

MOONSTONE

COMPLEX, CAPABLE,
COMPASSIONATE, AND DANGEROUS

By Doe Daughtrey



THE DIVINE FEMININE—when I speak with Latter-day Saints about her, I use the term “Heavenly Mother.” When interacting with people outside the LDS tradition, I generally use “The Goddess” or other terms that reflect their cosmology. I like all of these opportunities to speak of her—and the chance to use all the terms. Whoever the Divine Mother is, she has many aspects, many manifestations. I need more than one image to know her, more than one name to describe her. Because I don’t limit her to one name or image, I am able to believe in all of them.

Within Mormon tradition, there is a communal agreement about the nature of deity, which then gets expressed through LDS theology, history, and testimony. Most Mormons, I suspect, would admit to having a testimony that Heavenly Mother exists somewhere in time and space. Even President Gordon B. Hinckley has stated publicly his belief in her. “Logic and reason would certainly suggest that if we have a Father in Heaven, we have a Mother in Heaven. That doctrine rests well with me.”¹ However, at the same time, President Hinckley imposed a prohibition against elaborating further on that belief, to prevent it from becoming either discourse or practice in the public sphere. “However, in light of the instruction we have received from the Lord Himself, I regard it as inappropriate for anyone in the Church to pray to our

Mother in Heaven.”² As a result, Heavenly Mother is relegated to the private sphere, which history has shown is typically the feminine sphere of influence as well as the realm of personal practice. Ironically, then, Heavenly Mother’s relegation to the private sphere has caused her to pass from the realm of belief into the realm of practice, which realm is a place of vivid imagery.

IN discussing religious practice, scholars refer in part to the visual elements of popular religion. These visuals may include many forms or styles—from imagery to vision, from paintings to photographs, from icons and design to writing. For example, Islam has a rich visual culture in which calligraphy is generative, breathing life into the Word—or, better said, is the Word. While visual elements may be symbolic, creativity is not always meant to be symbolic only. In Catholicism, particularly Eastern Orthodoxy, images can point to a particular truth—such as the fact that the mother of Jesus is vital to the Christian tradition, a truth revealed in the number of and standardized elements contained in images of the Virgin Mary. However, the divine may also be thought to be literally present in the image, as when an image of Mary is reported to have spoken, wept, or suckled a starving monk.

To some extent, the visual is a reflection of belief, so that visual aspects of religion may

convey specific beliefs, or basic tenets of theology or cosmology. Belief is often complex; still, people tend to “judge a book by its cover,” as when assuming that an image conveys absolute truth or that appearance reveals a person’s true beliefs. For example, President Hinckley is concerned with the generative capacity of appearance when he cautions men not to wear earrings and youth not to get tattoos. This concern is complicated, of course, but it relates partly to what the image says about people and how it might generate behavior in Church members.

The relationship between image and belief is especially evident in the Mormon anthropomorphic God. To Latter-day Saints, God the Father is not just like, but actually used to be, a human man—so it is easy to picture him. Thus, because we humans actually embody his image, he becomes utterly real—even human—to us. Mormons most frequently image God the Father through the lens of Joseph Smith’s “First Vision,” in which “God” appeared as “two personages” of “flesh and bones.” This means that when we imagine God, we actively imitate Joseph’s vision. It also implies that we can replicate Joseph’s experience and have a personal vision and relationship with the divine. Imagining God, then, generates a type of reciprocity in our relationship with deity.

Perhaps because of this foundation, as a Mormon convert of more than thirty-five years, I am wedded to an anthropomorphic God. I am also wedded to an anthropomorphic Goddess. This means that as part of my spiritual quest, I found that I eventually needed to visualize and express the Mormon culturally-agreed-upon belief in the female god. However, because there is no description or image of the anthropomorphic female god in my religion, I turned to goddess imagery for ideas. I bought figures, art prints, music, knick-knacks, and books; I bought goddess key rings, jewelry, calendars, and tarot cards. In addition, I bought clay figures made by Linda Sillitoe, called “Givers”—figures of women, or goddesses, if you like—named according to the gift of insight they bring to their owner’s life. Whether because of the emotional demands of my spiritual “type” or because of my professional interest in material religious culture, I needed material versions of the material god.

In fact, as I was doing this, I was engaged in the creation of divine identity. I wasn’t worshipping the Goddess, or a goddess, I was trying on different identities of the divine feminine in order to see which ones were useful to me as I deliberated about and re-



DOE DAUGHTREY is a doctoral candidate in religious studies at Arizona State University where she currently teaches American religious traditions and new religious movements. She is a member of the Sunstone board of directors, is married to a fabulous man, is mother of five children, and with her recent birthday achieved official “crone” status. She gave an early version of this essay as part of the 2004 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium panel, “Real Goddesses Have Curves (and Identities)” (tape SL04–271).

lated to my mental picture of my Mother in Heaven. Previously, I had focused on determining for myself what she is *not*—e.g. to me, she is not a frail, white-haired grandmother dressed all in white. (Though I have nothing personal against this image, I've had to work hard to weed out the stereotypical images my brain had stored about holy women/goddesses, who looked suspiciously like elderly temple workers.) So, I turned to the question of what or who she really might be, especially to me. Ultimately, it became a decision about my own belief in her.

THERE are few things about her that Mormons are permitted to explore, especially in public. This may be changing, but my own experience has been otherwise. Thus, getting to know the female god is a private practice. For Mormons, it's safe in public only to assume that she's a wife, mother of many, and busy doing what mothers everywhere should consider their primary role: birthing, nurturing, raising children, and supporting her husband. Thus, to really know her, I felt I had to go elsewhere, to look for images that fully articulate the divine female experience, its range of potential, and its human qualities.

After reviewing many images of the divine female from a variety of traditions, I finally selected a few goddesses who express to me the complexities of Heavenly Mother and my own life. Interestingly, they all turned out to be "triple" or multi-faceted goddesses, who represent multiple aspects of a woman's life—such as the phases of maiden, mother, and crone, or the duality of darkness and light. One such goddess is Ix Chel (see line images at beginning of essay).

Off the coast of Cancun, Mexico, is Isla Mujeres, or the Island of Women. One travel guide states that Isla Mujeres "has been enjoyed as a healing sanctuary and energy center since 1300 AD when the Maya made pilgrimages to the shrine of Ix Chel to make offerings to the goddess of the moon and fertility." Though I visited Isla Mujeres with my husband and young children several years before I began actively seeking my Heavenly Mother through goddess myth and imagery, the notion of an island of women tugged at my spirit. But I had then never heard of Ix Chel. Yet when I look at the photos taken on that trip, I can almost see a thread between me and the island—as if Ix Chel, weaver of the universe, had woven me into her own story.

According to her myth, as Patricia Monaghan interprets it in her book *The New Book of Goddesses and Heroines*, Ix Chel is a



tried on different identities of the divine feminine in order to see which ones were useful to me as I deliberated about my Mother in Heaven. What or who is she to me?



Mayan goddess of water, the moon, childbirth, and weaving. In her maiden aspect, she is the woman who resists captivity. For the sin of choosing the sun as her lover, she died at the hands of her jealous grandfather. In death, Ix Chel was attended by grieving dragonflies, who sang over her for thirteen days, at the end of which time she was restored to life and able to rejoin her lover. However, the sun also grew jealous and suspicious and accused her of betraying him with his brother, the morning star. Having been thrown from heaven by the sun, Ix Chel found sanctuary elsewhere; however, in mindless repetition, the sun was able to entice her to return to him, only to grow jealous of her again. Eventually, Ix Chel wearied of the sun's behavior and reclaimed her life by leaving him. Like an autonomous woman who instinctively senses danger, she wanders the night as she wishes, avoiding his presence by disappearing. She is the moon moving across the night sky, disappearing below the horizon as the sun rises behind her.

In keeping with this type of intuition, in her mother aspect, Ix Chel is thought to protect and care for human women through pregnancy and labor. Similarly, the goddess website <www.goddess.com> notes affirmations such as "I am joyful! My big hips are sexy!" that embrace the natal value of wide hips and promote appreciation of both biological and general female creative capacities as embodied by Ix Chel.

In her "crone" aspect, Ix Chel is often depicted as a dangerous-looking old woman with a serpent in her hand or on her head. In goddess spirituality, the serpent is a symbol reclaimed from its biblical association with evil to represent Ix Chel's transformation through all the stages of life. This symbol recurs in the form of her assistant sky serpent, whose belly carried all of heaven's waters. Similarly, in another association with life-

giving substances and cyclical movement, the jug she sometimes carries contains enough water to flood, destroy, and then renew the earth. Ultimately, in keeping with her characterization as the Goddess of Becoming, Ix Chel is immediately recognizable as a shape-shifter: at once a maiden (fruitful), a mother (patroness of birthing women and their children), and a crone (bone-keeper and life-tender from beginning to end).

WHEN I look at these images of Ix Chel, do I believe that she is my heavenly mother? No, not exactly. What I see in Ix Chel is what I want to believe about her, as well as what I want to believe about myself. We are each of us complex, capable, compassionate, and dangerous; and I am an embryo of her potential. What I see is that we are both goddesses. Through Ix Chel, Heavenly Mother is alive to me in a way that the divine feminine has never been. I hope that when I sing songs containing her name, she hears me. When I weave at my loom, she is with me. When I nurture my daughters on their birthing beds, she attends us all. And when my body dies, she will be the one who meets me and collects my bones. And I will collect the bones of my daughters who die after me.

She is my mother. She is me. And I love her. 



NOTES

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Daughters of God," *Ensign*, November 1991, 97–98.
2. *Ibid.*