

Historical Correlation as Reasonable Justification for Contemporary Belief

The principal topic of this paper serves not to exposit or uncover new character or natural attributes of the Latter-Day Saint (LDS) theological figure, Heavenly Mother, but to instead demonstrate that Her existence in LDS theology provides reasonable justification for LDS belief in the doctrine of Restoration, due to historical correlation. In ancient times, it was common for polytheistic belief systems to contain at least one, but occasionally multiple goddesses that stood atop the pantheon in positions of motherhood in relation to the pantheon's other divine figures (Grollman, 1963). Latter-Day Saint teaching, from here on referred to as *Mormonism*, is not a polytheistic religion; Mormonism offers a henotheistic monolatry—the exclusive worship of one God, with the acknowledgement that others may or do exist. This position in Mormonism is built on their doctrine of *Restoration*: the idea that lost, corrupted, ignored, or unrevealed divine truths are brought to light in the present day through contemporary prophets. As the dominant world religions, such as the Judeo-Christian religion, moved in the direction of strict monotheism, beliefs in pantheons of divine beings were discarded and occasionally lost until later rediscovery. One of these beliefs regards the ancient Semitic goddess Asherah, the Queen of Heaven, whose worship fell out of favor circa 623 B.C.E. when the ruler of Jerusalem, King Josiah, modified his nation's religious practices (Barker, 2004).

Asherah in Ancient Semitic Practice

Prior to the time that Asherah fell out of favor in Israel, her worship held a place within the Israelite temple, where worshippers would offer “incense, libations, and special loaves to represent her” (Barker, 2004). She was associated with Wisdom, sacred trees, and was the consort of El, the original God of Israel. In the transition towards monotheism, Yahweh was made the God of Israel, assimilating El's roles in Israelite theology, and Asherah remained as

Yahweh's consort (Peterson, 2000). She, like in the larger Canaanite theology, was a fertility goddess and mother to the sons of God. Her depictions were quite common in the form of figurines, but it is important to note that while "the pagan Canaanite objects depict a highly sexualized goddess of both childbearing and erotic love, in the Israelite figurines the aspect of the *dea nutrix*, the nourishing or nurturing goddess, comes to the fore" (Peterson, 2000). In specifically Israelite practice, Asherah was more nurturing than erotic, as compared to the practices of the surrounding religions.

Asherah worship may also have been an incredibly ancient practice for the Hebrew people, as Barker (2004) writes that it "can be matched in the religion of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Parallels include sacrificial offerings among sacred trees, and the setting up of pillars to mark sacred spaces. The most significant marker of this parallel is the fact that an Asherah tree, probably the menorah created by Moses for the tabernacle, was placed in the temple's Holy of Holies until Josiah's purge (Barker, 2004).

Worship of Asherah was extended across the Israelite nation, and archaeology indicates that her worship was especially present in rural locales. One place it was especially relevant was the ancient Sidon, which appears to have borne some significance to the *Book of Mormon* prophet Lehi and his family, as Sidon's "name appears repeatedly in the Book of Mormon, both in its Hebrew and Egyptian forms[, and] which at that time was one of the two harbors through which the Israelites carried on an extremely active trade with Egypt and the West" (Peterson, 2000).

This influence is especially prevalent in Lehi and Nephi's visions of the Tree of Life, which focus on a sacred tree and the fruit of it. This tree is symbolized by a virginal mother and her son, when Nephi asks the Spirit to tell him of its meaning. Given the associations between

trees and motherhood with Asherah, as well as Lehi and Nephi's potential connection with Sidon, a place where Asherah worship was especially practiced, it is reasonable to see how Nephi reaches the conclusion that the sacred tree he and Lehi saw in vision was "a representation of the love of God" (1 Nephi 11:25). Nephi also frequently quoted from the teachings of the ancient prophet Isaiah, who in several places makes "explicit comparisons of God to a mother in the Hebrew Bible" (Schmitt, 1985).

Not only was Asherah worship practiced anciently and broadly, Barker (2017) argues that the worship or at least knowledge of the Queen of Heaven was had by Jesus and His followers, through her analysis of the New Testament's *Book of Revelation*. Barker (2017) states that in *Revelation*, "the woman clothed with the sun was a Mother in heaven who had more than one child. Her firstborn was a king, and the rest of her family were faithful followers of Jesus who kept the commandments of God." She makes a case that this revelation was something Jesus had hinted at knowing during his ministry, and may have been one of the things he discussed with his disciples. Barker also argues emphatically for the former existence of positive references to the Queen of Heaven in what she calls, "damaged texts". Her evidence for this is the rediscovery of texts such as the *Damascus Document*, which describe a people "who recognised that their nation had been unfaithful, and so the Lord had hidden his presence from them and from his temple. ... The Lord revealed to them the hidden things in which their people had gone astray, and they called themselves the members of the new covenant" (Barker, 2017). Barker points out that the Christians, the followers of Jesus, also called themselves "members of the new covenant" (2017).

The LDS Heavenly Mother

Paulsen and Pulido conducted a survey of LDS teaching on the subject, compiling every reference to Heavenly Mother, or the principle of a “divine feminine” in Mormonism, discovering that “Since the 1840s, this cherished doctrine has been an important, although relatively obscure, part of the Latter-day Saint understanding of the premortal origins and divine nature of mankind” (2011). In the ensuing discussion on their work, Paulsen and Pulido (2011) discovered these primary points with regard to Heavenly Mother:

- Heavenly Wife and Parent
- A Divine Person
- Co-creator with the Father
- Coframer of the Plan of Salvation
- Involved Parent in Our Mortality
- Mother in Heaven in the Hereafter

Correlation as Justification

Each of the above points of doctrine regarding a Mother in Heaven in Mormonism finds a parallel in ancient thought surrounding Asherah-worship. The following will be a point-for-point comparison between ancient belief and contemporary LDS practice, using Paulsen and Pulido’s (2011) work as a guide. These correlations provide reasonable justification for the Latter-Day Saint belief in *Restoration*, meaning that Latter-Day Saints believe in a process of divine truth being revealed by God contemporaneously after being lost to time, apostatized from, or withheld until a relevant time in human history.

Beginning with Heavenly Mother as “Heavenly Wife and Parent” (Paulsen & Pulido, 2011), we find that anciently, “Asherah was the chief goddess of the Canaanites. She was El’s

wife and the mother and wet nurse of the other gods. Thus, the gods of Ugarit [a community neighboring ancient Israel] could be called ‘the family of [or “the sons of”] El,’ or the ‘sons of Asherah.’ Moreover, Asherah was connected with the birth of Canaanite rulers and could be metaphorically considered to be their mother as well” (Peterson, 2000). El, anciently, “was the patriarch of the Canaanite pantheon” (Peterson, 2000). Cited by Paulsen and Pulido, LDS President George Q. Cannon stated, “God is a married being, has a wife. . . . We are the offspring of Him and His wife” (2011).

As “A Divine Person” (Paulsen & Pulido, 2011), it is quite clear that Asherah was atop the ancient Canaanite pantheon as Mother-Goddess. “In the classic religions of antiquity she [the Mother-Goddess] was transformed into the Queen and Mother of the Gods, the wife of the Father-God.” (Grollman, 1963) In relation to this, Paulsen and Pulido write, “President Brigham Young . . . taught that ‘we were created . . . in the image of our father and our mother, the image of our God,’ indicating that calling Heavenly Mother ‘God’ is consistent with the biblical account of the creation of both ‘male and female’ being in ‘the image of God’ (Gen. 1:26–27)” (2011).

In reference to co-creation with God the Father, Barker (2017) mentions that “there is a poem about Wisdom in creation in Proverbs 8. She was beside the Creator as he worked.” On this topic, Paulsen and Pulido (2011) write, “Regardless of the exact nature of her divinity, some authorities have described Heavenly Mother was an active participant in the process of creation.” Among several statements comes one from a current leader and his wife, Elder Jeffrey R. and Patricia Holland, who teach that Heavenly Parents, the Father-God and Mother-Goddess, are actively involved in an ongoing process of creation, and “are doing so lovingly and carefully and masterfully” (Paulsen and Pulido, 2011).

Regarding her role as “Coframer of the Plan of Salvation”, Latter-Day Saint leaders have taught that God’s plan for His children was formulated by both Heavenly Parents. From the Church’s 1978 *Gospel Principles* manual, Paulsen and Pulido (2011) find the following on both Father and Mother’s involvement in the creation of and purpose for their plan: “Our heavenly parents provided us with a celestial home more glorious and beautiful than any place on earth. We were happy there. Yet they knew we could not progress beyond a certain point unless we left them for a time. They wanted us to develop the godlike qualities that they have. To do this, we needed to leave our celestial home to be tested and to gain experience.” The final, godlike state that one reaches at the end of the plan of salvation is a glorified, immortal state of being. Prior to notions of a chosen messiah, the accomplishment of such a state may have been the primary responsibility of the Mother-Goddess. “With the Magna Mater there was a more elaborate belief in salvation and resurrection which emanated from the fecundity culture of the maternal religion” (Grollman, 1963).

One of the most interesting correlations is found in the idea that Heavenly Mother is an “Involved Parent in Our Mortality” (Paulsen & Pulido, 2011). In ancient practice, Asherah was “the recognizable sign of God’s presence among the people, though her identity was obscured by her many manifestations; she was Wisdom, *Khokhmah*; she was the presence of God, *Shekinah* ... her iconic symbols were indicative of her being the *Mater*-matter of life: the Breath of God; the Spirit; Holy Fire (she speaks to Moses from a burning, unconsumed fruit bush); fertile fields; high places (mountains or hills; the proto-temples of Abraham, Moses, etc.); the abundance and faithful generosity of fruit-bearing trees (including their derivatives, wooden totems); and the vessel that bears the Lord” (Petersen, 2021). In contemporary practice, Heavenly Mother’s

involvement is most well understood as Elder Widtsoe states, “the promises made to us in the temple ‘will help us understand the nearness of our heavenly parents.’ ... [and] as Milton R. Hunter has written, sin and ignorance draw us farther away” (Paulsen & Pulido, 2011).

“Mother in Heaven in the Hereafter” (Paulsen & Pulido, 2011) presents a very hopeful, almost nostalgic doctrine of happy reunion. “Elder Neal A. Maxwell ... mused that ‘such a regal homecoming [could not] be possible without the anticipatory arrangements of a Heavenly Mother.’ For Elder Orson Pratt ... and President George Q. Cannon, this reunion would include vividly recalling our former life with them.” (Paulsen & Pulido, 2011). Anciently, the tree goddesses who served as divine mothers—among whom is the character Asherah—were especially present in the transition between this life and the hereafter; “One encounters the Egyptian tree goddess who pours water at the western horizon — near the entrance to the netherworld — prior to an ascent to the tree goddess in the eastern horizon. Likewise tree and water motifs appear in connection with Israelite sacrificial altars and courtyards, outside the entrance of temples, prior to one entering or ascending to the full tree of life in the Holy of Holies or in the heavenly city (Revelation 22:2)” (Thompson, 2022). Transitions within the temple are symbolic of a return to the presence of God the Father, and the indication that Mother-Goddess is present in that return is striking with regard to her role in the hereafter.

Conclusion

Though historic correlation does not prove the truth claims of any religion, they do offer considerable insight to believers who feel reverence and veneration toward particularly ancient traditions and dogmas. The case with Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother is no different, in that the ancient practice of the worship of a Mother-Goddess provides comforting justification for their claim that *Restoration* is a correct principle, leading them in a return to the true faith and practice

that God intended for His children. Ample correlation in specific theological points provide compelling reasons for their contemporary practice, and potentially greater clarity in places where contemporary revelation is thought to be lacking. Though the practice of this non-monotheistic tradition may put Latter-Day Saints at odds with other faiths in the Abrahamic tradition, it is not something for practitioners of Mormonism to be ashamed or embarrassed of. Instead, the historic record indicates that practitioners should embrace their tradition with reverence and assurance.

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