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PLURAL MARRIAGE AND JOSEPH SMITH: A PR NIGHTMARE IN MORMONISM

by Eric Johnson

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Publicly mention the religion of Mormonism and the first thought to come to mind is “polygamy” or, as it is also called, plural marriage. This common perception linking Mormonism with the practice of one man marrying two or more women has caused the public relations department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, Mormon) great consternation over the years, even though this doctrine officially ended in 1890. While many Latter-day Saints may know that Brigham Young and other nineteenth century men in the LDS religion took multiple wives, they may not realize that Joseph Smith, their beloved founder, was Mormonism’s first polygamist.

Beginning in late 2013, the LDS Church began posting a series of “Gospel Topics” essays on its lds.org website that deal with a variety of controversial issues.¹ Church leader Steven E. Snow says that these essays were meant to counter faulty information that he believes emanates from enemies of the church: “We understandably have not spent a lot of time in the past worrying about these issues because our mission is to promote faith and belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. But as the information age is now upon us, we feel with all of this information out there we owe it particularly to the rising generation to provide good reliable information about these matters.”²

Three of the essays were dedicated to different aspects of plural marriage, including the 4,800-word “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo” published on October 22, 2014, which acknowledged how “careful estimates put the number [of Smith’s wives] between 30 and 40.”³ Hearing that Joseph Smith had wives other than

Emma Smith was new information for many, especially those living outside the United States. Kristine Haglund, the editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, explained, “Some lifelong members have grown up with family history of polygamy and so they know about it....But other members are just hearing now for the very first time and finding it very distressing.”⁴ Based on the number of blogs and online discussions, this information has appeared to hit a nerve.⁵

THE PLURAL MARRIAGES OF JOSEPH SMITH

In its introductory section, the “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo” essay explains how Smith “prayed to know why God justified Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and Solomon in having many wives. The Lord responded that He had commanded them to enter into the practice.” To suggest that God “commanded” these patriarchs to practice plural marriage is without biblical support. Genesis 16 depicts Sarai, not God, as convincing Abram to take a second wife. Isaac was not a polygamist. For the other cases, it’s an argument from silence to make God the responsible party and say that He “did not give exact instructions on how to obey the commandment,” despite the fact that specific prohibitions *are* provided in Leviticus 18, including having:

- (Verse 17) Sexual relations with a woman and her daughter (yet Smith married Patty Bartlett Sessions and her daughter Sylvia Sessions);
- (Verse 18) Sisters as wives (yet Smith married three pairs of sisters—the Johnsons, Lawrences, and Partridges);⁶
- (Verse 20) Relations with a neighbor’s wife (yet ten of Smith’s wives were already married to men he knew quite well).

Smith knew the “majority of his future wives” by 1831 when “most of them were still adolescents—the children of close associates.”⁷ Over the next dozen years, the charismatic Smith used a variety of coercive tactics to convince these girls and women to marry him. For one, the essay explained how Smith told a story about an angel appearing to him “three times between 1834 and 1842, commanding him to proceed with plural marriage when he hesitated. During the third and final appearance, the angel came with a drawn sword, threatening Joseph with destruction unless he went forward and obeyed the commandment fully.” Smith was fond of retelling this angel-with-the-sword tale, including to twenty-year-old Zina Diantha Huntington in 1841. According to scholar Todd Compton, “Zina, faced with the responsibility for his

position as prophet, and even perhaps his life, finally acquiesced.” Similar to his “First Vision” account describing how God the Father and Jesus appeared to him in 1820 as well as his testimony about how the angel Moroni visited him beginning in 1823, Smith’s word must be accepted because he was the sole witness. Huntington ended up agreeing to become Smith’s fourth wife, even though she was already married to Henry B. Jacobs.⁸

Plural Marriage and Smith’s Theology of Exaltation

The essay also described how Smith often linked his prospective wife’s eternal destiny with plural marriage. Because Smith taught that “exaltation” involved godhood and procreation into eternity, plural marriage served as the key to jumpstart one’s new world. Historian Gary James Bergera explained that this teaching was especially appealing to the women who were given “assurance that blessings unimaginable awaited them. For Smith, plural marriage represented the pinnacle of his theology of exaltation: the husband as king and priest, surrounded by queens and priestesses eternally procreating spirit children.”⁹ The benefits could even extend to the girl’s earthly family. For instance, Helen Mar Kimball, Smith’s twenty-fifth wife, claimed that Smith promised her that “if you will take this step, it will ensure your eternal salvation [and] exaltation and that of your father’s household [and] all of your kindred.” Her response? “This promise was so great that I gave myself to purchase so glorious a reward.” Just as he did with seventeen-year-old Sarah Whitney, “Joseph gave [Helen] responsibility not only for her own salvation but for that of her whole family. Thus Helen’s acceptance of a union that was not intrinsically attractive to her was an act of youthful sacrifice and heroism.”¹⁰

Physical Sexual Relations

Many Latter-day Saints in the past have rationalized Smith’s marriages as platonic in nature. Yet even the essay concedes that the unions “generally include[d] the possibility of sexual relations.” Indeed, “Utah Mormons (including Smith’s wives) affirmed repeatedly that he had physical sexual relations with them—despite the Victorian conventions in nineteenth-century American culture which ordinarily would have prevented any mention of sexuality.”¹¹ And “though it is possible that Joseph had some marriages in which there were no sexual relations, there is no explicit or convincing evidence for this.”¹² Mormon historian Richard Lyman Bushman adds that “nothing indicates that sexual relations were left out of plural marriages.”¹³

Conjugal relationships would make sense according to the LDS scripture called the Book of Mormon. While God is portrayed in Jacob 2:24 as declaring plural marriage “abominable before me,” verse 30 adds that the practice could be allowed only to “raise up seed [produce children] unto me.” Yet if producing children legitimizes polygamy, why did Smith marry ten women who were already married to living husbands? Couldn’t these men have been satisfactory to “raise up seed”? In addition, Bushman says that “not until many years later did anyone claim Joseph Smith’s paternity, and evidence for the tiny handful of supposed children is tenuous.”¹⁴ If raising up “seed” was the lone exception to polygamy, it seems odd that there is little to no evidence that Smith ever produced children through his marital relationships with these multiple wives.

Ten Teenage Wives

The essay attempts to obfuscate when it says that “most of those sealed to Joseph Smith were between 20 and 40 years of age at the time of their sealing to him.” If Smith had thirty-three plural wives, as Todd Compton suggests, then it could just as easily be said that the majority were between 14 and 27 years of age, a much more shocking statistic.¹⁵ It also states how Helen Kimball “was sealed to Joseph several months before her 15th birthday.” Someone in her fifteenth year is fourteen. Could making this girl appear a year older be an attempt to soften the impact, especially since the husband was thirty-seven in May 1843? The essay then rationalizes, “Marriage at such an age, inappropriate by today’s standards, was legal in that era, and some women married in their midteens.” The fact is that those in their mid-teens in nineteenth century America rarely married. Even if marriage at this age is legal, this doesn’t make it moral. For instance, while fifteen-year-olds with parental permission are allowed to marry today in the state of Utah, a case could be made that the majority of girls this age are nowhere close to being mature enough—either physically or emotionally—for a lifetime commitment. Besides, few parents today would allow their teenage daughter to marry someone like Smith who was more than twice her age. In addition, the essay failed to acknowledge that in the nineteenth century *any* union between a female of any age and a *married* man was illegal in every state, just as it is today.

EMMA SMITH

The essay described how “plural marriage was difficult for all involved. For Joseph Smith’s wife Emma, it was an excruciating ordeal.” Yet such information was conveniently left out of a church manual published just seven years earlier.¹⁶ In fact, Emma is the only one listed as Joseph’s wife in this book’s “Historical Summary”; the

other wives are never mentioned. The manual describes trials the couple had to endure, including the deaths of several of their children, financial problems, and Joseph's constant absence from home. If dealing with Smith's plural marriages "was an excruciating ordeal," as reported in the essay, it seems this information should have also been referenced in the official publication.

Perhaps empathy can be found for Emma when it is understood how Smith actively sought out and secretly married other women. While Joseph typically directed that his personal letters to these other wives be destroyed, not all were. In one note, he proposed a rendezvous with a seventeen-year-old wife, saying, "My feelings are so strong for you. Come and see me in this my lonely retreat...now is the time to afford me succor...I have a room intirely by myself, the whole matter can be attended to with most perfect safty, I know it is the will of God that you should comfort me."¹⁷

Except for a brief period of time, Emma was adamant in her disapproval of plural marriage and even threatened Smith many times with divorce. Mormon writers Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery explain, "In the most serious crisis of their marriage, Joseph backed down. He told Emma that he would give up his wives. But he confided to [William] Clayton that he did not intend to keep his word."¹⁸ Indeed:

Joseph's choice of women as plural wives gradually put a wedge between Emma and her friends as long as she remained either ignorant of the practice or opposed it. By late summer 1843 most of Emma's friends had either married Joseph or had given their daughters to him....At least five women in her own household were Joseph's plural wives. Whether Emma knew about them or not, the women would not have been sympathetic to Emma while she opposed plural marriage. As a result, she became isolated from her friends and associates, and through the next four years this isolation would become more and more acute.¹⁹

In June 1844, Mormonism's thirty-eight-year-old founder was killed in a gun battle at the Carthage Jail in Illinois.²⁰ In 1846, Brigham Young led the majority of Smith's followers west, leaving Emma behind in Illinois. On the date of Joseph's birthday (December 23) in 1847, Emma married the non-Mormon Lewis C. Bidamon and, despite the historical evidence, adamantly denied until her death that Joseph was ever a polygamist.

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NOTES

- 1 From November 2013 through October 2014, a total of eleven Gospel Topic essays were published, with one additional essay forthcoming.
- 2 "What about Historical Questions?"
<https://www.lds.org/topics?lang=eng#media=11373505780672488714-eng>.
- 3 <https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>. Smith married all but two of his wives within a thirty-two-month period of time (between April 1841 and November 1843).
- 4 "Mormon Church Grapples with Origins and Polygamy," PBS NewsHour, November 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSrQA3VbZgc&list=UU6ZFN9Tx6xhskXCuRHCDpQ>.
- 5 For example, the article, "New Mormon Essay: Joseph Smith Married Teens, Other Men's Wives," generated more than 6,800 online responses, many characterized by deep emotion. *The Salt Lake Tribune*, October 22, 2014.
- 6 A strong case can be made that Leviticus 18:18 prohibits all polygamy (see Richard M. Davidson, "Condemnation and Grace: Polygamy and Concubinage in the Old Testament," in this issue of the *Journal*, pp. 35–36).
- 7 George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 29.
- 8 Todd M. Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 81.
- 9 Gary James Bergera, "Identifying the Earliest Mormon Polygamists, 1841–44," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38 (Fall 2005): 4.
- 10 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 499.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 14–15.
- 13 Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 439.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 439.
- 15 Smith married more teenagers than women in either their twenties or thirties. According to Compton, the ages of Smith's wives were as follows: ten were between the ages of fourteen and nineteen; nine were between twenty and twenty-nine; nine were between thirty and thirty-nine; and five were in their forties and fifties. A total of seventeen of his wives were twenty-seven or younger. *In Sacred Loneliness*, 4–7.
- 16 *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007).
- 17 Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, viii. Spelling in original.
- 18 Newell and Tippetts, *Mormon Enigma* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 158.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 147.
- 20 See Eric Johnson, "The 'Martyrdom' of Joseph Smith," *Christian Research Journal* 31, 3 (2008); available at <http://www.equip.org/article/the-martyrdom-of-joseph-smith/>.