

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Insights on the Justification of Plural Marriages in Early Utah

KEITH L. BROWN

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Polygamy, which was practiced in the early history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is defined as “the practice or custom of having more than one wife or husband at the same time.” It is not a practice which Christendom embraces, as the general consensus is that God explicitly ordained the marriage union to be between one man and one woman. Both the Bible and the Book of Mormon distinctly define God’s standard for marriage in this manner. The teachings found within both volumes of sacred scripture emphasize that it was only at times declared by God Himself that the standard which had been established was to be altered or revised.

Consider the following instance of plural marriage recorded in the Bible in [Genesis 29:21-30](#):

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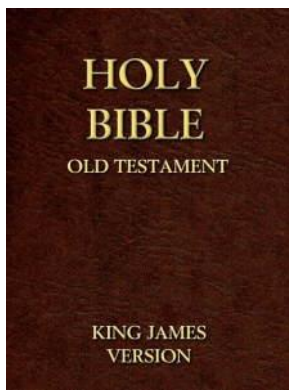
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And Jacob said unto Laban, Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her. And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast. And it came to pass in the evening that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her. And Laban gave unto his daughter Leah Zilpah his maid for an handmaid. And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah: and he said to Laban, What is this thou hast done unto me? Did not I serve with thee for Rachel? Wherefore then hast thou beguiled me? And Laban said, it must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. Fulfil her week, and we will give thee this also for the service which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years. And Jacob did so, and fulfilled her week: and he gave him Rachel his daughter to wife also. And Laban gave to Rachel his daughter Bilhah his handmaid to be her maid. And he went in also unto Rachel, and he loved also Rachel more than Leah, and served with him yet seven other years.

Modern-day revelation as recorded in [Doctrine and Covenants 132:34-35](#) further clarifies why the practice of plural marriages was allowed:

God commanded Abraham, and Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to wife. And why did she do it? Because this was the law; and from Hagar sprang many people. This, therefore, was fulfilling, among other things, the promises. Was Abraham, therefore, under condemnation? Verily I say unto you, nay; for I, the Lord, commanded it.

The Practice of Polygamy in the Old Testament



The question of polygamy is thought-provoking as many people today view polygamy as immoral. The first recorded instance of polygamy in the Old Testament is recorded in [Genesis 4:19](#), “And Lamech took unto him two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah.” Several notable men in the Old Testament of the Bible were polygamists – Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon, and others all had multiple wives. In [2 Samuel 12:8](#), speaking through the prophet Nathan, God said, “And I gave thee thy master’s house, and thy master’s wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things.” And according to [1 Kings 11:3](#), Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines (essentially wives of a lower status).

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Having this knowledge brings to mind three important questions, “Why did God allow polygamy in the Old Testament?” “How does God view polygamy today?” and “Why did God’s views on polygamy change?”

Referring to the above information as a foundation or premise for a discussion on the subject of plural marriages (polygamy), the question that begs an answer is, “Was Joseph Smith commanded of God to institute the practice of polygamy in the early 1840s?” Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe that as the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, Joseph Smith had received a revelation from God concerning the practice.

Why Did God Allow Polygamy in the Old Testament?

To answer this question adequately there are several key factors which need to be taken into consideration.

First, current statistics indicate that there has always been a larger number of women in the world than men. Assuming that the same statistics held true in Biblical times, there would have been tens of thousands more women than men. Second, the brutality of warfare in ancient times caused a high fatality rate. And third, due to the patriarchal nature of ancient societies, it was virtually impossible for an unmarried woman to provide for herself. Because women were generally uneducated and untrained, they relied on their fathers, brothers, and husbands for both provision and protection. It should also be noted that unmarried women were often subjected to prostitution and slavery. Given the significant difference in the ratio of women to men, many women would have found themselves in undesirable situations.

Therefore, it is plausible that God allowed polygamy to protect and provide for women who could not otherwise find a husband. Thus, a man would take multiple wives and serve as provider and protector for all of them. Albeit, this may not have been the idea or perfect situation, it overruled the dire alternatives of slavery, prostitution, or starvation.

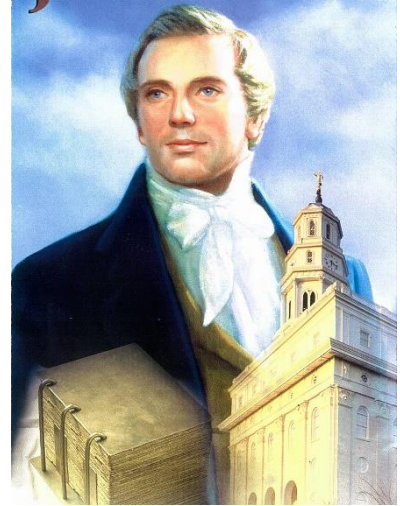
In addition, polygamy also enabled the expansion of humanity at a faster rate, thus fulfilling God’s command, “And you, be ye fruitful, and multiply; bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply therein” ([Genesis 9:7](#)).

The Practice of Polygamy in Early Latter-day Saint History

Latter-day Saints do not profess to understand the full purposes of God for instituting the practice of plural marriage, through His prophets, during the 19th century. Of peculiar interest, however, the Book of Mormon, which Mormons testify is *Another*

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Testament of Jesus Christ, identifies one reason for God commanding the practice which is directly in line with why He allowed the practice in the Old Testament. The following words are recorded in [Jacob 2:30](#), “For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things.” Thus, the commandment was fulfilled as plural marriage resulted in a large number of children being born within faithful Latter-day Saint families.



According to the essay titled “[Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah](#)” on the official website of [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#):

It [plural marriage] also shaped 19th-century Mormon society in other ways: marriage became available to virtually all who desired it; per-capita inequality of wealth was diminished as economically disadvantaged women married into more financially stable households; and ethnic intermarriages were increased, which helped to unite a diverse immigrant population. Plural marriage also helped create and strengthen a sense of cohesion and group identification among Latter-day Saints. Church members came to see themselves as a “peculiar people,” covenant-bound to carry out the commands of God despite outside opposition, willing to endure ostracism for their principles.

During the years that plural marriage was taught as a religious principle, all members of The Church of Jesus Christ were expected to accept the principle as a revelation from God, but not all were expected to live the principle. As in the times of the Old Testament, the practice of plural marriage (polygamy) could not have been a universal principle due to the fact that the number of women outweighed the number of men. Although Church leaders viewed plural marriage as a command for the Church as a whole, those who chose not to enter into the practice were still considered to stand approved of God.

A great deal of personal sacrifice was required of those who did enter into plural marriage as there were many challenges and difficulties that arose. Referring again to the essay “Plural Marriage and Family in Early Utah”:

Accounts left by men and women who practiced plural marriage attest to the challenges and difficulties they experienced, such as financial difficulty, interpersonal strife, and some wives’ longing for the sustained companionship of their husbands. But accounts also record the love and joy many found within their families. They believed it was a commandment of God at that time and that

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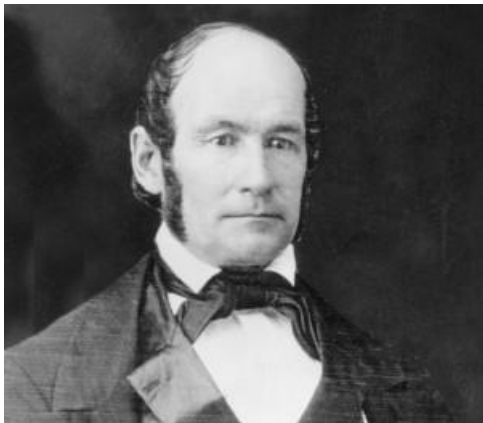
obedience would bring great blessings to them and their posterity, both on earth and in the life to come. While there was much love, tenderness, and affection within many plural marriages, the practice was generally based more on religious belief than on romantic love. Church leaders taught that participants in plural marriages should seek to develop a generous spirit of unselfishness and the pure love of Christ for everyone involved.

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Women were free to choose their spouses, whether to enter into a polygamous or monogamous union, or whether to marry at all. Some men entered plural marriage because they were asked to do so by Church leaders, while others initiated the process themselves; all were required to obtain the approval of Church leaders before entering a plural marriage.

Although some leaders had large polygamous families, two-thirds of polygamist men had only two wives at a time. Church leaders recognized that plural marriages could be particularly difficult for women. Divorce was therefore available to women who were unhappy in their marriages; remarriage was also readily available. Women did marry at fairly young ages in the first decade of Utah settlement (age 16 or 17 or, infrequently, younger), which was typical of women living in frontier areas at the time.

Testimonies of the Righteousness of Eternal Plural Marriage



Some Saints viewed plural marriage as a redemptive process of sacrifice and spiritual refinement. [According to Helen Mar Kimball](#), the daughter of Heber C. Kimball, Joseph Smith stated that, “the practice of this principle would be the hardest trial the Saints would ever have to test their faith.” She personally found plural marriage to be one of the “severest” trials of her life, but later testified that it had also been “one of the greatest blessings” of her life.

[Brigham Young, the second President of The Church of Jesus Christ, stated](#) that after learning about the principle of plural marriage, “it was the first time in my life that I had desired the grave. I had to pray unceasingly, and I had to exercise faith and the Lord revealed to me the truth of it and that satisfied me.” It is further noted that Heber C. Kimball who served as First Counselor to Brigham Young, found comfort with the practice only after his wife, Vilate, had a visionary experience attesting to the rightness of plural marriage. His daughter, Helen, later recalled that her mother had told her, “she

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never saw so happy a man as father was when she described the vision and told him she was satisfied and knew it was from God.”

The following is a more vivid account of Vilate Kimball’s vision as recounted by her Helen:

My father’s heart was raised at the same time in supplication, and while pleading as one would plead for life, the vision of her mind was opened, and she saw the principle of Celestial Marriage illustrated in all its beauty and glory, together with the great exaltation and honor it would confer upon her in that immortal and celestial sphere if she would but accept it and stand in her place by her husband’s side. She was also shown the woman he had taken to wife, and contemplated with joy the vast and boundless love and union which this order would bring about, as well as the increase of kingdoms, power, and glory extending throughout the eternities, worlds without end.

Her soul was satisfied and filled with the Spirit of God. With a countenance beaming with joy she returned to my father, saying, “Heber, what you have kept from me the Lord has shown me.”

She related the scene to me and to many others, and told me she never saw so happy a man as father was, when she described the vision and told him she was satisfied and knew that it was from God. She covenanted to stand by him and honor the principle, which covenant she faithfully kept, and though her trials were often heavy and grievous to bear, her integrity was unflinching to the end. [H[elen] M[ar] Whitney, “Life Incidents” (15 July 1882): cited in Stanley B. Kimball, “Heber C. Kimball and Family, the Nauvoo Years,” Brigham Young University Studies no. 4 (Summer 1975), 461–462.]

[Lucy Walker recalled her inner turmoil when Joseph Smith invited her to become his wife.](#) She wrote, “Every feeling of my soul revolted against it.” It was not until after several restless nights spent on her knees in prayer that she was able to obtain relief concerning the matter.

My room became filled with a heavenly influence. To me it was in comparison like the brilliant sun bursting through the darkest cloud...My Soul was filled with a calm, sweet peace that I never knew. Supreme happiness took possession of my whole being. And I received a powerful and irresistible testimony of the truth of the marriage covenant called ‘Celestial or plural marriage.’ Which has been like an anchor to the soul through all the trials of life. I felt that I must go out into the morning air and give vent to the Joy and gratitude that filled my Soul. As I

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descended the stairs, President Smith opened the door below; took me by the hand and said: 'Thank God, you have the testimony. I too, have prayed.' He led me to a chair, placed his hands upon my head, and blessed me with every blessing my heart could possibly desire.

Another of the early Saints, Sarah Levitt, testified:

...I thought that the Anointed of the Lord would not get more wives unless they were commanded to do so. But still I wanted a knowledge of the truth for myself. I asked my husband if he did not think we could get a revelation for ourselves on that subject. He said he did not know....[That evening] my mind was carried away from the earth and I had a view of the order of the celestial kingdom....I have seen so much wrong connected with this ordinance that had I not had it revealed to me from Him that cannot lie[,] I should have...doubted the truth of it, but there has never a doubt crossed my mind concerning the truth of it since the Lord made it known to me by a heavenly vision. ["Autobiography of Sarah S. Leavitt, from her history," ed. Juanita Leavitt Pulsipher, June 1919, 23, Utah State historical Society Library, Salt Lake City; cited in George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 359–360.]

And Margaret Cooper West who saw herself as valued by God testified:

We were living in Nauvoo when I first heard that it was right for men to have two wives. I never thought then of their having more than two [sic]; it looked an awful thing to me, and I said I would not believe it was right, if an angel from heaven should tell me so, And again, I said that if I should hear the Almighty tell and angel to come and tell me it was right, I would not believe it. I knew very well what I thought. I thought it would only be to try my virtue, as Abraham's faith was tried, when he was told to offer his son as a sacrifice, and I thought the Lord would love me better if I refused to believe in such a heinous thing, for the Lord loves virtuous women....

I was perplexed; I did not have much to say. I felt very serious over it, and made it a matter of prayer.

On the Sunday morning following, after my husband and I were ready to go to meeting, we walked out through our gate, and he said, "Let us call in at John's (his brother's); perhaps some of them will go to meeting." As we passed through the gate, all creation was opened in vision to my view, as it seemed to me; we were as the grass of the field. I can see now how it looked as it ran off in the distance. Then I saw plurality of wives, the celestial order of marriage, open to my view, and knew it was right, and a virtuous principle, and pertaining to the everlasting

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Gospel of Jesus. Then I saw the authorities of the Church, and what they had suffered to establish this peculiar doctrine. It was a grand point in the Gospel, and had to be established in this generation; there was no getting around it, it had to come forth. When I saw the labors of the brethren, and their toils and sufferings, my heart was pained for them, and I loved and pitied them. I was no longer an opposer of the two-wife system. I did not speak of these things, but pondered them in my heart. I realized the beauty and glory and exaltation connected with this heavenly principle; it was grand and glorious, and I felt rapt in joy. [Margaret West, "Testimony of Margaret West," 35 cited in Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy* Vol. 2, 185–186.]

How Does God View Polygamy Today?

Even though God allowed polygamous relationships at certain times, the Bible clearly teaches that monogamy, one man married to one woman, is the plan which conforms to God's idea for marriage. [Genesis 2:24](#) teaches, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." The consistent use of the singular should be carefully noted – man, wife, and flesh, not men, wives, or fleshes. Scriptures also warn about the problems that can arise from having multiple wives as seen in the life of Solomon, "And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart. For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father" ([1 Kings 11:3-4](#)).



In the New Testament, [1 Timothy 3:2, 12](#), and [Titus 1:6](#) all render "the husband of one wife" in a list of qualifications for spiritual leadership. If these qualifications are set forth for the leadership of the church, should they not also apply to all Christians? For all Christians have been called to be holy (see [1 Peter 1:16](#)).

[Ephesians 5:22-33](#) speaks of the relationship between husbands and wives. When referring to a husband (singular), it always also refers to a wife (singular).

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even

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as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.

If polygamy were allowable, the entire illustration of Christ's relationship with His body (the church) and the husband-wife relationship falls apart.

The Changing Dynamics of Polygamy

Toward the end of the 19th century, the experience of plural marriage was considerably different than that of earlier decades. Commencing in 1862, federal laws were passed against the practice of plural marriage in hopes to protect Mormon women and the American civilization in general.

Nevertheless, there were many Latter-day Saint women who publicly defended the practice of plural marriage, arguing that they were willing participants in such practice. Following the 1879 finding of the United States Supreme Court that anti-polygamy laws are constitutional, federal officials began prosecuting polygamous husbands and wives during the 1880s. Some Latter-day Saints felt that the laws were unwarranted and became civilly disobedient by continuing to engage in the practice of plural marriage and attempting to avoid arrest. Once they were convicted, they paid fines and spent time in jail. Plural wives often separated into different households or went into hiding under assumed names when pregnant or right after giving birth in order to prevent their polygamous husbands from facing prosecution.

Referring again to the essay "[Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah](#)" on the official website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints:

By 1890, when President Woodruff's Manifesto lifted the command to practice plural marriage, Mormon society had developed a strong, loyal core of members, mostly made up of emigrants from Europe and the Eastern United States. But the demographic makeup of the worldwide Church membership had begun to change. Beginning in the 1890s converts outside the United States were asked to

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build up the Church in their homelands rather than move to Utah. In subsequent decades, Latter-day Saints migrated away from the Great Basin to pursue new opportunities. Plural marriage had never been encouraged outside of concentrated populations of Latter-day Saints. Especially in these newly formed congregations outside of Utah, monogamous families became central to religious worship and learning. As the Church grew and spread beyond the American West, the monogamous nuclear family was well suited to an increasingly mobile and dispersed membership.

Why did the dynamics change? The question should be viewed not so much as God no longer allowing something He had previously allowed, but rather as God restoring marriage to His original plan. Polygamous relationships were never a part of God's original plan for marriage. God allowed polygamy for a time to "raise up seed" unto Himself. In most modern societies, there is absolutely no need for polygamy.

According to [Romans 13:1-7](#), we are to obey the laws of the land. The only instance when disobeying the law is permitted by scripture is if a law, or laws contradict God's commands (see [Acts 5:29](#)). Therefore, since God only allows for polygamy at times that He designates, and does not command that it be practiced, any law prohibiting the practice of polygamy should be upheld.

The Aftermath of the Practice of Plural Marriage

The essay "Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah" concludes with these comments which serve as a capstone to this discussion:

For many who practiced it, plural marriage was a significant sacrifice. Despite the hardships some experienced, the faithfulness of those who practiced plural marriage continues to benefit the Church in innumerable ways. Through the lineage of these 19th-century Saints have come many Latter-day Saints who have been faithful to their gospel covenants as righteous mothers and fathers, loyal disciples of Jesus Christ, and devoted Church members, leaders, and missionaries. Although members of the contemporary Church are forbidden to practice plural marriage, modern Latter-day Saints honor and respect these pioneers who gave so much for their faith, families, and community.

Keith L. Brown is a convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, having been born and raised Baptist. He was studying to be a Baptist minister at the time of his conversion to the LDS faith. He was baptized on 10 March 1998 in Reykjavik, Iceland while serving on active duty in the United States

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Navy in Keflavic, Iceland. He currently serves as the First Assistant to the High Priest Group for the Annapolis, Maryland Ward. He is a 30-year honorably retired United States Navy Veteran.

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