

CHAPTER 4  
“YOUR DIVINE NATURE AND DESTINY”: THE  
TEMPLE, THE DIVINE FEMININE AND  
MORMON WOMEN’S EXALTATION

This examination of Mormon women’s exaltation will conclude with an investigation of the temple liturgy and the doctrine of Heavenly Mother. Each of these topics is significant to women’s exaltation in its own way. The temple experience and its rites are where the eternal sealings occur, thus it represents the pinnacle of Mormon worship as well as the achievement of the highest ordinances available in Mormonism. It is “the heart and core of the gospel, and all else derives meaning and purpose from it.”<sup>1</sup> For many Latter-day Saints, a marriage sealed in the temple represents the culmination of a lifetime of dreams as the event serves to bind two lives together for eternity and open the gateway to exaltation. Likewise, the concept of Heavenly Mother is a sacred one for many Latter-day Saints, with mention of her being found in one well-known Mormon hymn and a general understanding that Heavenly Mother represents the conclusion of female exaltation. As Glenn L. Pace of the Seventy stated in a 2010 BYU devotional: “Sisters, I testify that when you stand in front of your heavenly parents in those royal courts on high and look into Her eyes and behold Her countenance, any question you ever had about the role of women in the kingdom will

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<sup>1</sup>Carol Cornwall Madsen, “Mormon Women and the Temple: Toward a New Understanding,” in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 89.

evaporate into the rich celestial air, because at that moment you will see standing directly in front of you, your divine nature and destiny.”<sup>2</sup> For these reasons, a study of both the temple liturgy and the divine feminine will offer the final pieces to the puzzle of the nature of female exaltation in Mormonism.

*Queens and Priestesses: Women and the Temple*

The first Mormon temple was erected in Kirtland, Ohio with its dedication in 1836, but this temple’s higher rites did not include women directly, the ordinances performed therein being “primarily to empower the elders of the church in connection with their proselyting and ecclesiastical callings.”<sup>3</sup> General practice and knowledge of the washing and anointing ordinances, the endowment ceremony, and baptism for the dead for both men and women would come later in Nauvoo.<sup>4</sup> While Latter-day Saints hold that Joseph Smith was aware of “celestial marriage” and even practicing it privately himself in the early 1830s, the first official church marriage sealings would not be performed until the Saints had journeyed to Nauvoo.<sup>5</sup>

With the construction of the Nauvoo temple underway in the early 1840s, the first temple ordinances began to be performed in the upper room above Joseph Smith’s red brick store. On May 4, 1842, nine men met with Smith to be instructed on and receive the

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<sup>2</sup>Glenn L. Pace, “The Divine Nature and Destiny of Women,” Devotional, delivered at Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 9 March 2010; available online at <<http://bit.ly/1sdkGXX>>, retrieved 1 May 2016.

<sup>3</sup>Madsen, 81.

<sup>4</sup>See David John Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship* (San Francisco, Ca.: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 28-30.

<sup>5</sup>The earliest account of a sealing is that of Vilate Kimball to her husband Heber C. Kimball in 1841, although Smith had taken numerous plural wives before that point. See Madsen, 86.

ordinances of washing and anointing and endowment. This event served as “the formal beginning of the administration of temple ordinances performed in Mormon temples throughout the world today, the initiation of the ritual of endowment.”<sup>6</sup> This limited group that had received their endowments came to be known as the “Holy Order” or “Quorum of the Anointed.” On September 28, 1843, women were added to the Quorum of the Anointed as Emma Smith, wife of the prophet, became the first woman to receive her endowment. Other women would soon follow, and the endowment has continued to be practiced from 1842 to the present day.<sup>7</sup>

That the liturgy of the temple ceremony has undergone extensive changes since its inception in 1830s Kirtland and 1840s Nauvoo is known by scholars. However, the full extent to which it has changed is unclear as, due to the sacred nature of the ordinances, Latter-day Saints did not write down the text and were cautioned against talking about their experiences. Even today, official transcripts of temple rites are not published by the Church. However, good unofficial transcripts of the modern-day ceremonies do exist, as do transcripts showing a major revision to the ceremony in 1990 with a more modest adjustment to the washing and anointing ordinance in 2005.<sup>8</sup> These transcripts yield a number of interesting theological statements that have a direct bearing on women’s exaltation.

The primary or initiatory ordinance, also known as “washing and anointing,” serves as a prerequisite to the endowment ceremony. In this initiatory ordinance, men

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<sup>6</sup>Madsen, 85.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 85-86.

<sup>8</sup>Transcripts cited in this chapter come from [www.LDSEndowment.org](http://www.LDSEndowment.org) unless otherwise noted. The site only has transcripts of the male washing and anointing, with footnotes explaining a few differences found in the female washing and anointing.

administer to other men while women administer to other women, although instead of performing the washings and anointings “by the power of the Melchizedek priesthood,” the officiator (whether male or female) simply pronounces that they do so “having authority.” For the washing part of the ceremony, the officiator touches the initiate’s head<sup>9</sup> with water and pronounces that the initiate is clean, but the wording differs for men and women. Men are washed “that you may become clean from the blood and sins of this generation through your faithfulness,” while women are told, “your sins are forgiven and you are clean every whit.”<sup>10</sup> Some commentators see this as a difference that favors women, since women are pronounced forgiven and clean on the spot while men are only given the potential to become clean. If so, it is arguably the only portion of the temple endowment that favors women over men.

Following this “washing,” the officiator anoints the initiate with oil. Men are anointed “preparatory to your becoming a king and a priest unto the most high God,” while women are anointed “preparatory to your becoming a queen and priestess unto your husband.” On the surface, this may indicate parity between men and women, since men are pronounced to become “kings and priests” while women are called “queens and priestesses.” However, the distinction of “unto the most high God” versus “unto your husband” is a significant one and is the first of a recurring pattern throughout the temple ceremony where men are empowered to interact with God directly, while women must rely on their husbands to act as intermediaries between themselves and God.

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<sup>9</sup>Other parts of the body were touched prior to 2005, but after the 2005 changes to the washing and anointing ritual, only the forehead is touched.

<sup>10</sup>The transcript of the female washing and anointing is not available at [www.LDSEndowment.org](http://www.LDSEndowment.org); I retrieved it from <<http://bit.ly/1OhPjVN>>, 11 March 2016.

There is some evidence that the original Nauvoo washings and anointings may have said otherwise. In an 1874 address published in the *Millennial Star*, Eliza R. Snow exhorted: “You, my sisters, if you are faithful, will become Queens of Queens, and Priestesses unto the Most High God.”<sup>11</sup> It is possible that her 1874 exhortation was based on the original wording of the endowment, which she received in 1845. However, if the ceremony was changed, it may have happened shortly thereafter. The 1846 records of the “second anointing” or higher rites of celestial marriage between Brigham Young and his wife, Mary Ann Young, as well as the record for Heber C. and Vilate Kimball, both show that each woman was anointed to be “a priestess unto her husband.”<sup>12</sup> Though the second anointing is a different and higher ordinance from washing and anointing, it is likely that the latter rite has always designated women as priestesses to their husbands rather than as priestesses to God. In the individual endowment rite, it is again reiterated that men “have been anointed to become hereafter kings and priests unto the most high God,” while women “have been washed and anointed to become queens and priestesses to [their] husbands.” There are some uncommon places in LDS discourse where leaders have called women “queens and priestesses” unto God or the Lord rather than unto their husbands. For example, at the 1934 October General Conference, Apostle Melvin J. Ballard taught, “If you are faithful over a few things here, you shall be ruler over many things there, and become kings and priests unto God. And you sisters who have dwelt in reflected glory will shine in your

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<sup>11</sup>Eliza R. Snow, “An Address by Miss Eliza R. Snow,” in *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 36.2 (13 January 1874): 21.

<sup>12</sup>Book of Anointings records, Special Collections and Archives. University of Utah, J. Willard Marriott. Salt Lake City, Utah. These ordinances took place on 11 January 1846 and 8 January 1846, respectively.

own light, queens and priestesses unto the Lord forever and ever.”<sup>13</sup>

In the initiatory rite, the initiate will be given a new name, which they are charged to “always remember” and “never reveal,” except during the portion of the endowment that takes place at the veil. Yet it anticipates a temple marriage, wherein a groom will take his bride through the veil and can learn her new name, but she does not learn his new name. Often it has been explained that the reason for this disparity is so that husbands can call forth their wives by their new name on the morning of the resurrection and resurrect them. Since the wife will not be resurrecting her husband, she has no need to know her husband’s new name.

While early LDS leaders did not often give specifics about the temple ceremony, they did caution numerous times that a wife’s salvation would be dependent on her husband. In an 1857 sermon, apostle Erastus Snow stated:

Do the women, when they pray, remember their husbands? Do you pray for brother Brigham? Yes, you should always pray for him. But when you pray for him, do you pray also for your own husband, that he may have the inspiration of the Almighty to lead and govern his family as the lord? Do you uphold your husband before God as your lord? “What! My husband to be my lord?” I ask, Can you get into the celestial kingdom without him? Have any of you been there? You will remember that you never got into the celestial kingdom [during the ceremony at the veil] without the aid of your husband. If you did, it was because your husband was away, and someone had to act proxy for him. No woman will get into the celestial kingdom, except her husband receives her, if she is worthy to have a husband; and if not, somebody will receive her as a servant.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, Lorenzo Snow taught in the same year that a husband “holds [his family’s]

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<sup>13</sup>Melvin J. Ballard, *Conference Reports*, October 1934, 121.

<sup>14</sup>Erastus Snow, “Preparation of Heart for Divine Blessings—Responsibility—Family Government,” reported by G. D. Watt and J. V. Long, in *JD* 5 (4 October 1857): 291.

salvation in his hands,”<sup>15</sup> while Daniel H. Wells taught that wives “seek their salvation through them [their husbands].”<sup>16</sup> Writing later in 1888 and alluding more directly to the temple liturgy’s doctrine of resurrection, Charles W. Penrose explained:

In the divine economy, as in nature, the man "is the head of the woman," and it is written that "he is the savior of the body." But "the man is not without the woman" any more than the woman is without the man, in the Lord. Adam was first formed, then Eve. In the resurrection, they stand side by side and hold dominion together. Every man who overcomes all things and is thereby entitled to inherit all things, receives power to bring up his wife to join him in the possession and enjoyment thereof.<sup>17</sup>

There is a hint of egalitarianism in Penrose’s affirmation that man and woman will “stand side by side and hold dominion together,” yet he affirms that man “is the head of the woman” and that the man will be resurrected first and have power to resurrect his wife in the hereafter.<sup>18</sup>

Other LDS sources have downplayed the salvific implications of this part of the temple ceremony. Writing to address the critical question, “In the temple, do you teach that husbands get to decide if their wives will be resurrected and enter the celestial kingdom?” W. John Walsh explains, “Latter-day Saints do not believe that husbands have the ability to decide whether or not their wives will be 1) resurrected, or 2) enter the celestial

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<sup>15</sup>Lorenzo Snow, “Union of the Saints, Etc.,” reported by J. V. Long, in *JD* 4 (1 March 1857): 243.

<sup>16</sup>Daniel H. Wells, “Misapplication of the Term Sacrifice, Etc.,” reported by G. D. Watt, in *JD* 4 (1 March 1857): 256.

<sup>17</sup>Charles W. Penrose, *“Mormon” Doctrine, Plain and Simple, or Leaves from the Tree of Life* (Salt Lake City, Ut.: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1888), 51.

<sup>18</sup>For other sources on the belief that husbands will resurrect their wives, see Melodie Moensch Charles, “The Need for a New Mormon Heaven,” in *Dialogue* vol. 21 no. 3 (Fall 1987), 79-80; and (more polemically) Sandra Tanner, “How the LDS Husband Hopes to Resurrect His Wife According to the LDS Temple Ceremony,” <<http://bit.ly/1TzXXeA>>; retrieved 8 March 2016.

kingdom. . . . Jesus, not a woman's husband, will decide what degree of glory a women [sic] will live in for eternity.” He goes on to acknowledge, “Latter-day Saints do believe that in some instances, a woman's husband will be given the privilege of performing the resurrection ordinance for and in behalf of the Savior,” but cautions that “the person performing the resurrection ordinance . . . is not acting on his own and has no ability to decide what degree of glory a person will live in for eternity.”<sup>19</sup> In another vein, while not commenting on the ceremony at the veil or resurrection directly, Valerie Hudson has attempted to find parity in men’s preeminence in entrance into salvation by pointing out that women have preeminence in entrance into mortality. At a conference in 2010, she explained:

It is through women that souls journey to mortality and gain their agency, and in general it is through the nurturing of women, their nurturing love of their children, that the light of Christ is awakened within each soul. And I would include in that list of souls Jesus the Christ. . . . Women escort every soul through the veil to mortal life and full agency. . . . Adam, who was created before Eve, entered into full mortality and full agency by accepting the gift of the First Tree from the hand of a woman. In a sense, Adam himself was born of Eve.

. . . [P]riesthood is not some extra given to men and denied women. Priesthood is a man’s apprenticeship to become a heavenly father, and I believe that women have their own apprenticeship to become like their heavenly mother. The ordinance—and they are ordinances—of body and of agency—pregnancy, childbirth, lactation—the spiritual ordinances of the First Tree are not less powerful or spiritual than the ordinances of the Second Tree. Women have their own godly power.<sup>20</sup>

In these ways, Latter-day Saints have tried to wrest with the difficulties posed by the gender imbalances in ceremony at the veil.

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<sup>19</sup>W. John Walsh, “Do Husbands Resurrect Their Wives?,” *All About Mormons*, <<http://bit.ly/24O0fID>>; retrieved 9 March 2016.

<sup>20</sup>Valerie Hudson, “The Two Trees” (presentation, 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, Sandy, UT, August 6, 2010), retrieved from <<http://bit.ly/1TVj11E>>, 30 January 2016.



While these attempts at explaining the difficulties with the ceremony at the veil are admirable, the actual ceremony itself—and the requirement that women yield their “new names” to men without the mutuality of requiring men to do likewise for women—has always made some LDS women uncomfortable with the prospect of female exaltation. As Melodie Moensch Charles explained, “Though both men and women need spouses to achieve the highest eternal glory, a husband helps his wife attain salvation in a way that a wife does not do for her husband.” Even if one regards a woman’s role in childbearing as providing parity to a man’s salvific priesthood activities, one wonders why male contributions should be codified and acknowledged through sacred liturgy while female contributions remain silent and assumed.

Two final pieces of the temple liturgy bear mentioning. The first is that, during the endowment ceremony, women pledge to “hearken to” the counsel of their husbands, while men pledge to “hearken to” the Father’s counsel. Though this has been softened from the pre-1990 ceremony, where women pledged to “obey the law of their husbands” while their husbands pledged to “obey the law of God,” the theme that places a woman’s husband as acting on God’s behalf, rather than having women covenant with God directly, remains. Likewise, during the prayer circle portion of the ceremony, the women must veil their faces while the men remain unveiled and metaphorically free to pray openly and speak with God face-to-face.

The symbolism laid out in the temple ceremony yields the same consistent message repeatedly: men interact with God directly and serve as intercessors between their wives and God. Throughout the temple ceremony, the pattern is a hierarchical one of:

GOD => HUSBAND => WIFE

Figure 2.

As Elizabeth Hammond explains:

In the temple model of female salvation, Eve's Fall and subsequent estrangement from Elohim are healed not through Jesus alone, but also through her husband. Because of Christ's atonement both Man and Woman can overcome death . . . and be sanctified . . . Elohim will then resurrect and exalt Man, and thereafter, acting as her god, the deified husband shall resurrect and exalt his wife/wives. It is from the husbandgod's exaltation that she receives her eternal power as his priestess . . . By this mechanism Man acts in accord with Christ as savior to his wife.<sup>21</sup>

While the hierarchical pattern that LDS women are subject to in this life is ubiquitous, if the present hierarchy is but a mortal experience eventually to be replaced by mutuality and equality in the hereafter, one would expect to find evidence for this remedy in the temple liturgy, which deals more directly with exaltation than any part of the LDS canon. Instead, one only finds evidence that the hierarchical pattern of this life is a permanent feature of exaltation.

#### *Heavenly Mother and the Divine Feminine*

The doctrine of Heavenly Mother may have existed as early as 1839. A late, third-hand account by Susa Young Gates claimed that, during that year, Joseph Smith consoled Zina Diantha Huntington on the death of her mother by assuring her that, on the other side, she would see not only her own mother again but would “meet and become acquainted with your eternal Mother, the wife of your Father in Heaven.” In response to her astonishment that she had a Mother in Heaven at all, Smith reasoned, “How could a Father

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<sup>21</sup>Elizabeth Hammond, “The Mormon Priestess: A Theology of Womanhood in the LDS Temple,” in *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, ed. by Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 283. A version of the essay was originally published on *Feminist Mormon Housewives* on 6 April 2014, <<http://bit.ly/24O0Jby>>.