

# THE MOTHER TREE: UNDERSTANDING THE SPIRITUAL ROOT OF OUR ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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Imagine two circles, largely but not completely overlapping. The center, a tall oval of convergence, and on each side, facing crescents. One of the two circles is the dominant element of culture, men. The other, the muted element of culture, women. Both the crescent that belongs to men only and the crescent that belongs to women only are wilderness. However, as Elaine Showalter explains, “All of male consciousness is within the circle of the Dominant structure and thus accessible to or structured by language.”<sup>1</sup> Women know what the male crescent is like, even if they have never seen it, because it becomes spoken culture, the histories and mythologies of a people. These myths shape ideologies surrounding built and natural environments. What is understood in the twenty-first century as “nature” is really a curated environment built around industrial needs, urbanization, and selected areas of wildness, the boundaries of which are ever-eroding. The earth’s wildness has no place in “nature,” which has become man’s property.

But the experience of women as women, their wilderness crescent, is unshared with men—utterly other—and therefore to men, unnatural. In the words of Ursula K. Le Guin:

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1. Elaine Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 200.

This is what civilization has left out, what culture excludes, what the Dominants call animal, bestial, primitive, undeveloped, unauthentic—what has not been spoken, and when spoken, has not been heard—what we are just beginning to find words for, our words not their words: the experience of women. For dominance-identified men and women both, that is true wildness. Their fear of it is ancient, profound, and violent. The misogyny that shapes every aspect of our civilization is the institutionalized form of male fear and hatred of what they have denied and therefore cannot know, cannot share: that wild country, the being of women.<sup>2</sup>

Early authors of the ecofeminist movement instituted women's relationship with the natural world in modern discourse. Established as both an ecological philosophy and a social movement in the early 1970s, ecofeminism began by citing "the existence of a unique and significant relationship between women and nature and, on that basis, [it] advocates specifically women's environmental activism to save the Earth."<sup>3</sup>

A multidisciplinary group of scholars recognized the historical associations between women and nature. In 1974, cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner published "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" arguing that "women's subordination to men is rooted in their symbolic connection to nature."<sup>4</sup> Environmental historian and philosopher Carolyn Merchant followed with "The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution" about how "modern science's mechanistic worldview has enabled the simultaneous exploitation of nature and subordination of women."<sup>5</sup> In Ortner's words, "The universality of female subordination, the fact that it exists within every type of social and

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2. Ursula K. Le Guin, "Woman/Wilderness," in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 163.

3. Juliann Emmons Allison, "Ecofeminism and Global Environmental Politics," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (print publication date: Mar. 2010, online publication date: Nov. 2017).

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

economic arrangement and in societies of every degree of complexity, indicates to me that we are up against something very profound, very stubborn, something we cannot rout out simply by rearranging a few tasks and roles in the social system, or even by reordering the whole economic structure.”<sup>6</sup>

If conceptions of nature are built around just one crescent of human experience, male, it is clear that the intergenerational repercussions of woman’s dismissal and subordination, her separation from her own wild nature, reverberate in every facet of her being, affecting the health of the world. A lodestar in restoring the voice and psyche of women is Jungian analyst and cantadora Clarissa Pinkola Estés. For over twenty years Dr. Estés researched the archetype of the Wild Woman. This facet of the female psyche is primal, wild, but has been twisted and hidden by the forces of culture. She remains, however, in the traces of the myths, folk tales, and stories of many cultures—instinctual, visionary.

Consequently, Dr. Estés is keenly aware of the devastations of the female unconscious that accompany women starved of these attributes. Dr. Estés gathered women’s own language to describe the grim symptoms of a disrupted relationship with the wildish force of the psyche. They include: “feeling extraordinarily dry, fatigued, frail, depressed, confused, gagged, muzzled, unaroused. Feeling frightened, halt or weak, without inspiration, without animation, without soulfulness, without meaning, shame-bearing, chronically fuming, volatile, stuck, uncreative, compressed, crazed.”<sup>7</sup> She contrasts this desiccated sense of being with the attributes of the Mother wolf, fresh with blood, making tracks, and herding her brood through wilderness with authority—Nature in her unadulterated form. It becomes possible, then, to imagine what a society

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6. Sherry B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?,” in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, edited by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), 68.

7. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 11.

might look like that has returned to nature's ways, filled with women inhabiting their own authority. For now, the world is left in a state of ecological disaster.

### A False Paradigm of Separateness Promotes Ecological Fraying

It is impossible to separate what has been done to women from what has been done to the land. Both are distrusted. Both are removed from their wildness. They are feared, tamed, and contorted into knowable forms, into extractable resources. Dominance-identified men and women do not say nature is sacred because they distrust it. Their definition does not include humanity. It is their construct; just as most of what is said and known about women is myth and construct.<sup>8</sup>

Because the essential networks of interconnection that define the sanctity of the earth and women are muted, rigorous scientific study that gathers enough understanding of ecological systems to honor and protect them is ignored in the face of lust for immediate gains that cut at the last roots of the living world. Humankind's large-scale environmental degradations demonstrate that the forces of industrialization perceive that natural systems' inherent value is inferior to extractable resources for immediate human consumption. Consumption is spreading at an uncontainable scale and rate. The pride behind this wanton destruction of eternal networks in the physical and spiritual spheres of the wild is the same pride that has removed Heavenly Mother from her temple throne and attempted to accelerate the silencing of women. The ramifications? A slow suicide.

Social and economic structures that promote this commodity-based view of the natural world have not been kept from influencing the worldviews of Church members and the Church's own institutional structure. Unfortunately, this contributes to a spiritual and cognitive dissonance toward the land and the true substance of divine feminine

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8. Le Guin, "Woman/Wilderness," 162.

identity. A full appreciation of these aspects is necessary for a full restoration of the gospel, one that plants the Mother tree in the temple as the giver of life and the healer of the environmentally degraded world.

### An Uprooted Eco-Spirituality

As long as the institutional structure of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints remains a patriarchy, its behaviors and correlated teachings will uphold the mistreatment of women and nature by defining them as appendages of men, to be tamed and used, not heard or understood. Hearing women and valuing their voices dissolves the pride that sustains all patriarchal structures. A patriarchy is an inherently telestial system where equality is impossible. In the words of Gina Colvin, “It’s a given that women aren’t equal to men in the church—and any argument that brawls with this fact is a nonsense. While men are granted the exercise of ecclesiastical and managerial authority over women—that is called a patriarchy.”<sup>9</sup>

While the Church has recently placed emphasis on the need for greater environmental stewardship, it has largely come through public-facing statements on the Newsroom website and in speeches presented at symposiums rather than to the membership by way of general conferences or standardized materials.<sup>10</sup> These outward-facing statements are not a part of LDS discourse in any developed, systematic way and effect

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9. Gina Colvin, “Ordain Women, But . . . : A Womanist Perspective,” in *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, edited by Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 271.

10. See, for example, “Environmental Stewardship and Conservation,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, available at <https://www.lds.org/topics/environmental-stewardship-and-conservation?lang=eng>; “Environmental Conservation and Stewardship Efforts,” *Mormon Newsroom*, <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/environmental-conservation-stewardship-efforts>; Steven E. Snow, “The Moral Imperative of Environmental Stewardship,” *Mormon Newsroom*, <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/the-moral-imperative-of-environmental-stewardship-elder-steven-e-snow>; “Selected Scriptures and Church Leader

little change. To find environmental statements by General Authorities in the Church, one must search through the decades to find isolated commentary. For example, former President Ezra Taft Benson said in 1976, “Irreverence for God, of life, and for [humankind] takes the form of things like littering, heedless strip mining, [and] pollution of water and air. But these are, after all, outward expressions of the inner man.”<sup>11</sup> While these words bring attention to the spiritual issues behind environmental waste and destruction, they were prepared for the White House Forum on Domestic Policy in Denver, Colorado and have had little more effect on current LDS discourse than that of a small bandage on a wound that has been hemorrhaging for decades. Ultimately, they fail, as all statements will within the Church’s current patriarchal paradigm, to elucidate Mother in Heaven’s fundamental role in the design of the purposes and paths of creation.<sup>12</sup>

The patriarchal lens of the Church creates tension and dissonance around LDS theology that attributes all living beings with a soul, with an individual purpose and identity, and that promises their celestialization along with Earth’s. Instead of carving out a unique paradigm that honors and sustains the ecologies connecting all living beings on the earth, the Church has largely taken on the inherent attitudes of dominance-identified men and women: that the earth is to be used as those in power see fit. What follows is an underlying belief by many of its members, compounded by eschatological theories, that things will go as they will for the earth and there isn’t much to be done to stop it. Its mentality is a modern-day iteration of the sorrowing of the damned.

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Statements on Environmental Stewardship and Conservation,” *Mormon Newsroom*, <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/environment-statements>.

11. Ezra Taft Benson, “Problems Affecting the Domestic Tranquility of Citizens of the United States of America,” *Vital Speeches* 42, no. 8 (Feb. 1976): 240.

12. Margaret Barker, “Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?,” Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/11/1/7.aspx>.

This fatalistic view of the earth creates a disconnect from the rape and abuse of the land and of women: it is sad but inevitable and only discussed peripherally. The beauty of the earth is mentioned in songs and occasionally over the pulpit, but there is little talk about the spiritual consequences of its destruction. Relatedly, there is little official discourse about the abuse of women in the Church. When stories surface, they are immediately buried under counter-accusations and victim-blaming; over and over again, women have to fight to be heard and to have the power of the patriarchal institutions on their side.<sup>13</sup> As patriarchy fears the creative powers of the wild, it fears the creative powers of women and their voices that cast a spiritual warning about collective abuses of their bodies and the body of the earth. There is no room within the walls of any patriarchy for women to speak as women, to voice the primal and primary roles that are theirs in the cycling of life to death and back to life. Consequently, women, wild with desire for their birthright, are opening paths of understanding to Heavenly Mother. Saints across the globe are seeking and finding answers on their own, through personal revelation and through creative works that are becoming the greatest force for ushering in exiled Lady Wisdom.

Women preside in the rites of birth and death; tend to children, the sick, and elderly; and are, therefore, a constant reminder of the inevitability of death, representing the unknown and uncontrollable. As Ortner states, “Because of woman’s greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than man is. Yet in part because of her consciousness and participation in human social dialogue, she is recognized as a participant in culture. Thus, she appears as something intermediate between

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13. One example is the case of the BYU rapes, daylighted through the courage of women. BYU then changed its policies. See Jack Healy, “At Brigham Young, a Cost in Reporting a Rape,” *New York Times*, Apr. 26, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/27/us/rape-victims-brigham-young-university-honor-code-suspensions.html>.

culture and nature, lower on the scale of transcendence than man.”<sup>14</sup> This hierarchy bleeds into the mindset of LDS men and women. They are lulled by the trappings of a false power structure, and Mother of Heaven and her daughters are not only veiled but also violently severed from their true identity with no map to the Tree.

### A Cosmos without A Tree

The cosmological failings of the correlated gospel include an omission of woman’s true realm, her powers, her voice, her dimensions. Likewise, Heavenly Mother is faceless, nameless, voiceless. Even Mormon feminists have been caught within the constructs of the Church’s patriarchal framework when articulating, in the words of Taylor G. Petrey, “Mother in Heaven’s identity and roles in order to represent their own needs and desires of the ideal woman and their calls for reforming the theology.”<sup>15</sup>

Within this context, Heavenly Mother is not located in a place of agency but instead reconsidered in domestic iterations. In these scenarios, and in the words of Melodie Moench Charles, “Heavenly Mother is not an equal partner with Heavenly Father in any sense. She is second to her husband in everything, to her son in many things, and even to the Holy Ghost. Since she has no sphere of operations, she has no power.”<sup>16</sup>

What does women’s heaven look like, spoken from their own lips out of their own hearts? What is the spirit and soul of their Creatress like? In short, what is the character of their own spirits? There are more answers available than have been given space in LDS discourse. They have not entered with full force into the discourse of LDS theology because Mother is still missing from her temple home as the source of women’s

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14. Ortnier, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” 68–87.

15. Taylor G. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” *Harvard Theological Review* 109, no. 3 (July 2016): 322.

16. Melodie Moench Charles, “The Need for a New Mormon Heaven,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 84.



spiritual orientation and nourishment. Again, women must follow the crumbs that Dr. Estés has left behind to mark as a trail. A healthy woman, full of the wisdom of her Mother, “is much like a wolf: robust, chock-full, life-giving, territorially aware, inventive, loyal, roving.”<sup>17</sup> She embodies the wildness of the Wild Woman archetype. “She is the Life/Death/Life force, the incubator. She is intuition, far-seer, and deep listener. She encourages humans to remain multilingual; fluent in the languages of dreams, passions, and poetry. She thunders after injustice.”<sup>18</sup> She is not separate from the networks that create life; she maps them on her body. She “finds heartening instead of fear in the darkness of regeneration.”<sup>19</sup> She is the cosmological center. In the words of Mircea Eliade, “All religious experiences connected with fecundity and birth have a cosmic structure. The sacrality of woman depends on the holiness of the earth.”<sup>20</sup> Women represent the web of relationships born of Heavenly Mother, from whom they inherit creative powers. Like the Mother, women are the connective power between heaven and earth, administering their own life-giving ordinances.

### Heavenly Mother: The Seal of Creation

Mother is a tree. Her roots reach down into the underworld; her body is the flesh and blood of the present, the passage between life and death; her branches paths to the heavens. She represents eternal life in the most primal sense, as the preserver of the interrelationships of all beings and the earth around them. She knows everything that lives by name, why and how each came to be. She knows that for women and men to follow the righteous example of the rest of creation and fulfill the measure of their

17. Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, 12–13.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 147.

20. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1957), 144.

creation, they must choose to take part in the everlasting covenant. She is the Tree of Life, the Axis Mundi, the vertical marking of the center of the cosmos, the conceptual and ceremonial center, marking the point of intersection of the cardinal directions.<sup>21</sup> The tree of life has always been a symbol of the divine feminine. Specifically, in the Old Testament, the tree is the representation of Asherah, an Israelite goddess. She is the lady in the temple, the source of fecundity and eternal life. Christ is her fruit.<sup>22</sup>

Asherah was one in a family of gods worshipped in the first Jerusalem temple and part of a larger council of gods. This family included the Father, the Highest; the Mother, the consort-goddess Asherah and personification of wisdom; and the Son, called the Lord.<sup>23</sup> There is much textual evidence to support that the Son and Father were blurred into the one God of the current Hebrew Bible, and Wisdom the Mother was banished, surviving in allusions and fragments.<sup>24</sup> Abraham's earliest form of temple worship was altered by King Josiah in the sixth century BCE to adhere with the book of the law. This book was discovered during the temple's renovation and is either a version of Deuteronomy or an extracanonical law code.<sup>25</sup> The supporters of this law code are referred to as the Deuteronomists, and their temple and worship reforms "caused the loss of what were likely many plain and precious things. Among these were the older ideas, symbols, possibly entire rituals, and forms of words from the temple as its adherents had known it, including the Lady Wisdom."<sup>26</sup>

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21. Ibid., 33–36.

22. Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, vol 1., *The Lady in the Temple* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 190.

23. Zina Petersen, "Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 7 (2013): 100.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

The removal of Asherah from the Holy of Holies of the temple was the removal of the urtext of women; the sacred script that unfolded their role in salvation. It was the rejection of the ecological wisdom encoded in the everlasting covenant. In the words of Bible scholar Margaret Barker, Josiah also “destroyed the high places and pillars and burned Asherah, the sacred tree.”<sup>27</sup> At the time of the purge, Barker notes, groups of believers of the older faith (such as Lehi and his family) left or were driven from Jerusalem and, in their exile, continued the older forms of Abrahamic worship.<sup>28</sup> These older beliefs are found in texts such as the Book of Weeks and the Apocalypse of Enoch, as well as in the Book of Mormon. Close readings of the Bible reveal evidence for the older traditions in Ezekiel, Psalms, Micah, Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, and parts of Isaiah. Many of these prophets condemn “not only foreigners, enemies, or invaders from outside the kingdom but also the changes they saw from the religion of Abraham to that of Moses, and his Law.”<sup>29</sup>

According to Barker, “the sins of Jerusalem that Isaiah condemned were not those of the ten commandments, but those of the Enoch tradition: pride (e.g., Isa. 2:11, 17), rebellion (e.g., Isa. 1:23, 1:28, 5:24) and loss of Wisdom (e.g., Isa. 2:6, 3:12, 5:12).”<sup>30</sup> The first chapter of the Book of Proverbs gives voice to rejected Lady Wisdom: “How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing, and fools hate knowledge? Give heed to my reproof and I will pour out my spirit on you . . . because I called and you refused to listen . . . and you have ignored all my counsel . . . I will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when panic strikes you . . . when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me but I will not answer, they will seek me diligently but they will not find

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27. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, 24.

28. *Ibid.*, 75.

29. Petersen, “Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?” 104.

30. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, 53.

me” (Prov. 1:22–28). This is the Goddess speaking.<sup>31</sup> These are women’s words of warning. This is wilderness promising that the very wildness that has stirred up such disdain will roll out on the earth the wrath of the Mother whose counsel is ignored.

Lady Wisdom spoke from the cosmological center of the Israelites, from her home in the Holy of Holies about the mysteries of creation. The Holy of Holies (Prov. 8) was constructed as a perfect cube and lined with gold to represent the light and fire of the divine presence (2 Chr. 3:8). Barker states, “Wisdom is described in Proverbs 8.30 as the *amon* in creation, a word not found elsewhere, but thought to mean ‘architect.’ The Greek, however, translated it *harmozousa*, the one who joins together (Prov. 8:30), which implies that She was remembered as the bond of the everlasting covenant.”<sup>32</sup> The everlasting covenant was given to all living beings, not just men and women, as a way to preserve the connections forged on the earth and with Earth eternally. Barker continues, “The prophets linked covenant not to the Lord’s exclusive relationship to his people, but to the Creator’s relationship to the creation.”<sup>33</sup> Breaking the everlasting covenant means destroying the fabric of creation. It is a rejection of the feminine aspect of deity, her admonitions and eternal wisdom. The scriptures below suggest that “covenant” had a meaning connected with the order and stability of creation:<sup>34</sup>

Behold I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you . . . the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth (Gen. 9:9–10, 16).

The earth mourns and withers . . . for they have broken the everlasting covenant . . . (Isa. 24:5).

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31. Barker, “Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?”

32. Ibid.

33. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, 209.

34. Ibid.

I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air and the creeping things of the ground (Hos. 2:18).

### Conclusion: Salvation is Dependent on Revering the Ecologies of Creation

Isaiah prophesied that during the last days the earth would be cursed because of transgression: “The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore hath the curse devoured the earth, and they that dwell therein are desolate: therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men left” (Isa. 24:5–6). It could not be more clear: salvation is dependent on revering the ecologies of creation and the physical, emotional, and spiritual ties that bind it.

As the seal of creation, Heavenly Mother’s continued exile from the temple and from the religious and cultural life of contemporary Saints is in partial fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. Her return to her rightful place in the temple will give women their divine archetype back and speaking grounds for not only their place in LDS cosmology but their place in healing the world. Her return will signify a restoration of humility, and love for all that is wild that will bring her offering as life-giver and eternal center of the actualized principles of wisdom to fruition. To enter the Holy of Holies, into the promises of celestial glory—a unified, holistic view of the entirety of creation—is to reverence a wild and mysterious Mother and her wild daughters, to learn the purposes of creation, the grand and the terrible, to contemplate the darkest abyss in order to discern the most brilliant light. It is to ultimately be entrusted with the understanding of the paths of everything that lives.<sup>35</sup>

What Moses actually saw on Sinai, as remembered by Baruch, the scribe of the prophet Jeremiah, was in part the transformation of the mountain into the Holy of Holies, a consecrated and purified space

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35. *Ibid.*, 283.

where Moses saw the creation of the world and learned the law.<sup>36</sup> These revelations were the mysteries of godliness, the wild heart of Heavenly Mother. This was Moses entering into true wildness. He was shown:

The measures of fire, the depths of the abyss, the weight of the winds, the number of the raindrops, the suppression of wrath, the abundance of long suffering, the truth of judgement, the root of wisdom, the richness of understanding, the fountain of knowledge, the height of the air, the greatness of Paradise, the end of the periods, the beginning of the day of judgement, the number of offerings, the worlds which have not yet come, the mouth of hell, the standing place of vengeance, the place of faith, the region of hope, the picture of coming punishment, the multitude of angels which cannot be counted, the powers of the flame, the splendour of lightnings, the voice of the thunders, the order of the archangels, the treasures of the light, the changes of the times, and the enquiries into the Law. (2 Baruch 59:4–11)

Approaching the Mother tree in order to partake of Christ the fruit is to enter into the way of all abundance. The Creatress, with El and Yahweh, will usher souls into eternal life who are trusted with the mysteries of creation, to better understand wildness as the vast web of interconnections and relationships to energies, matter, and souls. The Father's and the Mother's evaluation of their children will be based on the doctrine of Christ: to become as little children (3 Ne. 11:37–38). The roots of the word "innocent" mean to be free of injury or hurt. In Spanish it is understood to mean a person who tries not to harm others and who also is able to heal any injury or harm to herself.<sup>37</sup> All children are wild. All were wild once and lived in the wild country of the Mother tree. She is prophesied to return. It is time to usher her in.

On the Day of Atonement  
Her return is as Her departure,  
" . . . the sound of many waters."

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36. Ibid., 218.

37. Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, 152.

A rush of angels and measuring reeds, laws  
pour out in a clamor of tongues, framing  
cubit by cubit.

To the Holy of Holies, through the eastern gate,  
Glory fills the temple—a river springs  
from its center, Her branches spreading  
on its banks, whose leaves  
are for healing.

Whose fruit is for wisdom and whose oil  
is for anointing, to open the eyes to unerring  
knowledge of what exists. She, the bond who holds  
all things in harmony, She, the seal of creation, pours  
out of the mouth of the Most High,  
covering the earth like a mist.

My eyes were enlightened and my face  
received the dew.<sup>38</sup>

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38. Kathryn Knight Sonntag, from “Ezekiel’s Visions,” in *The Tree at the Center* (Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2019), 64–65.