

A Reason for Faith  
Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History

LAURA HARRIS HALES  
EDITOR

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## THE PRACTICE OF POLYGAMY

*Brian C. Hales and Laura Harris Hales*

*I*N OLD TESTAMENT TIMES, PATRIARCHS LIKE ABRAHAM AND JACOB practiced polygamy, which allowed them to have multiple wives. In the early nineteenth century, there were some fringe religious groups who toyed with the practice, but in general it was foreign and repugnant to most pre-Victorian Americans. Nevertheless, in Nauvoo in the 1840s, Joseph Smith taught that God commanded polygamy to be practiced by the Latter-day Saints. He described plural marriage as one part of a much grander doctrine called celestial marriage, which allows God's children to be eternally married and to become like our exalted Heavenly Parents. This exaltation is offered to all righteous couples sealed in the new and everlasting covenant of marriage and is not conditional on a plurality of wives, which is sometimes authorized by the Lord.

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As far as historians can determine, Joseph learned that polygamy could be a divinely sanctioned practice in 1831, while reviewing the Old Testament accounts about patriarchs who practiced plural marriage. The Prophet told a few close associates that three years later an angel appeared to him and commanded him to reestablish the practice upon the earth, but he did not immediately act on this instruction. Erastus Snow, a friend, recalled: "The Prophet Joseph had said . . . 'I have not been obedient enough to this holy law and the Lord was angry with me and an angel met me with a drawn sword but I pled with the Lord to forgive me and he did so and I made the sacrifice required of my hand and by the help of the Lord I will obey his Holy Law.'"<sup>1</sup>

In 1840, Joseph Smith began teaching the practice of *polygamy*, or *plurality of wives*, to select members of the Church in Nauvoo, Illinois. At his death on June 27, 1844, over a hundred men and women had been married in plural matrimonyes. Hundreds more were aware of the principle even though the practice was not openly taught or acknowledged until years later. In the twenty-first century, the practice of plural marriage may seem strange and perhaps difficult to accept. Unfortunately, Joseph Smith only left one document to help us understand his plural marriage teachings (section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants), but it contains three reasons why plural marriage is sometimes allowed by God.

### TO PROVIDE BODIES FOR PREMORTAL SPIRITS BY “MULTIPLYING AND REPLENISHING THE EARTH”

One reason given in the revelation for the practice of plural marriage is the need for polygamous couples to multiply and replenish the earth. It explains, “They [plural wives] are given unto him [their husband] to multiply and replenish the earth, according to my commandment . . . that they may bear the souls of men.”<sup>2</sup>

A teaching that is generally unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is that we lived as premortal spirits before we were born on earth. Nauvooan Charles Lambert recalled: “The Prophet used to hold meetings in a log house of his sometimes. . . . At one of these he said he wished he had a people that he could reveal to them what the Lord had shown to him. But one thing I will say, there are thousands of spirits that have been waiting to come forth in this day and generation. Their proper channel is through the priesthood, a way has to be provided. But the time has come and they have got to come away.”<sup>3</sup> Helen Mar Kimball, one of the Prophet’s plural wives, confirmed this teaching: “It was revealed to him [Joseph Smith] that there were thousands of spirits, yet unborn, who were anxiously waiting for the privilege of coming down to take tabernacles of flesh, that their glory might be complete.”<sup>4</sup>

Multiplying and replenishing the earth is a way to “raise up seed” to God. It is the only reason mentioned in the Book of Mormon whereby polygamy might be acceptable. The Nephites were given the general commandment: “There shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none.”<sup>5</sup> However, the scriptural language three verses later anticipates the possibility that God could command the practice of polygamy in order to “raise up seed” to him: “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.”<sup>6</sup> Between 1841, when plural marriage was first introduced in Nauvoo, and 1890, when the practice was revoked,

thousands of children were born to polygamous wives, fulfilling the commandment to multiply and replenish the earth.

Many revelations came to the Prophet as he pondered great mysteries. The revelation on celestial marriage, now section 132, was given in response to Joseph's inquiry "to know and understand wherein . . . the Lord, justified . . . Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as also Moses, David and Solomon . . . as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines."<sup>7</sup> Abraham was promised that his posterity would be numerous and his descendants would receive the gospel and bear the priesthood.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, his wife Sarah was barren. How then was this promise to be fulfilled? It was the custom and civil *law* of the times to allow men to marry polygamously should their first wives be barren. We learn in Doctrine and Covenants 132:34 that "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." Apparently, the Lord gave his divine sanction for other Old Testament patriarchs such as Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and Solomon to marry polygamously under the civil law as well.<sup>9</sup> The Bible gives few details regarding the dynamics of their polygamous relationships, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to compare it to plural marriage in Joseph Smith's day. However, the fact that these men were polygamists and were highly favored of the Lord intimates that polygamy itself is not inherently sinful when it is practiced through the proper authority and sanction of the Lord. It is never condemned in scripture as are the practices of adultery, homosexual behavior, and fornication.

### TO PROVIDE A CUSTOMIZED TRIAL FOR THE SAINTS OF THAT TIME AND PLACE

Another reason given for the establishment of plural marriage is that it brought customized trials that provided special opportunities for spiritual growth to practicing Saints. In an 1831 revelation, Joseph Smith taught the value of tribulations: "Ye cannot behold with your natural eyes, for the present time, the design of your God concerning those things which shall come hereafter, and the glory which shall follow after much tribulation. For after much tribulation come the blessings. Wherefore the day cometh that ye shall be crowned with much glory; the hour is not yet, but is nigh at hand."<sup>10</sup>

Though the Saints suffered many trials and much tribulation, the trial of practicing polygamy was arguably one of the most formidable and enduring. Apostle John Taylor questioned, "Where did this commandment come from in relation to polygamy?" And then he answered: "It . . . came from God. It was a revelation given unto Joseph Smith from God, and was made binding upon His servants. When this system was first introduced among

this people, it was one of the greatest crosses that ever was taken up by any set of men since the world stood.”<sup>11</sup>

Throughout religious history, God’s followers have, at times, received special commandments. For example, Adam was given the law of animal sacrifice, and the Israelites were given the law of Moses. Plural marriage from the 1840s to 1890 may have been such a commandment. Customized mandates like these bring specific blessings to those who obey, but only at the time when they are commanded.

### AS PART OF THE “RESTITUTION OF ALL THINGS” PROPHESIED IN ACTS 3:19–21

In Acts 3:21, we are taught that the Savior would not be received in heaven “until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” Regarding this restitution, Joseph Smith was told, “I am the Lord thy God. . . . I have conferred upon you the keys and power of the priesthood, wherein *I restore all things*.”<sup>12</sup>

What “things” needed to be restored? The restitution did not include the hundreds of regulations contained in the law of Moses, which was fulfilled through the Atonement of Christ.<sup>13</sup> Instead, the things that needed restoration were the covenants and ordinances of the gospel. The first of these to be restored was baptism through the Aaronic Priesthood, which occurred on May 15, 1829.<sup>14</sup> The second was the oath and covenant of the Melchizedek Priesthood given to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery by Peter, James, and John shortly thereafter.<sup>15</sup>

No additional authorities with their associated ordinances or covenants were restored until the Kirtland Temple was dedicated on April 3, 1836. On that date, Joseph and Oliver dropped the curtains in the temple, prayed, and Jesus Christ appeared and accepted the temple as his “House of the Lord.”<sup>16</sup> Immediately thereafter, three additional angelic messengers appeared: Moses, Elias, and Elijah, restoring keys and authorities that apparently could not be bestowed without a temple and are used to officiate in temple ordinances.<sup>17</sup>

While the keys restored by John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John allowed for the establishment of an earthly church organization, the keys restored in the Kirtland Temple authorized the sealing of families that continues after death in the celestial kingdom. The framework for building eternal families begins by laying a foundation through an eternal marriage covenant, the sealing of a husband and wife together forever. Section 132:19–20 explains:

And again, verily I say unto you, if a man marry a wife by my word, which is my law, and by the new and everlasting covenant, and it is sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise, by him who is

anointed, unto whom I have appointed this power and the keys of this priesthood . . . [it] shall be of full force when they are out of the world; and they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon their heads, which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever. Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them.<sup>18</sup>

Of all of the teachings, authorities, covenants, and ordinances that Joseph Smith restored, eternal marriage appears to be the zenith because it brings exaltation. Brigham Young explained that eternal marriage “lays the foundation for worlds, for angels, and for the Gods; for intelligent beings to be crowned with glory, immortality, and eternal lives. In fact, it is the thread which runs from the beginning to the end of the holy Gospel of salvation—of the Gospel of the Son of God; it is from eternity to eternity.”<sup>19</sup>

So if *eternal* marriage was the primary “thing” that needed to be restored, then why do people say that the restoration of polygamy was part of the “restitution of all things”? It is because plural marriage is an element within the doctrine of eternal marriage that has sometimes been allowed.

Section 132 describes the eternal consequences for men or women who are not sealed in an eternal marriage (either on earth or by proxy in the spirit world) prior to the Resurrection: “Therefore, when they are out of the world they neither marry nor are given in marriage; but are appointed angels in heaven, which angels are ministering servants, to minister for those who are worthy of a far more, and an exceeding, and an eternal weight of glory. For these angels did not abide my law; therefore, they cannot be enlarged, but remain separately and singly, without exaltation, in their saved condition, to all eternity; and from henceforth are not gods, but are angels of God forever and ever.”<sup>20</sup> Both monogamous and plural marriages performed with the proper sealing keys can create bonds that could last through eternity.<sup>21</sup>

On May 16, 1843, William Clayton recorded Joseph clarifying that “in the celestial glory there was three heavens or degrees, and in order to obtain the highest a man must enter into this order of the priesthood and if he don’t he can’t obtain it. He may enter into the other but that is the end of his kingdom.”<sup>22</sup> The Prophet also publicly alluded to this principle: “Those who keep no eternal Law in this life or make no eternal contract are single & alone in the eternal world.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, every man and every woman must be sealed to an eternal spouse in order to be exalted.

## POLYGAMY WAS COMMANDED BETWEEN THE 1840s AND 1890

Though the Prophet likely inquired about the ancient practice of polygamy and learned about the new and everlasting covenant of marriage in 1831,<sup>24</sup> it was not until 1843 that the revelation now known as D&C 132 was dictated, which addresses these subjects. In the revelation, the Lord reveals that those who do not abide the new and everlasting covenant of marriage will be damned.<sup>25</sup> In this context, damnation refers to lack of progression after death. The revelation explains that the new and everlasting covenant of marriage is *eternal* marriage, which brings exaltation to worthy couples who are sealed by proper authority.

Section 132 does not command the practice of plural marriage, and no presiding Church leader from Joseph Smith to the present has proclaimed through any revelation or official declaration that all exalted beings will be required to practice polygamy. Joseph told close associates that the commandment originated with an angel who appeared to him three times between 1834 and 1842, mandating the practice.<sup>26</sup> In Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph Smith confided in Church member Lyman Sherman that “the ancient order of plural marriage was again to be practiced by the Church.”<sup>27</sup> Later, in Nauvoo, Joseph A. Kelting recalled the Prophet explaining the principle: “He then began a defense of the doctrine by referring to the Old Testament. . . . He then informed me that he had received a revelation from God which taught the correctness of the doctrine of a plurality of wives, and commanding him to obey it.”<sup>28</sup>

## THE PRACTICE OF PLURAL MARRIAGE AMONG THE EARLY SAINTS

After a brief experiment with plural marriage in Kirtland,<sup>29</sup> Joseph abandoned the practice until the Saints had settled in Nauvoo. The Prophet was married to Louisa Beaman in 1841,<sup>30</sup> and the following year Joseph slowly began authorizing plural marriages among members of the Quorum of the Twelve. The practice was kept secret because of fear of persecution from nonmembers and prosecution for possible violation of Illinois state law.

This was a great challenge for these first polygamists, and many looked forward to moving to the West, where they would be able to openly practice this new marital dynamic. At the time of the Prophet’s death on June 27, 1844, twenty-nine men besides Joseph had married a total of fifty plural wives.<sup>31</sup> But it was only after crossing the Mississippi River during their arduous thousand-mile trek to the Great Basin that these polygamous Saints felt free to begin speaking openly about their relationships.<sup>32</sup>

By 1851, with the Saints firmly ensconced in the Utah Territory, polygamy was no longer a secret among the Saints or the rest of the country.



Sensational headlines graced the covers of newspapers from New York to San Francisco decrying the practice and especially commenting on the reported number of wives of Brigham Young, Utah territorial governor and President of the Church.<sup>33</sup> In an August 1852 conference of elders, Apostle Orson Pratt formally explained the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith on the matter, added some additional justifications for the practice, presented the revelation dictated in 1843 to the congregation, and announced that all worthy Latter-day Saint men were now encouraged to marry plurally.<sup>34</sup>

### THE TRIAL OF THE PRACTICE OF POLYGAMY

Those who practiced polygamy during the early decades after it was authorized reported varying experiences. Eliza Partridge, married twice polygamously, declared, “Nothing but a firm desire to keep the commandments of the Lord could have induced a girl to marry in that way. I thought my trials were very severe in this line.”<sup>35</sup> Some women who practiced polygamy seemed to have found it a blessing in some aspects. Lucy Walker, one of Joseph’s plural wives, recalled the value of plural marriage in teaching character strengths: “I will say [that polygamy] is a grand school. You learn self control, self denial; it brings out the nobler traits of our fallen natures, and teaches us to study and subdue self, while we become acquainted with the peculiar characteristics of each other. There is a grand opportunity to improve ourselves, and the lessons learned in a few years, are worth the experience of a lifetime, for this reason, that you are better prepared to make a home happy.”<sup>36</sup>

Polygamy on earth does not seem fair to most observers. It generally expands a man’s emotional and sexual opportunities as a husband as it simultaneously diminishes a woman’s emotional and sexual opportunities as a wife. Many of our concerns today regarding polygamy are not all that different from those felt by nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints. Helen Mar Kimball remembered, “The Prophet said that the practice of this principle would be the hardest trial the Saints would ever have to test their faith.”<sup>37</sup> This statement seems to apply today as much as it did in Nauvoo. Some of the early polygamists were blessed with spiritual experiences as they struggled to gain a testimony of the principle. Reading their stories may aid understanding by modern Saints.<sup>38</sup>

Despite these challenges, neither Joseph Smith nor any other presiding leader gave a reason for the requirement of the practice. In 1892, when asked why the principle of plural marriage was adopted, Apostle Lorenzo Snow simply responded, “I can’t tell for I didn’t do it.”<sup>39</sup> Future Apostle James Talmage stated that “the sole and sufficient reason which led the church to promulgate the doctrine was that the Lord had by revelation taught it and had commanded its acceptance in the present dispensation.”<sup>40</sup>

## MONOGAMY ONCE AGAIN BECOMES THE STANDARD IN THE CHURCH

In 1890, newly passed federal laws threatened the very existence of the Church and greatly impeded the Church's ability to do missionary work and to perform vicarious temple ordinances. Despite this enduring persecution, however, the vast majority of Latter-day Saint polygamists were willing to continue practicing plural marriage, if that was the Lord's requirement. But in September of that year, Wilford Woodruff, who held the sealing keys needed to authorize all valid eternal marriages, declared that the commandment to practice plural marriage had been revoked and was no longer binding upon the Latter-day Saints. Thereafter, the practice of monogamy was the Latter-day Saint standard.

Between 1890 and 1904, a few secret plural marriages were authorized by the Church President each year. Most were performed outside of the United States, but not all. These sealings were eventually discovered by the media, bringing embarrassment to the Church. In April of 1904, Joseph F. Smith, then President of the Church and holder of all priesthood keys, refused to authorize any new plural ceremonies. Since that time, all attempts to practice polygamy have been without authorization, are considered sinful,<sup>41</sup> and are not considered "valid, neither of force when they are out of the world."<sup>42</sup> This is the status of all earthly polygamous marriages entered into by men and women today because they are not performed through authorized priesthood keys.

James Talmage once noted that "plural marriage was an incident, never an essential."<sup>43</sup> There is no ordinance or covenant or ceremony of plural marriage. At the time these marriages were permitted, they were simply a repetition of the eternal marriage rite. Current Church dialogue centers on eternal marriage, the union of one man to one woman for time and eternity,<sup>44</sup> which *is* an ordinance, a covenant, and a ceremony. Monogamous marriage is "the Lord's standing law on marriage."<sup>45</sup> Members can rejoice in modern-day revelation that declares marriage "between a man and a woman is ordained of God" and lays the basis for exaltation and eternal families.<sup>46</sup>

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "Plural Marriage in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." <https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-the-church-of-jesus-christ-of-latter-day-saints>.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Brian C. Hales** is the author of seven books dealing with Mormon polygamy. He has presented at numerous meetings and symposia and published articles in *The Journal of Mormon History*, *Mormon Historical Studies*, and *Dialogue*, as well as the *Persistence of Polygamy* series. He also maintains the websites MormonPolygamyDocuments.org and JosephSmithsPolygamy.org. Brian works as an anesthesiologist and has served as the president of both the Utah Medical Association and the medical staff at the Davis Hospital and Medical Center in Layton, Utah. Brian is married to Laura Harris Hales and is the father to four children.

**Laura Harris Hales** is a freelance copy editor, author, and mother of five avid truth seekers. She received a bachelor's degree in international relations from Brigham Young University and a master's degree in professional writing from New England College. She has also worked as both a paralegal and as an adjunct professor of English. With her husband, Brian C. Hales, she coauthored *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding* and maintains the website JosephSmithsPolygamy.org.

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3. Charles Lambert, "Autobiography," CHL; quoted in Danel W. Bachman, "The Authorship of the Manuscript of Doctrine and Covenants Section 132," in *Sidney B. Sperry Symposium: A Sesquicentennial Look at Church History*, January 26, 1980 (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Instruction, 1980), 43, n. 44.
4. Helen Mar Kimball Smith Whitney, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), 7.
5. Jacob 2:27.
6. Jacob 2:30.

7. D&C 132:1; emphasis added.
8. See Abraham 2:9, 3:14; Genesis 17:5–6.
9. D&C 132:1.
10. D&C 58:3–4.
11. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:221.
12. D&C 132:40, 45; emphasis added.
13. See 3 Nephi 9:17.
14. D&C 13:1.
15. D&C 27:12.
16. D&C 110:1–7.
17. D&C 110:11–16.
18. D&C 132:19–20.
19. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:90 (October 6, 1854).
20. D&C 132:16–17.
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41. D&C 132:38.
42. D&C 132:18.
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44. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Lesson 19: The Doctrine of Eternal Marriage and Family,” *Foundations of the Restoration Teacher Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), 84–88, [https://www.lds.org/bc/content/ldsorg/manual/institute/Foundations\\_of\\_the\\_Restoration.v2\\_eng.pdf](https://www.lds.org/bc/content/ldsorg/manual/institute/Foundations_of_the_Restoration.v2_eng.pdf).
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