



Air Bud Theology Meets Queer Theory: Loopholes in Latter-day Saint Doctrine

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Can early Church practices justify new sealings? The evidence affirms doctrinal continuity, not revisionist change.

Part two in a series of two.

In the [first article](#) of this two-part series, I defined Air Bud Theology and provided an example of its most common form: justifying a belief or practice not through explicit doctrinal or scriptural support, but rather through the absence of an explicit prohibition. In this second article, I will examine another widely used form: recontextualizing an approved past or current behavior or practice as precedent for introducing an unrecognized one. One of the most prevalent examples of this second approach is the application of queer theory—a framework that challenges traditional

understandings of gender and sexuality, arguing that these concepts are, essentially, nothing more than social constructs rather than fixed biological realities—to Latter-day Saint history and practice.

Queer Theory and the Latter-day Saint Cosmos

Authors such as Taylor Petrey and Blaire Ostler have argued that with the proper application of queer theory, Latter-day Saint teachings on family, divine embodiment, and eternal relationships can accommodate non-heterosexual or “queer” identities. They contend that Latter-day Saint cosmology, when analyzed through the lens of postmodern gender deconstruction that is foundational to queer theory, actually provides theological resources that could support non-heterosexual interpretations of gender and sexuality.

These authors and others who broadly follow their methodology do raise some legitimate questions about the full extent and nature of eternal relationships in the Latter-day Saint cosmos. One such question is whether spirits have always existed as independent, uncreated intelligences who were later adopted into divine parentage or whether they were actually spiritually begotten by God in a manner similar to human biological birth. Teachings from Joseph Smith and other early Church leaders could be interpreted in support of both positions. Joseph’s [King Follett Discourse](#), for example, suggests that intelligence—or spirit—is eternal and uncreated, appearing to support the idea that individual identity has no beginning.

However, other statements from Church leaders have normalized the concept of spiritual birth. Brigham Young, for instance, [taught in 1857](#) that “there is not a person here today but what is a son or a daughter of that Being. In the spirit world, their spirits were first begotten and brought forth, and they lived there with their parents for ages before they came here.” Orson Pratt [echoed this teaching](#), which has largely remained the de facto paradigm in orthodox Latter-day Saint doctrine. Thus, the precise mechanics of spirit birth and divine parentage remain areas of both theological and historical exploration, as shown in articles by Latter-day Saint authors such as [Brian C. Hales](#) and [Jonathan A. Stapley](#).

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While these ambiguities do exist, however, they do not provide means for radically reconfiguring Latter-day Saint teachings on gender and family. The fundamental premise of Latter-day Saint cosmology has always been the eternal complementarity of male and female within the divine order, even amid unresolved questions such as the origins of spirits. The existence of theological gaps does not automatically justify speculative reinterpretations that deviate from core doctrinal principles. The primary flaw in using lingering theological uncertainty to argue for a “queer” Latter-day Saint cosmos is the total lack of evidence that Joseph Smith—or any of his successors—ever conceived of non-heterosexual marriage unions in the eternal worlds in the first place. Proponents of this revisionist theology run headlong into a doctrinal brick wall when confronting the cosmology articulated by Joseph Smith, as this cosmology was fundamentally rooted in two principles that are completely anathema to contemporary queer theory: gender essentialism and heteronormativity.

Joseph’s [vision of eternal relationships](#) was structured around complementary male and female roles. Central to his theology was the belief that exaltation—the highest state of salvation—was achievable only through the eternal union of man and woman in celestial marriage. This doctrine, outlined in such texts as [Doctrine and Covenants 132](#) (which queer theorists routinely regard as a misogynistic theological dinosaur at best or an insidious, coercive pseudo-revelation at worst), established marriage not merely as a social institution but as an eternal, divinely ordained structure that mirrored the organization of heaven itself. In this formulation, gender is not fluid or socially constructed; rather, it is an inherent and eternal characteristic of both human and divine beings. (The roots of the Family Proclamation run deep.) Joseph’s cosmology extended into the eternal worlds, where deified men and women would continue to perpetuate an unending cycle of celestial family formation—what the text calls “a continuation of the seeds forever and ever” (v. 19). This doctrine, often referred to as [“eternal increase”](#) in Latter-day Saint parlance, was central to the Nauvoo-era temple rituals, stressing that exaltation was not merely about individual progression but about the continuation of divine lineage through sexual complementarity ratified and sealed by priesthood authority.

Consonant with this theology, men and women were understood to occupy distinct, interdependent roles that were seen as both biologically and spiritually ordained. Male and female union was not just an incidental aspect of

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exaltation but an essential, structuring principle of divine life. The necessity of heterosexual marriage in this theology meant that exaltation was inherently relational, requiring the union of man and woman to fully participate in godhood—as outlined in doctrinal instructions Joseph Smith gave in May 1843. This model left no doctrinal space for non-heterosexual marriage relationships in the highest degree of glory, and, despite their best efforts, queer theorists cannot point to a single authoritative statement from Joseph Smith otherwise. Thus, the intense anxiety some same-sex attracted Latter-day Saints feel over the prospect of being “cured” of their homosexuality in the Celestial Kingdom—an idea Blaire Ostler encapsulates with her vivid and purposefully inflammatory description of a “celestial genocide” of queer people—stems from a perceived tension between Latter-day Saint doctrine and contemporary queer theory. This concern is understandable if one attempts to simultaneously take seriously Joseph Smith’s teachings on eternal relationality and queer theory’s assertion that “queer identity” is an essential and immutable aspect of queer personhood.

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The fundamental question, then, is whether Latter-day Saint cosmology can accommodate modern conceptions of identity—especially “queer” identity—or if the very nature of exaltation, as Joseph Smith envisioned it, inherently disrupts such earthly categories as typically imagined. To me, the answer seems fairly obvious: Joseph’s Nauvoo cosmology leaves no room for a reified, immutable queer identity as understood in contemporary terms. His teachings on exaltation, eternal increase, and divine relationality are inextricably tied to male-female complementarity.

To be sure, many questions remain unanswered about the precise nature of life and identity in the Celestial Kingdom, and I do not presume to claim that we fully understand what our celestial relationships will entail. Likewise, nothing in my argument justifies discrimination or mistreatment of queer-identifying individuals in society or in our interpersonal relationships. What I am saying, however, is that lingering uncertainties cannot be used to justify an extreme revisionist reinterpretation of the theology of exaltation. The doctrinal structure of Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo temple cosmology is fundamentally incompatible with the assumptions of contemporary queer theory, which proposes an understanding of identity that directly contradicts the revealed order of eternal relationships. We therefore seem to be faced with a stark choice—one that calls to mind the words of Christ: “No man can serve two masters”

(Matthew 6:24). If Joseph Smith's vision of exaltation is true, then it is not infinitely adaptable to secular ideological frameworks. Rather than attempting to force one system into the other, we must decide which framework we accept as authoritative—prophetic revelation or critical revisionism.

The Misuse of Polygamy as a Queer Precedent

As part of this cosmology, Joseph Smith introduced [sealing ordinances](#), which bound marriages and families together across generations, reinforcing a vision of exaltation as the expansion of divine kinship. An important outgrowth of this practice was [plural marriage](#), which Joseph [privately introduced](#) to a small group of Latter-day Saints in the early 1840s before it became openly practiced starting in the early 1850s. Controversial as it was (and is), plural marriage fits squarely within Joseph Smith's heteronormative and gender-essentialist cosmology, as it functioned as an expansion—not a deviation—of the foundational principle that exaltation was predicated on the eternal union of man and woman.

In response to this, some queer theorists argue that because the term *queer* denotes that which is abnormal or that which disrupts traditional norms, plural marriage in the early Church was itself a form of “queering” marriage and kinship structures. (Petrey devotes a chapter of his book [Queering Kinship in the Mormon Cosmos](#) to this point, although he remains ambivalent; Peter Coviello is much more emphatic in [Make Yourself Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism](#).) They claim that because polygamy deviated from Western monogamous sexual norms, it fundamentally destabilized conventional gender roles and opened the door for alternative family configurations beyond the standard Christian monogamist male-female dyad. By this logic, if plural marriage was an accepted part of early Latter-day Saint cosmology despite breaking societal norms, then other non-traditional family structures—such as same-sex eternal marriages—could likewise be accommodated within the broader framework of Latter-day Saint theology.

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However, this interpretation misunderstands both the function and intent of plural marriage. While polygamy was certainly abnormal or unconventional by 19th-century American social standards—so much so that it [induced federal disenfranchisement](#) and [nationwide scorn](#)—it did not “queer” the fundamental gender complementarity embedded in Latter-day Saint theology. Instead, it reinforced and expanded it. Plural marriage was predicated on the principle that male-female unions were essential for exaltation. So its very purpose was, in part, to increase the opportunities for individuals to enter into such unions. But rather than disrupting Latter-day Saint gender roles, it entrenched them by emphasizing patriarchal authority, reproductive capacity, and priesthood governance. All three aspects of celestial (and plural) marriage are articulated in Doctrine and Covenants 132, which uses Abraham and the covenantal promise of innumerable posterity as the archetype for Saints to follow (vv. 29–37).

Early Latter-day Saint plural marriage was never conceived as an “egalitarian” expansion of sexual opportunity in the way that queer theorists or polyamorous advocates often envision today. Plural marriage was instead a patriarchal structuring of male-female unions, where men presided over multiple wives, but not vice versa. The practice was highly regulated, with only one living individual—the president of the Church—holding the keys to “this priesthood” and overseeing its administration (D&C 132:7). There was no provision for a woman to be sealed to multiple men concurrently, nor was there any permission for her to have multiple sexual partners ([sexual polyandry](#)). Chastity within plural marriage was strictly mandated for both men and women, with severe consequences (typically excommunication) for adultery or unauthorized plural unions.

Equally problematic for queer theorists who wish to cite the historical practice of plural marriage as some kind of precedent for same-sex sealings today, within Latter-day Saint polygamous households, the fundamental heteronormative and patriarchal structure of eternal marriage remained fully intact. This is indeed precisely why many modern queer theorists are uncomfortable with early Latter-day Saint polygamy. Blaire Ostler, for instance, bemoans in [Queer Mormon Theology](#) that early polygamy did not provide for non-traditional gender or sexual arrangements she believes are necessary for a fully modern, egalitarian sexual ethic. The undeniably stark gender asymmetry in early Latter-day Saint polygamy—where only men could have multiple spouses—makes it fundamentally incompatible with the modern queer vision of fluid, sexually egalitarian relationships.

The Misuse of the Law of Adoption as a Queer Precedent

Some authors also point to the [Law of Adoption](#), a 19th-century Latter-day Saint practice in which men were sealed to priesthood leaders, as potential precedent for reimagining eternal relationships, including the possibility of non-heterosexual unions within Latter-day Saint theology. Nate Oman, for example, [highlights this practice](#) in his case for a theology of same-sex marriage in the Church. He notes that “sealing practices manifest great diversity within the categories of marriage and adoption” in the formative decades of the Church. In this, Oman is correct—the historical record does show that early sealing practices lacked uniformity and took time to formalize into the structure that is normative today. Because of this early diversity, Oman suggests that same-sex sealings might similarly one day find a place in the Church’s theological evolution. While at first glance the Law of Adoption may seem to complicate the traditional male-female structure of eternal relationships, and thereby lend itself to an accommodation of same-sex sealings, a closer examination shows that, similar to plural marriage, it functioned as an extension of, rather than a departure from, the fundamental principles of Latter-day Saint kinship theology.

For starters, the practice of adopting men into priesthood-led sealing networks was never intended as an alternative to celestial marriage between men and women, but was about reinforcing divine lineage through hierarchical priesthood bonds. It did not alter the fundamental necessity of male-female unions for exaltation. These adopted sons—most infamous perhaps being John D. Lee, the adopted son of Brigham Young and one of the chief perpetrators of the [Mountain Meadows Massacre](#)—were still expected to marry women for exaltation (which they did), and the broader vision of eternal increase remained intact under this system.

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More importantly, and more problematic for those who may see it as precedent for same-sex sealings, the Law of Adoption did not grant moral permission for homosexual relationships. There is no evidence that any such allowance was ever granted in this practice. Instead, it reinforced the patriarchal structure of divine kinship by emphasizing a father-son relationship rather than a sexual or romantic one. Unless

queer theorists are proposing that same-sex-attracted Saints be sealed to Russell M. Nelson or Dallin H. Oaks as their adopted sons, the Law of Adoption bears no real resemblance to modern same-sex relationships. The historical practice was about creating priesthood-based familial networks, not redefining celestial marriage. By contrast, contemporary arguments for same-sex sealings seek to establish male-male or female-female sexual and domestic partnerships as a parallel to male-female unions, which directly conflicts with the Law of Adoption as it was historically practiced.

When Wilford Woodruff [officially ended the practice](#) of adoption in 1894, he did so in favor of extending the biological family model of sealing that is now central to Latter-day Saint theology. But even as Woodruff closed the door on the practice of adoption sealings, he left open a window, stating, “We want the Latter-day Saints from this time to trace their genealogies as far as they can, and to be sealed to their fathers and mothers. Have children sealed to their parents, and run this chain through as far as you can get it. When you get to the end, let the last man be adopted to Joseph Smith, who stands at the head of the dispensation.” In saying so, Woodruff shifted the focus from priesthood-based adoption to biological lineage while still maintaining a theological framework that tied all Latter-day Saints into a unified, covenantal family under Joseph Smith, the head of the dispensation. The Law of Adoption was thus an administrative practice designed to reinforce priesthood lineage, not a fundamental alteration of Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo cosmology. It never replaced celestial marriage, never allowed for alternative family structures that bypassed male-female complementarity, and was ultimately discontinued in favor of a model that more explicitly emphasized biological kinship as the foundation of exaltation. It does not provide a precedent for dismantling the gender essentialism and heteronormativity inherent in both Joseph Smith’s teachings and the current Church’s.

Air Bud Theology as a Misreading of Latter-day Saint Doctrine

These common arguments made by queer theorists in search of accommodating same-sex sealings, while perhaps sincere and earnest, are good examples of the second form of what I call Air Bud Theology. These authors construct theological possibilities largely by exploiting ambiguities. Oman openly acknowledges as much, stating that his “goal is to accommodate uncertainty on the precise eternal status of homosexuality,” prompting [one reviewer](#) to succinctly characterize Oman’s methodology as essentially saying, “We don’t know, so we might as well.” But such agnosticism is not grounds for a

radical departure from revealed truth. Nor is any supposed lack of explicit discussion on same-sex sealings evidence of their implicit possibility; rather, it reflects the fact that the entire Latter-day Saint doctrine of exaltation has presupposed heterosexual marriage from the beginning.

Air Bud Theology is not an attempt to understand doctrine as revealed by prophets but rather to reinterpret it through the lens of omission—arguing that whatever may not be explicitly prohibited must therefore be possible. But this is not how Latter-day Saint theology works. Doctrine is established through affirmative revelation and repeated, unified prophetic teaching, not through theological loopholes. The supposed absence of a direct prohibition against same-sex sealings does not suggest that they are covertly hiding somewhere in Latter-day Saint teaching, waiting to be uncovered—as if all that is needed is an intrepid postmodernist Indiana Jones to unearth them through deconstructionist textual excavation. On the contrary, the presence of a comprehensive theological structure built entirely on heterosexual celestial marriage (whether monogamous or polygamous) means they do not exist within the revealed order in the first place. Some of the practical mechanisms of this theology might be ambiguous, but the overarching framework is not; it has been affirmatively and consistently articulated by both scripture and modern prophetic authority.

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To be clear, I am not suggesting that asking good-faith questions or exploring theological possibilities within the established parameters of Latter-day Saint doctrine is the same as Air Bud Theology. There is a meaningful distinction between engaging with unresolved theological questions and using ambiguity as a tool to justify doctrinal revisionism. What defines Air Bud Theology is how it functions—not as an earnest inquiry but as a mechanism for introducing ideological preferences into a theological system that was never designed to accommodate them. It does not simply raise good-faith questions; it selectively exploits perceived loopholes and ambiguities to push doctrinal innovations that align with modern secular thought. At its worst, Air Bud Theology is a form of ideological colonization.

In the end, theology is not a game of technicalities, and the doctrine of exaltation is not a playground for ideological experimentation. If we are to take the doctrine of eternal marriage seriously, as it was revealed by Joseph Smith and has been taught for nearly two centuries, we must evaluate it based on what it actually teaches, not on what it may supposedly fail to explicitly forbid. Air Bud Theology may make for entertaining thought experiments, but it is no substitute for revealed truth.

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