

# Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah

The Bible and the Book of Mormon teach that the marriage of one man to one woman is God’s standard, except at specific periods when He has declared otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

In accordance with a revelation to Joseph Smith, the practice of plural marriage—the marriage of one man to two or more women—was instituted among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the early 1840s. Thereafter, for more than half a century, plural marriage was practiced by some Latter-day Saints. Only the Church President held the keys authorizing the performance of new plural marriages.<sup>2</sup> In 1890, the Lord inspired Church President Wilford Woodruff to issue a statement that led to the end of the practice of plural marriage in the Church. In this statement, known as the Manifesto, President Woodruff declared his intention to abide by U.S. law forbidding plural marriage and to use his influence to convince members of the Church to do likewise.<sup>3</sup>

After the Manifesto, monogamy was advocated in the Church both over the pulpit and through the press. On an exceptional basis, some new plural marriages were performed between 1890 and 1904, especially in Mexico and Canada, outside the jurisdiction of U.S. law; a small number of plural marriages were performed within the United States during those years.<sup>4</sup> In 1904, the Church strictly prohibited new plural marriages.<sup>5</sup> Today, any person who practices plural marriage cannot become or remain a member of the Church.

This essay primarily addresses plural marriage as practiced by the Latter-day Saints between 1847 and 1890, following their exodus to the U.S. West and before the Manifesto.

Latter-day Saints do not understand all of God’s purposes for instituting, through His prophets, the practice of plural marriage during the 19th century. The Book of Mormon identifies one reason for God to command it: to increase the number of children born in the gospel covenant in order to “raise up seed unto [the Lord]” (Jacob 2:30). Plural marriage did result in the birth of large numbers of children within faithful Latter-day Saint homes.<sup>6</sup> It 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;<sup>7</sup> and ethnic intermarriages were increased, which helped to unite a diverse immigrant population.<sup>8</sup> 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,”<sup>9</sup> covenant-bound to carry out the commands of God despite outside opposition, willing to

endure ostracism for their principles.<sup>10</sup>

For these early Latter-day Saints, plural marriage was a religious principle that required personal sacrifice. 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.

During the years that plural marriage was publicly taught, all Latter-day Saints were expected to accept the principle as a revelation from God.<sup>13</sup> Not all, however, were expected to live it. Indeed, this system of marriage could not have been universal due to the ratio of men to women.<sup>14</sup> Church leaders viewed plural marriage as a command to the Church generally, while recognizing that individuals who did not enter the practice could still stand approved of God.<sup>15</sup> Women were free to choose their spouses, whether to enter into a polygamous or monogamous union, or whether to marry at all.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

The passage of time shaped the experience of life within plural marriage. Virtually all of those practicing it in the earliest years had to overcome their own prejudice against plural marriage and adjust to life in polygamous families. The task of pioneering a semiarid land during the middle decades of the 19th century added to the challenges of families who were learning to practice the principle of plural marriage. Where the family lived—whether in Salt Lake City, with its multiple social and cultural opportunities, or the rural hinterlands, where such opportunities were fewer in number—made a difference in how plural marriage was experienced. It is therefore difficult to accurately generalize about the experience of all plural marriages.

Still, some patterns are discernible, and they correct some myths. Although some leaders had large polygamous families, two-thirds of polygamist men had only two wives at a time.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> As in other places, women married at older ages as the society matured.

Almost all women married and had a large percentage of women. In fact, it was

Almost all women married, and so did a large percentage of men. In fact, it appears that a larger percentage of men in Utah married than elsewhere in the United States at the time. Probably half of those living in Utah Territory in 1857 experienced life in a polygamous family as a husband, wife, or child at some time during their lives.<sup>21</sup> By 1870, 25 to 30 percent of the population lived in polygamous households, and it appears that the percentage continued to decrease over the next 20 years.<sup>22</sup>

The experience of plural marriage toward the end of the 19th century was substantially different from that of earlier decades. Beginning in 1862, the U.S. government passed laws against the practice of plural marriage. Outside opponents mounted a campaign against the practice, stating that they hoped to protect Mormon women and American civilization. For their part, many Latter-day Saint women publicly defended the practice of plural marriage, arguing in statements that they were willing participants.<sup>23</sup>

After the U.S. Supreme Court found the anti-polygamy laws to be constitutional in 1879, federal officials began prosecuting polygamous husbands and wives during the 1880s.<sup>24</sup> Believing these laws to be unjust, Latter-day Saints engaged in civil disobedience by continuing to practice plural marriage and by attempting to avoid arrest. When convicted, they paid fines and submitted to jail time. To help their husbands avoid prosecution, plural wives often separated into different households or went into hiding under assumed names, particularly when pregnant or after giving birth.<sup>25</sup>

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 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.

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.

*The Church acknowledges the contribution of scholars to the historical content presented in this article; their work is used with permission.*

1. 1. Jacob 2:27, 30. For instances of plural marriage in the Bible, see Genesis 16:3; 25:1; 29:21–30; 30:3–4, 9. See also D&C 132:34–35.
2. 2. D&C 132:7. The Church President periodically set apart others to perform plural marriages.
3. 3. See Official Declaration 1.
4. 4. Kathryn M. Daynes, *Plural Marriage in the Mormon West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 208–9; Thomas G. Alexander, *Plural Marriage in the Mormon West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 60–73; *Manifesto of 1890*, 5 vols. (1992), “Manifesto of 1890,” 2:852–53.
5. 5. “Official Statement,” Apr. 6, 1904, in James R. Clark, ed., *Official History of the Church*, 6 vols. (1965–1975), 4:84–85.
6. 6. Studies have shown that monogamous women bore more children per wife than did polygamous wives except the first. Fertility at the societal level, however, was enhanced because of the near universality of marriage among women and the abundant opportunities for remarriage among previously married women of childbearing age. L. L. Bean and G. P. Mineau, “The Polygyny-Fertility Hypothesis: A Re-evaluation,” *Journal of Family Issues* 40 (1986): 67–81; Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen, *Plural Marriage in the Mormon West* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008), 62–63.
7. 7. Daynes, *Plural Marriage in the Mormon West*, 130–33.
8. 8. Kathryn M. Daynes, “Forging Mormon Society: Polygamy and Assimilation,” (Presentation at the Western Historical Association, Fort Worth, TX, Oct. 10, 2003).
9. 9. 1 Peter 2:9.
10. 10. See Jacob 1:8; and Acts 5:41. Studies of the 19th-century Mormon image in the United States have found the Mormons were most closely associated with plural marriage. Jan Shipps, *Unholy Matrimony: Plural Marriage in the Mormon West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 130–33.

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 51–

97.

11. 11. For an exploration of some of these difficulties, see Jessie L. Embry, (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008).
12. 12. For one example of the feelings that existed between husband and wives, see Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 305, 329–30.
13. 13. Plural marriage was first introduced privately to a small group of Church members, which expanded over time. Church leaders publicly announced the practice in 1852.
14. 14. Recent calculations using a 3 percent growth rate and an average five-year age interval between husbands and wives at first marriage (reasonable estimates for the 19th-century Mormon population) indicate that the upper limit of sustainable polygamy in a stable society is 16 percent of husbands and 28 percent of wives. Davis Bitton and Val Lambson, “Demographic Limits of Nineteenth-Century Mormon Polygyny” 51, no. 4 (2012): 11–15.
15. 15. See, for example, the comments of George Q. Cannon, in 22:124–25, 23:278.
16. 16. See, for example, Emmeline B. Wells, Ellen B. Ferguson, Emily S. Richards, and Joseph M. West, letter to the Honorable Committee of the Senate on Education and Labor, May 12, 1886, quoted in Daynes, 61. They testified, “No Mormon woman, old or young, is compelled to marry at all, still less to enter into polygamy.” In addition, Brigham Young stated: “When your daughters have grown up, and wish to marry let them have their choice in a husband. ... Take this or that man if you want them my girls, ... you shall have your own agency in the matter even as I want mine.” Brigham Young Sermon, Apr. 16, 1854, Brigham Young Office Files, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
17. 17. See, for example, Lowell C. Bennion, “Mapping the Extent of Plural Marriage in St. George, 1861–1880,” 51, no. 4 (2012): 34–49; and Embry, 75–81.
18. 18. These figures are based on two different studies using different sources. Stanley S. Ivins, “Notes on Mormon Polygamy,” 10, no. 3 (Summer 1956): 233; and Daynes, 130. Brigham Young’s large family was definitely atypical.

- See Dean C. Jessee, "'A Man of God and a Good Kind Father': Brigham Young at Home," 40, no. 2 (2001): 23–53.
19. 19. Brigham Young to William H. Dame, Aug. 8, 1867, Brigham Young Letterbook, vol. 10, p. 340, Brigham Young Office Files, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Daynes, 141–70. In general, women in Utah Territory could obtain a divorce more easily than in most other places in the United States at the time. One of Brigham Young's clerks explained: "As a rule, the Prest. [Brigham Young] never refuses a bill [of divorcement] on the application of a wife, and NEVER when she INSISTS on it." Quoted in Embry, 253.
20. 20. Daynes, 107; Cynthia Culver Prescott, "'Why Didn't She Marry Him': Love, Power and Marital Choice on the Far Western Frontier," 38, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 25–45; Paul Bourke and Donald DeBats, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 121.
21. 21. Lowell C. Bennion and others, (Salt Lake City: Western Regional Architecture Program, University of Utah, 2005), 26; Marie Cornwall, Camela Courtright, and Laga Van Beek, "How Common the Principle? Women as Plural Wives in 1860," 26 (Summer 1993): 149; Daynes, 101.
22. 22. Lowell C. Bennion, "Plural Marriage, 1841–1904," in Brandon S. Plewe, ed., (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2013), 122–25; Lowell C. Bennion, "The Incidence of Mormon Polygamy in 1880: 'Dixie' versus Davis Stake," *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 17, 31.
23. 23. (Salt Lake City: 1870); Lola Van Wagenen, "In Their Own Behalf: The Politicization of Mormon Women and the 1870 Franchise," in Carol Cornwall Madsen, ed., (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1997), 60–73.
24. 24. Sarah Barringer Gordon, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
25. 25. Ronald W. Walker, "A Mormon 'Widow' in Colorado: The Exile of Emily Wells Grant," in

(Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2004), 175–93; Kimberly Jensen James, “‘Between Two Fires’: Women on the ‘Underground’ of Mormon Polygamy,” 8 (1981): 49–61.