

# Perspectives on Joseph Smith's Plural Marriage History

By Cameron Ford

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The introduction of plural marriage was one of the greatest trials and tests of faith for the early Latter Day-saints, both for those that practiced it and for those that did not. Many left the church over the doctrine in the early days of its introduction. Interestingly enough, more than a century and a half later it continues to be a severe test and trial of faith for some members of the church; some still lose faith and choose to leave because of it. However, based on the available research, losing faith in the Prophet Joseph Smith and leaving the Church is not the inevitable outcome for those that look closely at the data.

The critics charge Joseph of being a man gone crazy with religious power that took advantage of his position to satisfy his lustful desires. However, a study of his life and patterns of behavior provides a convincing argument that the person who believed the most in Joseph's revelations, was Joseph himself. The historian Richard L. Bushman wrote:

“Nothing confuses the picture of Joseph Smith’s character more than these plural marriages. What lay behind this egregious transgression of conventional morality? What drove him to a practice that put his life and his work in jeopardy, not to mention his relationship with Emma? Was he a dominant male whose ego brooked no bounds? Joseph exercised such untrammelled authority in Nauvoo that it is possible to imagine him thinking no conquest beyond his reach. In theory, he could take what he wanted and browbeat his followers with threats of divine punishment.

This simple reading of Joseph’s motives is implicit in descriptions of him as “a charismatic, handsome man.” They suggest he was irresistible and made the most of it. ... But missing from that picture is Joseph’s sense of himself. In public and private [especially in private journal entries], he spoke and acted as if guided by God. All the doctrines, plans, programs, and claims were, in his mind, the mandates of heaven. They came to him as requirements, with a kind of irresistible certainty. The revelations weighed him down with impossible tasks like translation, gathering, constructing a temple, or building a city. More than once he told the Church he had completed the work and had no more to accomplish, as if he hoped the revelations would subside. Then a new commandment would force itself upon him, and the work would resume. Joseph ordinarily followed the commandments punctiliously, as if disobedience put him at risk. In the case of plural marriage, he held off for two or three years before marrying Fanny Alger [his first plural wife], and then after this one unsuccessful attempt, waited another five years. The delay showed an uncharacteristic reluctance, hard for one who feared God.”

–Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling* Pg. 437

Brackets added by Cameron Ford

According to the best guesses of historians, Joseph Smith was sealed to about 30 different women. There are many factors that make it difficult to get a true picture of the beginnings of plural marriage. Some of those factors include:

1. Heightened emotions regarding the subject from both those for and against it.
2. The desire for privacy of the participants regarding a very controversial practice involving one of mankind's most intimate relationships.

3. The secrecy required because of public resistance.
4. The danger involved from those that were violently opposed to it.
5. The fact that many of the sources about the practice come from gossip, rumor, assumption, outright lies, or distortions from untrustworthy ex-members, and 2nd and 3rd hand reports sometimes many decades after the events.

These factors combine to make trying to get at the truth a little like looking into a room through a keyhole and only getting a partial picture. Only those that were directly involved can give us a true picture, and in some cases, they made no statements, or made confusing statements. The church critics often just grab on to any unsavory statement, regardless of the source, and run with it. But such statements do not necessarily represent the correct picture of what really happened. It is necessary to select careful research based on the most reliable sources closest to the actual events (one such researcher being Brian C. Hales, probably the most comprehensive scholar on this subject).

Clearly Joseph was not perfect and made mistakes and errors of judgment in many areas of his life —the Kirtland Bank, running an unsuccessful business, trusting John C. Bennett, being sometimes overly prideful, etc... (see *Rough Stone Rolling* by Richard L. Bushman for a description of many of his faults). It also appears that the Lord did not give a great deal of detailed instructions regarding the implementation of plural marriage. So, the Prophet had to kind of find his way; he may have made some mistakes, some of them big ones. In D&C 132:60 the Lord indicates that Joseph had clearly committed some unspecified sins, but that it was between the Lord and Joseph:

“Let no one, therefore, set on my servant Joseph; for I will justify him; for he shall do the sacrifice which I require at his hands for his transgressions, saith the Lord your God.” D&C 132:60

Regardless of whatever mistakes may have been made by Joseph, we have to be careful to not be armchair quarterbacks and judge the situation in hindsight. We weren't there in those circumstances under the same pressures that he was. The Lord gave him an incredibly difficult commandment that likely cost him his life. To understand, we need to try to have empathy for his situation.

A cautionary tale for withholding judgment until all of the facts are completely available is provided by a humorous experience recently played out on social media after a baseball game on the weekend of July 21-22, 2018.

“Over the weekend, social media criticized a Chicago Cubs fan who was caught on camera keeping a baseball from a child sitting in the stands. But upon further review, the story isn't as it seems.

Cue the outrage. Social media went ablaze with reactions, according to USA Today. So much so that the Chicago Cubs approached the child after the game and handed him a ball signed by Javy Baez. But Reddit users discovered through multiple reports from fans that the social media reaction was misguided — the man grabbed a ball for the young boy earlier in the game, which is why the boy has two baseballs in his photo with the Cubs.

“He had already helped that kid get a ball. He gave two more away to kids also. He was a great guy. TV got this all wrong,” wrote Chuck Mycoff, who sat on the man’s left.”

-Deseret News, Herb Scribner, July 23, 2018,

*No, that Chicago Cubs fan didn't steal a foul ball from a child. Here's what really happened*

Joseph Smith’s experience with plural marriage is much like this baseball social media story. The critics make Joseph out to be a villain, but when the truth is fully known he will turn out to be a hero, perhaps a flawed hero, but still a hero. Because of the historical difficulties involved, we may never get all of the facts needed to give us a crystal-clear picture of what happened until the Day of Judgment. But we do have enough facts to create a plausible narrative that can vindicate the prophet and convict him of nothing more than being a flawed mortal that understandably stumbled and struggled in implementing an incredibly difficult commandment from the Lord.

We also need to be careful to not look at Joseph only through a microscopic lens just focused on the introduction of such a challenging and controversial practice. Such a focus distorts our view of the whole picture of Joseph Smith. It is a little like focusing on a single brushstroke of a painting, at the tragic expense of missing the larger masterpiece. A book called "Remembering Joseph: Personal Recollections of Those Who Knew the Prophet Joseph Smith" by Mark L. McConkie documents hundreds of statements by people (some of them non-members) about how Joseph was an incredibly devout, faith filled, sacrificing, kind, caring, and noble man. While some of these statements can be attributed to a psychological “cult of personality” effect that charismatic leaders can have on their followers, such statements as well as other elements of his life and ministry deserve to be weighed against the charges made against Joseph. A few of the many other elements that could be listed are:

1. The translation of the Book of Mormon: A complex and profound book touching the lives of millions that has a large and growing body of scholarly work that supports its authenticity. Its production and content have continued to go without adequate explanation by its skeptics and critics for over 180 years.
2. The doctrine of the pre-existence of the souls of mankind that turns out to be an ancient doctrine (see the works of Terryl Givens).
3. Temple ordinances beautifully reflecting previously unknown ancient temple practices (see the works of Hugh Nibley).
4. The Book of Abraham and Moses mirroring similar stories circulated anciently only found in the last century (see the works of Hugh Nibley, among others).
5. His uncanny ability to time and again receive revelations that teach doctrines that are now found to be ancient (see the works of Hugh Nibley & Terryl Givens).
6. The doctrine of the literal fatherhood of God to the spirits of men that provides a sense of significance and belonging to mankind.
7. The doctrine of eternal families, giving hope that loving relationships can last beyond the grave.
8. The profound effect that his revelations have had on the lives of millions.
9. Perhaps most importantly, in a world plagued with doubt, Joseph’s revelations stand as another witness that God is real, and that Jesus is His Christ.

For a PowerPoint slide summary of many of these items, see:

[http://www.2understandlatterdaysaints.com/documents/My\\_Writings/lds\\_church\\_evidences\\_summary.pdf](http://www.2understandlatterdaysaints.com/documents/My_Writings/lds_church_evidences_summary.pdf)

## Reconstructing Joseph's Plural Marriage History

Below represents a description of events and collection of statements that represents a very plausible and likely narrative of Joseph Smith's path through plural marriage.

Historians believe that Joseph first became aware of the possibility of the reintroduction of the biblical practice of plural marriage around 1831. Early participants in plural marriage say that Joseph told them that he received three different visits from an angel commanding the practice. His first plural marriage was to Fanny Alger in Kirtland Ohio, likely due to the first appearance of the angel:

“Sometime in late 1835 or early 1836, in a priesthood ceremony performed by Levi Hancock, Joseph secretly married Fanny Alger, a domestic living in the Smith home.”

“Mary Elizabeth Rollins recalled that an angel commanding polygamy first appeared in 1834: “Joseph the Seer ... said God gave him a commandment in 1834, to take other wives besides Emma.” If accurate, then Joseph would probably have married after that angelic visit. Late 1835 or early 1836 seem more likely dates.” –Brian C. Hales,  
<http://josephsmithpolygamy.org/common-questions/fanny-alger/>

Since the ceremony was done in secret, it appears that Joseph did not feel that Emma would accept the reality of the angelic command. Events would prove him correct:

“When Oliver Cowdery and Emma Smith learned of the relationship, they did not consider it a legitimate marriage. Joseph was unable to convince them the polygamous marriage was approved of God. Fanny left the area and married a non-member a few months later and never returned to the Church. Her family and others who were close to her remained true to Joseph Smith, following him to Nauvoo and later migrating with the Saints to Utah.

“Late in life she reportedly rebuffed questions about her relationship with Joseph Smith: “That is all a matter of my own, and I have nothing to communicate.” Although he does not provide a source for his declaration, according to Benjamin Johnson, Fanny “did not turn from the Church nor from her friendship for the Prophet while she lived.” –Brian C. Hales  
<http://josephsmithpolygamy.org/common-questions/fanny-alger/>

Such a negative experience may have caused Joseph to postpone for the time being any more attempts to fulfill the angelic command. It would not be until 1841 that he attempted it again, probably after the second appearance of the angel.

“The first plural marriage in Nauvoo took place when Louisa Beaman and Joseph Smith were sealed in April 1841. ...Following his marriage to Louisa Beaman and before he married other single women, Joseph Smith was sealed to a number of women who were already married. Neither these women nor Joseph explained much about these sealings, though several women

said they were for eternity alone. Other women left no records, making it unknown whether their sealings were for time and eternity or were for eternity alone.

There are several possible explanations for this practice. These sealings may have provided a way to create an eternal bond or link between Joseph's family and other families within the Church. These ties extended both vertically, from parent to child, and horizontally, from one family to another. Today such eternal bonds are achieved through the temple marriages of individuals who are also sealed to their own birth families, in this way linking families together. Joseph Smith's sealings to women already married may have been an early version of linking one family to another. In Nauvoo, most if not all of the first husbands seem to have continued living in the same household with their wives during Joseph's lifetime, and complaints about these sealings with Joseph Smith are virtually absent from the documentary record."

<https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>

On the topic of Joseph's motivation to increase ties to people he loved via plural marriage, more so than sexual experiences or female companionship, historian Richard L. Bushman concluded:

"Joseph did not marry women to form a warm, human companionship, but to create a network of related wives, children, and kinsmen that would endure into the eternities. The revelation on marriage promised Joseph an "hundredfold in this world, of fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, houses and lands, wives and children, and crowns of eternal lives in the eternal worlds." Like Abraham of old, Joseph yearned for familial plentitude. He did not lust for women so much as he lusted for kin."

—Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling* Pg. 440

Given Emma's reaction to Joseph's first attempt with plural marriage, it is also plausible to believe that Joseph was trying to be creative in his implementation of plural marriage in order to spare his wife's feelings. According to Brian C. Hales:

"...several polygamists reported that Joseph Smith told them that he was commanded by an angel to introduce and practice polygamy. Mary Elizabeth Rollins recalled him saying the angel visited three times, with the third occurring in "early February" of 1842 during which the angel brandished a sword to dramatically reinforce his message." It is possible that after the angel's earlier visits commanding polygamy, Joseph sought to appease his demands by marrying Louisa Beaman in a time-and-eternity polygamous union and then contracting almost exclusively eternity-only plural ceremonies. Those sealings would not have authorized sexual relations during this life and therefore would probably have been less bothersome to Emma.

Joseph reported that the angel was not satisfied. Benjamin F. Johnson, a close friend of Joseph, claimed that he "put it off" and "waited until an Angel with a drawn Sword Stood before him and declared that if he longer delayed fulfilling that Command he would Slay him." Erastus Snow contended that the angel accused Smith of "being neglectful in the discharges of his duties" and spoke "of Joseph having to plead on his knees before the Angel for his Life."

Helen Mar Kimball Whitney asserted: "Had it not been for the fear of His displeasure, Joseph would have shrunk from the undertaking and would have continued silent, as he did for years, until an angel of the Lord threatened to slay him if he did not reveal and establish this celestial principle."—Brian C. Hales

<http://josephsmithpolygamy.org/common-questions/emma-smith-plural-marriage/>

After the rebuke during the third visit of the angel, Joseph returned primarily to sealings for time and eternity with single women until his death. Regarding Joseph's own sincere beliefs and feelings about plural marriage, the following poignant account is enlightening:

"The anguish of Joseph Smith on this subject was still being felt during the spring of 1844 in the midst of attempts by apostates to murder him. D. L. Harris, Verbal Statement, pp. 5–6 remembered him as saying:

"They accuse me of polygamy, and of being a false prophet ... but, said he, I am no false prophet, I am no impostor; I have had no dark revelations, I have had no revelations from the devil. I have made no revelations; I have not got anything up myself. The same God that has thus far dictated and directed me, and inspired me and strengthened me in this work, gave me this revelation and commandment on Celestial and Plural marriage; and the same God commanded me to obey it. He said to me that unless I accept it and introduce it and practice it, I together with my people should be damned and cut off from this time henceforth. And they say if I do so and so they will kill me. What shall I do! What shall I do! If I do not practice it I shall be damned with all my people; if I do teach it and practice it and urge it, they say they will kill me, and I know they will. But said he, we have got to observe it, that it was an eternal principle, and that it was given to him by way of commandment and not by way of instruction."

Jeffery M. Bradshaw, Footnote 249 of: <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/now-that-we-have-the-words-of-joseph-smith-how-shall-we-begin-to-understand-them-illustrations-of-selected-challenges-within-the-21-may-1843-discourse-on-2-peter-1/>

When Joseph proposed plural marriage to Mary Elizabeth Rollins, she asked Joseph about the possibility that he was deceived.

"When Joseph sent for me he told me all of these things. "Well," said I, "don't you think it was an angel of the devil that told you these things?" Said he, "No, it was an angel of God. God Almighty showed me the difference between an angel of light and Satan's angels. The angel came to me three times between the years of 1834 and 1842 and said I was to obey that principle or he would slay me. But," said he, "they called me a false and fallen prophet but I am more in favor with my God this day than I ever was in all my life before. I know that I shall be saved in the Kingdom of God. I have the oath of God upon it and God cannot lie; all that he gives me I shall take with me for I have that authority and that power conferred upon me."-Brian C. Hales  
<http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/plural-wives-overview/mary-elizabeth-rollins/>

## **John C. Bennett Complicates the Life of Joseph Smith**

The history of John C. Bennett is a sad saga that made an already precarious situation even more volatile.

"In late 1840, John C. Bennett arrived in Nauvoo to join the Latter-day Saints and advance the cause of Mormonism. He was quickly elected Nauvoo Mayor and appointed an assistant to the First Presidency. By summer of 1842, his situation had drastically changed having been accused of practicing "spiritual wifery," which had nothing to do with Joseph Smith's private teachings of plural marriage"

“Although gifted in many areas, Bennett had a troubling hidden past. Historian Linda King Newell provided this pithy observation: “There is no evidence that Bennett was hampered by either theological or ethical considerations.” By mid-February 1841, Joseph Smith sent George Miller to McConnelsville, Ohio, to investigate rumors about his reputation. Four weeks later Miller reported back that Bennett, who had been passing himself off as a bachelor, was already married and that “his poor, but confiding wife, followed him from place to place, with no suspicion of his unfaithfulness to her; at length, however, he became so bold in his departures, that it was evident to all around that he was a sore offender, and his wife left him under satisfactory evidence of his adulterous connections.””-Brian C. Hales  
<http://josephsmithpolygamy.org/john-c-bennett-and-spiritual-wifery/>

It is likely that Bennett had heard whispering of plural marriage during his time in Nauvoo and decided to use the rumor along with his position close to the Prophet to improvise the idea of “Spiritual Wifery” to help him in his sexual exploits.

“In clandestine circles he whispered teachings of “spiritual wifery,” which allowed any man and woman to experience sexual relations without a marriage ceremony, so long as they kept it secret. Bennett soon had a number of gullible men and women convinced his teachings were acceptable.”-Brian C. Hales  
<http://josephsmithpolygamy.org/john-c-bennett-and-spiritual-wifery/>

As Joseph started to become aware of the character and activities of Bennett, he struggled to know what to do. Should he expose Bennett, or forgive him and try a reformation of his character? At first he attempted the softer approach, but as events unfolded he decided to take the more severe course:

“Joseph let Bennett down gently, stripping him of authority in the city and the Church, taking over as mayor without fanfare. But in early June, news came of Bennett’s earlier expulsion from an Ohio Masonic lodge, a fact not verified before, and Joseph learned of additional men who had adopted Bennett’s rationalization of illicit sexual relations. In midmonth, Joseph published Bennett’s disfellowshipping letter in the *Times and Seasons* and backed his expulsion from the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge. On June 18 [1842], Joseph spoke against Bennett’s “iniquity & wickedness” in an open meeting.

All along Bennett had pled not to be exposed, once claiming it would break his mother’s heart. He could deal with the high council, the Masons, and Joseph and Hyrum, when they brought charges against him, but he could not bear the world to know his shame.”  
–Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling* Pg. 461

After John C. Bennett’s excommunication, he immediately turned to attack the church and the Prophet in an apparent effort to undercut the accusations made against himself and to seek revenge. His efforts played a significant role in the events that eventually led to the death of Joseph. Based on the evidence, among them Bennett’s own statements, it is clear that he was not a plural marriage insider, was not authorized by the Prophet in his sexual activities, and had no understanding of the true doctrine of celestial [eternal] or plural marriage.

“Because of the public relationship between Joseph Smith and Bennett, multiple authors have concluded that Bennett was privy to Joseph’s plural marriage teachings. However, Bennett later denied learning about “marrying for eternity,” monogamously or polygamously, while in Nauvoo.

In a letter to the *Iowa Hawk Eye* published December 7, 1843, he claimed that eternal marriage was “an entirely new doctrine” to him.”

“... Andrew F. Smith noted: “No primary evidence has been presented indicating that Bennett was officially involved in the evolving practice of polygamy at Nauvoo. ... No evidence indicates that Bennett’s extramarital relationships were sanctioned by Joseph Smith.””

“While in Nauvoo Bennett had heard rumors of polygamy and had apparently spoken with some insiders concerning the practice. Exploiting this kernel of truth, Bennett described three fictitious “orders” of polygamous wives with participants wearing different colored veils (white, green and black), each bringing its own immoral obligations. Nauvoo pluralists knew these descriptions were pure fabrication, but others, even some uninformed church members, were confused.”-Brian C. Hales

<http://josephsmithpolygamy.org/john-c-bennett-and-spiritual-wifery/>

## **Hyrum Smith’s Challenging Acceptance of Plural Marriage**

Hyrum Smith’s circumstances relating to plural marriage is a strangely comforting narrative. The details and the outcome speak to the truthfulness and sincerity of the Prophet Joseph.

Hyrum was very similar to Emma in his feelings against plural marriage. Joseph had not fully discussed the subject with Hyrum until relatively late in the Nauvoo period, likely because tentative discussions revealed that he would not be easily convinced. Complicating the life of the Prophet Joseph, his brother Hyrum was vocally crusading against rumors of plural marriage and the un-authorized “spiritual wifery” teachings of John C. Bennett.

“Andrew F. Ehat describes the background of the precarious situation with regard to the subject that prevailed on 21 May 1843:

In the aftermath of [John C.] Bennett’s expulsion [from the Church for licentious teachings and practices relating to a counterfeit form of “spiritual wifery”], the crusade in Nauvoo to rid the last vestiges of Bennett’s profligacy ... divided the nine-member [“Quorum of the Anointed” which consisted of a small group of men who had received their temple endowments on 4 May 1842]. By July 1842, while the other members of the Quorum had accepted eternal and plural marriage, Hyrum Smith, William Law and William Marks had resisted Joseph Smith’s effort to broach the subject with them. Their crusade against the embarrassing activities of Bennett narrowed their perspective, and Joseph Smith soon learned that he should not try then to convert them. This helps explain why in the year after Joseph Smith first gave these endowment blessings to the Quorum he did not invite others to become members of the group, did not yet invite the wives of these men to receive these ordinances, and did not administer any of the more advanced ordinances. ... In May 1843, when Hyrum, William Law and William Marks realized that their efforts had not ended the rumors of the private practice of to them aberrant marriage forms, they decided to bring the issue into the open. They were suspicious that their worst fears were true — Joseph was teaching plural marriage. So while Joseph was out of town, Hyrum spoke on 14 May to the Nauvoo populace taking as his text Jacob 2 in the Book of Mormon — quoting the verses that are a severe denunciation of polygamy. ... Hyrum said to the Saints, “If an angel from heaven should come and preach such doctrine, [you] would be sure to see his cloven foot and cloud of blackness over his head.” The following



Sunday, Joseph, in an apparent mild rebuttal, referred to the doctrine of eternal marriage for the first time in public ... Apparently, Hyrum Smith, William Law and William Marks were disturbed by the Prophet's remarks. They did not understand why some concepts of the Gospel still needed to remain unsaid, concepts relating to the doctrine of eternal covenants. Two days later, Heber C. Kimball and William Clayton "conversed ... concerning [rumors they had apparently heard, rumors of] a plot ... being laid to entrap the brethren of the secret priesthood [i.e., those who had entered plural marriages] by bro. H[yrum] and others." ... With this insight into a time of personal dilemma of the Prophet, a point emerges that must be emphasized: Joseph Smith's actions towards his brother confirm the depth of his religious convictions regarding these principles. The eyes of his people, his closest leaders and associates, and even his brother Hyrum were scrutinizing his every action, and yet he never once faltered. Even the most gracious of humanistic explanations of the origins of plural marriage — the belief and characterization that Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage was such a complexly conceived system, so subtly and subconsciously constructed from latent biblical precedent that it totally quieted his own conscience regarding it — seems too superficial a theory to approach describing the fact and reality of Joseph and Hyrum's experience. He must truly have believed he heard the voice of God to go through what he did from his brother, his counselors in the First Presidency, and from his wife. To carry on such a principle sub rosa for two years without any of the First Presidency the least bit agreeable to the concept is incredible, and yet true."

The Prophet's actions at this time — and subsequently — demonstrated that he was more willing to forfeit his life than to deny the truthfulness of what had been revealed to him. Later, Brigham Young remembered that Joseph Smith told him and "scores" of others on many occasions that "if ever there was a truth revealed from heaven through him, it was revealed when that revelation [i.e., on celestial and plural marriage] was given, and if I have to die for any revelation God has given through me I would as readily die for this one as any other. And I sometimes think that I shall have to die for it. It may be that I shall have to forfeit my life to it and if this has to be so, Amen."

Jeffery M. Bradshaw, pages 75-77 <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/now-that-we-have-the-words-of-joseph-smith-how-shall-we-begin-to-understand-them-illustrations-of-selected-challenges-within-the-21-may-1843-discourse-on-2-peter-1/>

"According to Richard S. Law, son of William Law who led the effort against the Prophet's life, his father "with his arms around the neck of the Prophet, was pleading with him to withdraw the doctrine, of plural marriage..... [William] pleaded for this with Joseph with tears streaming from his eyes. The prophet was also in tears, but he informed [William] that he could not withdraw the doctrine, for God had commanded him to teach it, and condemnation would come upon him if he was not obedient to the commandment"

Jeffery M. Bradshaw, Footnote 249 of: <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/now-that-we-have-the-words-of-joseph-smith-how-shall-we-begin-to-understand-them-illustrations-of-selected-challenges-within-the-21-may-1843-discourse-on-2-peter-1/>

The powerful account of Hyrum's acceptance of plural marriage was recounted by Brigham Young:

"Right north of the Masonic Hall in Nauvoo the ground was not fenced. This was in the year 1842. There were some rails laid along to fence up some lots. Hyrum saw me and said, "Brother Brigham, I want to talk to you." We went together and sat upon the rails that were piled up. He commenced by saying, "I have a question to ask you. In the first place I say unto you that I do know that you and the Twelve know some things that I do not know. I can understand this by the

motions and talk and doings of Joseph and I know there is something or other which I do not understand that is revealed to the Twelve. Is this so?" I replied, "I do not know anything about what you know, but I know what I know." Then he said, "I have mistrusted for a long time that Joseph had received a revelation that a man should have more than one wife, and he has hinted as much to me, but I would not bear it." We had heard him say hard things. I recollect in one council where Joseph undertook to teach the brethren and sisters, William Law was there and William and Hyrum and a few others were against Joseph. William Law made this expression: "If an angel from heaven was to reveal to me that a man should have more than one wife, and if it were in my power I would kill him." That was pretty hard, but Joseph had to submit for it. The brethren were not prepared to receive the doctrine. Brother Kimball and others were in that council. Joseph had meetings in his house time after time and month after month, every Sunday evening. Joseph was worn out with it, but as to his denying any such thing, I never knew that he denied the doctrine of polygamy. Some have said that he did, but I do not believe he ever did. . . . I will now go back to where I met Hyrum. He said to me, "I am convinced that there is something that has not been told me." I said to him, "Brother Hyrum, Joseph would tell you everything the Lord reveals to him if he could." I must confess I felt a little sarcastic against Hyrum, although he was just as honest as an angel and as full of integrity as the Gods, but he had not that ability which Joseph possessed to see and understand men as they were. I took advantage of this and I said to him, "Brother Hyrum, I will tell you about this thing which you do not know if you will swear with an uplifted hand before God that you will never say another word against Joseph, and his doings' and the doctrines he is preaching to the people." He replied, "I will do it with all my heart," and he stood upon his feet saying, "I want to know the truth and to be saved," and he made a covenant there, never again to bring forward one argument or use any influence against Joseph's doings. Joseph had many wives sealed to him. I told Hyrum the whole story and he bowed to it and wept like a child and said, "God be praised." He went to Joseph and told him what he had learned and renewed his covenant with Joseph and they went heart and hand together while they lived, and they were together when they died, and they are together now, defending Israel."

Jeffery M. Bradshaw, Footnote 254 of: <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/now-that-we-have-the-words-of-joseph-smith-how-shall-we-begin-to-understand-them-illustrations-of-selected-challenges-within-the-21-may-1843-discourse-on-2-peter-1/>

## Joseph and Emma

No account of plural marriage would be complete without describing its impact on Joseph's beloved wife Emma. Of her importance and influence upon him, Richard L. Bushman wrote:

"Emma probably had more influence over him than any living person. He worried about displeasing her and begged her forgiveness for unknown infractions."

—Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling* Pg. 448

That she was beloved to him is absolutely clear. In the summer of 1842 when he had to go into hiding from the law, he wrote in his journal a touching account of his feelings about a secret nighttime meeting with Emma:

"With what unspeakable delight, and what transports of joy swelled my bosom, when I took by the hand on that night, my beloved Emma, she that was my wife, even the wife of my youth; and the choice of my heart." He remembered all they had passed through together: "the fatigues, and the toils, the sorrows, and sufferings, and the joys and consolations from time to time." Now here

she was again. “Oh! What a comingling of thought filled my mind for the moment, again she is here, even in the seventh trouble, undaunted, firm and unwavering, unchangeable, affectionate Emma.” –Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling* Pg. 472

His discussions about Emma with his other wives also reveal the love and concern Joseph had for her:

“According to a later report, “when one of his [plural] wives spoke to him [Joseph] in a manner complaining of Emma, he turned to her and said, ‘If you desire my love, you must never speak evil of Emma.’””

<http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/common-questions/emma-smith-plural-marriage/>

Emma detested the practice of plural marriage. She was torn between a sincere belief in her husband as a Prophet, and his teaching of a doctrine that was extremely hurtful to her personally. Throughout the last years of the life of the Prophet, she vacillated back and forth between being a willing participant in plural marriage and railing against the doctrine and her husband.

“Maria Jane Woodward, a domestic working in the Smith home, overheard an emotional conversation between Emma and Joseph regarding plural marriage. Knowing that Mary Jane had been listening, Emma approached her the next morning: She told me to sit down on the bed by her and we both sat down on the bed that I was making. She looked very sad and cast down, and there she said to me, “The principle of plural marriage is right, but I am like other women, I am naturally jealous hearted and I can talk back to Joseph as long as any wife can talk back to her husband, but what I want to say to you is this. You heard me finding fault with the principle. I want to say that principle is right, it is from our Father in Heaven,” and then she again spoke of her jealousy. Then she continued, “What I have said I have got to repent of. The principle is right but I am jealous hearted. Now never tell anybody that you heard me find fault with Joseph or that principle. The principle is right and if I or you or anyone else finds fault with that principle we have got to humble ourselves and repent of it” (M. J. Woodward, Maria Jane Woodward statement, attached to letter from George H. Brimhall to Joseph F. Smith, April 21, 1902 (1: DVD 28). Original in the Church History Library, MS 1325).

It is also clear that Emma dearly loved Joseph:

“Immediately after Joseph’s death, family friend John P. Greene reported seeing Emma “weeping and wailing bitterly, in a loud and unrestrained voice, her face covered with her hands.” He remarked, “this affliction would be to her a crown of life.” She allegedly replied: “My husband was my crown.” <http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/common-questions/emma-smith-plural-marriage/>

“Her son remembered her saying softly over his dead body, “Oh, Joseph, Joseph! My husband, my husband! Have they taken you from me at last!” When the bodies of Hyrum and Joseph were moved to the homestead site, she had a lock of her husband’s hair snipped for a locket she wore all her life.” –Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling* Pg. 554

At one point Joseph instructed Emma to write down the best blessing she could think of for him to pronounce upon her and he would sign it upon his return from hiding.

“The text of the blessing, as it survives in later typescript form, included Emma’s wish: “I desire with all my heart to honor and respect my husband as my head, ever to live in his confidence and by acting in unison with him retain the place which God has given me by his side.”

<http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/common-questions/emma-smith-plural-marriage/>

Her deep love for Joseph endured right up to the end of her life:

“Emma died in 1879. According to their son Alexander, her final words, spoken as her last breath were “Joseph Joseph ... yes, yes, I am coming.”

<http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/common-questions/emma-smith-plural-marriage/>

## **Powerful Spiritual Manifestations of Plural Marriage Participants**

One of the fascinating and convincing elements supporting the reality of the Prophetic calling of Joseph Smith is the fact that he was not alone in experiencing miraculous heavenly experiences regarding his revelations and teachings. This sets him apart from other religious leaders with similar claims. Several miraculous events were shared by more than himself, such as the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon seeing an angel, Oliver Cowdery sharing in the angelic visitations of John the Baptist and Peter, James and John, or Joseph and Sidney Rigdon together receiving the incredible vision recorded in D&C 76. The introduction of plural marriage was no exception to this general pattern.

### **Mary Elizabeth Rollins**

One of Joseph’s plural wives named Mary Elizabeth Rollins gives an account of her miraculous experience as follows.

“Well, I talked with him for a long time and finally I told him I would never be sealed to him until I had a witness. Said he, “You shall have a witness.” Said I, “If God told you that, why does he not tell me?” He asked me if I was going to be a traitor. “I have never told a mortal and shall never tell a mortal I had such a talk from a married man,” said I. “Well,” said he, “pray earnestly for the angel said to me you should have a witness.”

I went out and got between three haystacks where no one could see me. As I knelt down I thought, why not pray as Moses did? He prayed with his hands raised. When his hands were raised, Israel was victorious, but when they were not raised, the Philistines were victorious. I lifted my hands and I have heard Joseph say the angels covered their faces [meaning she covered her face with a cloth]. I knelt down and if ever a poor mortal prayed, I did. A few nights after that an angel of the Lord came to me and if ever a thrill went through a mortal, it went through me. I gazed upon the clothes and figure but the eyes were like lightning. They pierced me from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet.”

-Brian C. Hales, <http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/plural-wives-overview/mary-elizabeth-rollins/>

### **Desdemona Fullmer**

Another of the Prophet’s plural wives gave this brief account:

“Having been convinced of the truth of polygamy I therefore entered into the order but I dared not make it known not even to my parents for I was forbidden by the Prophet for it would endanger the life of Joseph and also many of the Saints.” She also reported a night vision in which an angel told her that the polygamy doctrine was true.”-Brian C. Hales

<http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/plural-wives-overview/desdemona-fullmer/>

## **Lucy Walker**

Another of Joseph’s plural wives named Lucy Walker had several powerful experiences convincing her of the truth of the plural marriage revelation. After agonizing for several months over Joseph’s proposal:

“...Lucy bluntly refused, unless God Himself told her otherwise, and “emphatically forbid him speaking again to me on this Subject.” Joseph blithely replied, “God Almighty bless you,” promised her a manifestation, and left.” –Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*

The fulfillment of the Prophet’s promise apparently came in two separate powerful experiences. A second hand account indicates Lucy received an angelic visitation to address her concerns.

“I went to live with Joseph Smith’s family as a maid and after I had grown up, Joseph asked me if I would marry him. I felt highly insulted and he said that if I wanted to know whether the principle was true, I could go to God and find out. One night after supper I went out into the orchard and I kneeled down and prayed to God for information. After praying I arose and walked around the orchard and kneeled again and repeated this during the night. Finally as I was praying the last time, an angel of the Lord appeared to me and told me that the principle was of God and for me to accept it.” -Brian C. Hales

<http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/plural-wives-overview/lucy-walker/>

Her firsthand account of the other experience describes a spiritual manifestation that left no room for her to doubt any longer:

“It was near dawn after another sleepless night when my room was lighted up by a heavenly influence. To me it was, in comparison, like the brilliant sun bursting through the darkest cloud. The words of the Prophet were indeed fulfilled. My soul was filled with a calm, sweet peace that “I never knew.” Supreme happiness took possession of me, and I received a powerful and irresistible testimony of the truth of 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 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.”

<http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/plural-wives-overview/lucy-walker/>

## **Sealings to Young Brides**

“Joseph Smith was sealed to ten women under the age of twenty. Four were nineteen, three were seventeen, one was sixteen, and two were fourteen. Marriages for young women sixteen and older were not uncommon in the mid-nineteenth century, but younger marriages were less common.

Sexual relations are documented in several of the plural marriages between Joseph and the older seven plural wives, but there is no documentation supporting that plural sealings to the two fourteen-year-old wives were consummated.”

<http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/common-questions/14-year-old-wives-teenage-brides/>

“LDS scholar Gregory L. Smith explained:

“It is significant that none of Joseph’s contemporaries complained about the age differences between polygamous *or* monogamous marriage partners. This was simply part of their environment and culture; it is unfair to judge nineteenth century members by twenty-first century social standards. . . . Joseph Smith’s polygamous marriages to young women may seem difficult to understand or explain today, but in his own time such age differences were not typically an obstacle to marriage. The plural marriages were unusual, to say the least; the younger ages of the brides were much less so. Critics do not provide this perspective because they wish to shock the audience and have them judge Joseph by the standards of the modern era, rather than his own time.””-Brian C. Hales

<http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/common-questions/14-year-old-wives-teenage-brides/>

One of the 14-year-old brides, Helen Mar Kimball, later wrote extensively defending the practice of plural marriage. Of her experience relating to the Prophet Joseph, Brian C. Hales writes:

“Helen never describes even one time being alone with the Prophet without a chaperone. References to intimate relations would not be expected. Yet, if the two spent time together as husband and wife, Helen might have made a passing reference to the interactions, but none are found.

One could say that Helen’s father, Heber C. Kimball, had the most active part in bringing Helen and Joseph together. Helen wrote: “He [her father—Heber C. Kimball] taught me the principle of Celestial marriage and having a great desire to be connected with the Prophet, Joseph, he offered me to him; this I afterwards learned from the Prophet’s own mouth.”

Richard Anderson observed: “Helen says several times that her father took the initiative to arrange the marriage and very possibly he did so with a view to committing her to the Prophet before her budding social life produced a choice or a proposal” from someone else. Joseph’s role was not completely passive because he was willing to teach Helen Mar and marry her after Helen’s father introduced the idea. Helen’s sealing was for both time and eternity, so this would eventually have become an actual marriage that included sexual relations. In Utah, Brigham Young instructed polygamous men to wait to consummate their sealings to younger brides until they were at least eighteen. While it is impossible to document, it appears this policy began in Nauvoo with Joseph Smith.”

<http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/common-questions/14-year-old-wives-teenage-brides/>

## **Did Joseph Smith Send Men on Missions in Order to Steal Their Wives While They Were Gone?**

“Another detail in [John C.] Bennett's Pittsburgh affidavit is that the Prophet had sent men on missions so he could marry their wives in Nauvoo. This statement is contradicted by historical data. Of the twelve "polyandrous" husbands identified by Todd Compton, ten were not on

missions at the time Joseph was sealed [for eternity only, which meant they did not involve sexual relations] to their legal wives. Of the two possible exceptions, only one, Orson Hyde, is documented as on a mission at the time of Marinda Johnson Hyde's sealing to Joseph Smith. The second possible case involves George Harris, who left on his fourteen-month mission in July 1840. His wife, Lucinda may have been...sealed to Joseph Smith at some point, but the date is unavailable.”

Hales, Joseph Smith's Polygamy Vol. 1, 313–314.  
Bracket additions added by Cameron Ford

## The Heartrending Story of Orson and Sarah Pratt

Historian Richard L. Bushman details a sad account involving Orson and Sarah Pratt.

“[John C.] Bennett claimed that while Pratt was in England with the other apostles in 1842, Joseph had proposed marriage. Bennett’s disclosure stunned Orson Pratt. Had the Prophet tried to seduce his wife? To make matters worse, a story circulated of Bennett’s possible involvement with Sarah. Nauvoo residents swore they witnessed long nocturnal visits and glimpses of the two in compromising positions. The non-Mormon but friendly Nauvoo resident Jacob Backenstos signed an affidavit stating flatly that Bennett had “illicit intercourse with Mrs. Orson Pratt.” In a public meeting, Joseph spoke openly about Bennett’s relations with Sister Pratt.

Orson Pratt faced two equally repulsive stories. Either his wife had received a proposal of marriage from the man Pratt thought was the Lord’s anointed (Bennett’s story), or she had compromised her virtue with John C. Bennett (Joseph’s story). No contemporary report of Sarah’s own version remains (save Bennett’s account), but forty years later, after Orson’s death, and after she had left the Church, she told a story that substantially supported Bennett against Joseph. If that was the story she gave at the time, Orson was forced to choose between his wife and the Prophet, dreadful alternatives.

On July 15, Orson Pratt left a note to his wife and disappeared. “My sorrows are greater than I can bear! Where I am henceforth it matters not,” he wrote. For a day he could not be found. Fearing Pratt would take his own life, Joseph organized a search of the city. While the search went on, Joseph called meetings to explain Pratt’s plight and to further expose Bennett’s schemes. Pratt was finally discovered five miles down the river sitting dazed on a log. Two days after the disappearance, Brigham Young wrote to Pratt’s brother Parley: “Br Orson Pratt is in trubble in consequence of his wife, his feelings are so rought up that he dos not know whether his wife is wrong or whether Josephs testimony and others are wrong and due Ly and he decived for 12 years—or not. He is all but crazy about matters.” Relating the incident later, Young said Pratt’s “mind became so darkened by the influence and statements of his wife, that he came out in rebellion against Joseph, refusing to believe his testimony or obey his counsel. He said he would believe his wife in preference to the Prophet.” Joseph told Pratt that “if he did believe his wife and follow her suggestions, he would go to hell.”

In this rebellious mood, Orson Pratt refused to vote for a resolution supporting Joseph Smith’s character. At a public meeting on July 22, Pratt rose to explain his opposition. In reply, Joseph asked, “Have you personally a knowledge of any immoral act in me toward the female sex, or in any other way?” Since Pratt was relying on the testimony of his wife and Bennett, his answer had to be no. After laboring with Pratt for days, the apostles decided he would not yield. On August 20, 1842, he was excommunicated.

Bennett hoped to enlist Pratt and other disaffected Mormons in bringing Joseph down.... In early January, Bennett wrote to Rigdon and Orson Pratt as “Dear Friends,” detailing his plans to drag Joseph into Missouri to stand trial on the old charges of murder, burglary, and treason.... But back in Nauvoo, Orson Pratt began to mend. He published a statement in an October 1842 issue of the Nauvoo Wasp denying Bennett’s claim that he and Sarah were leaving Nauvoo and planning to expose Mormonism. When Ridgon passed along Bennett’s January letter, Pratt handed it to Joseph. Perhaps as a result of this visible support, Pratt’s case was reconsidered by the council of the Twelve. Joseph ruled on a technicality that Pratt had not been officially excommunicated back in August. Then the two men spoke directly about Sarah. “She lied about me,” said Joseph. “I never made the offer which she said I did.” He advised Orson to divorce Sarah and begin another family. Orson, still loyal to his wife, demurred. He was reinstated as an apostle, and that afternoon both he and Sarah were rebaptized in the Mississippi. By the time Orson left Nauvoo in 1846, he had taken four additional wives.”

–Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling* Pg. 466  
Brackets added by Cameron Ford

Within this tragic and disturbing story lie the seeds of a reasonable explanation for what may have really occurred. These seeds consist of the involvement of John C. Bennett, an individual whose poor character and corrupt morality are well documented, as well as Sarah Pratt’s claim that Joseph made her an offer of marriage. Another important clue is that this claimed proposal likely takes place in late 1841 or early 1842, since all the subsequent events involving Orson Pratt occurred in the summer of 1842. The period of late 1841 to early 1842 is right during the time period of Joseph’s unusual practice of being sealed for “eternity only” to the wives of faithful members in his possible attempts to create connections between himself and those families, as well as to comply with the angel’s command without needing to have sexual relations. It is thought that Joseph generally stopped this practice after the third appearance of the angel, which Mary Elizabeth Rollins stated was in February of 1842. <http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/common-questions/emma-smith-plural-marriage/>

It is entirely possible, and even likely, that John C. Bennett was using his ideas of “Spiritual Wifery” to try to seduce Sarah Pratt into an illicit sexual relationship with him. During the period that he was making his attempts, the Prophet may have approached Sarah with the idea of being sealed for “eternity only” to him, to help him fulfill the Lord’s command. Since Bennett had already effectively “poisoned the well”, it is logical to see how she could jump to the conclusion that Joseph was speaking of Bennett’s false doctrine of “Spiritual Wifery” and proposing sexual relations.

Note the carefully worded statement of the Prophet: “I never made the offer which she said I did.” In this statement it can be seen how the Prophet was being truthful, but also leaving room for the possibility that he may have made an offer of a different kind, that she misunderstood. But after the uproar caused by Bennett, Joseph probably decided to cut his losses and not try to clarify what it was he had actually proposed.

Aside from providing a plausible explanation of the events surrounding Sarah and Orson Pratt, another important point to make is that this account contains a beautiful and faith filled pattern to follow in coming to terms with the challenging doctrine of Plural Marriage and Joseph Smith’s involvement with it. Orson was presented with conflicting stories regarding the character and



actions of the Prophet Joseph Smith. But because of the strength of his testimony, he eventually decided that the magnitude of all the evidences and witnesses he had received regarding the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith overpowered the conflicting accounts he was being told. He ultimately decided to shelve these concerns because of his greater reasons to believe, and he eventually became a staunch defender of the doctrine of Plural Marriage.

Furthermore, can critics and skeptics really claim that peering through the murky lens of conflicting historical documents more than 150 years after the events, that they can determine the character of Joseph Smith better than Orson Pratt? A man who personally knew and worked with him for over a decade? A man who had suffered through severe hardships because of the scriptures, doctrines, and organization revealed by the Prophet Joseph? A man whose testimony of the Prophet was sorely tested by the events surrounding his wife, but came out all the stronger? It would have been completely understandable for him to permanently walk away due to these accusations, as others had done. Yet he did not. Years later in Salt Lake City, on August 11, 1867, Orson Pratt testified:

“I do not speak enthusiastically when I say I KNOW. It is not a spirit of excitement which prompts me to declare these things, but I testify now, to that which I know by revelation to me from heaven, as I have testified to hundreds and thousands of people, both in America, England, and on the Continent of Europe. I know this great work which you, Latter-day Saints, have received, to be the work of Almighty God. I have the same certainty that I have that you are now sitting on these seats. This religion is not a whim; it is not a wild enthusiastic creed, invented by human wisdom, but the origin of this Church is divine. This book, called the Book of Mormon, God gave, by the inspiration of His Holy Spirit, to Joseph Smith, whom you and I believe, and not only believe, but know to be, a prophet.” -Journal of Discourse 12:87

The fact that Orson Pratt continued to have a strong testimony after these experiences stands as a powerful witness to the Prophetic calling of Joseph Smith.

## **Why Would God require Such a Sacrifice of the Prophet and the Early Latter-day Saints?**

Brian C. Hales describes four reasons given by the Prophet Joseph Smith as to why the practice of Plural Marriage had to be restored. Snippets of his discussion are reproduced below. For his full explanations, see <http://josephsmithpolygamy.org/theology/joseph-smiths-teachings/>

### **1. A Restoration**

“The earliest justification mentioned by the Prophet was as a part of the “restitution of all things” prophesied in Acts 3:19–21. Old Testament prophets practiced polygamy, so it could be a part of the restoration of “all things” (see D&C 132:40, 45).

...in 1841, Joseph Smith attempted to broach the topic publicly. Helen Mar Kimball remembered: “He [Joseph] astonished his hearers by preaching on the restoration of all things, and said that as it was anciently with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, so it would be again, etc.”

Joseph Smith was a prophet-restorer, which helps to explain why the command to practice plural marriage has been labeled a “restoration,” even though it is not a salvific ordinance.”

## 2. To Provide a Customized Trial

“The belief that God challenges His followers on earth in order to make them worthy of blessings from their obedience is a pattern in the scriptures. Sometimes disciples are required to migrate to new lands or to defend themselves against powerful enemies.

Practicing plural marriage was difficult for most participants. One of Joseph’s plural wives, 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.” She also recalled:

“I did not try to conceal the fact of its having been a trial, but confessed that it had been one of the severest of my life; but that it had also proven one of the greatest of blessings. I could truly say it had done the most towards making me a Saint and a free woman, in every sense of the word; and I knew many others who could say the same, and to whom it had proven one of the greatest boons—a ‘blessing in disguise.’”

This trial was withdrawn through the 1890 Manifesto. At that time, Wilford Woodruff, the holder of the sealing keys to authorize all valid eternal marriages, declared the commandment to practice plural marriage to be no longer binding upon the Saints.”

## 3. Multiplying and Replenishing the Earth

“Charles Lambert recalled the Prophet teaching: “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.”

Helen Mar Kimball recalled, “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.””

“Plural marriage did result in an increased number of children born to believing parents.”

<https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng#45>

## 4. Making Eternal Marriage Available to Everyone

“The fourth reason Joseph Smith gave for the practice of plural marriage dwarfs the other three explanations in significance because it deals with eternity. The message of D&C 132:16–17 states that men and women who are not sealed in eternal marriages during this life (or vicariously later) “remain separately and singly, without exaltation, in their saved condition, to all eternity.”

In other words, “exaltation,” the highest salvation, requires eternal marriage. No unmarried person can be exalted according to Joseph Smith’s teachings.

Doctrine and Covenants section 132 seems to anticipate more worthy women than men as it approves a plurality of wives and disallows a plurality of husbands. Verse 63 states that a plurality of wives is “for their [the wives] exaltation in the eternal worlds.”

Section 132 supports that *eternity* was the primary focus of the Joseph's marriage theology rather than *plurality* or *sexuality*. Eternal, rather than plural, marriage was his zenith doctrine. It appears that the crucial objective of polygamy on earth was to allow all worthy women to be eternally sealed to a husband and thus obtain all the ordinances needed for exaltation.

According to these teachings, a plurality of wives in some form may be practiced in eternity, but not by all worthy men and women. We know that polygamy on earth is unequal and difficult, but we know nothing about how eternal marriage or eternal plural marriage might feel in eternity."

## **Personal Speculations on Why Plural Marriage was Required**

"Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire." –Joseph Smith Jr., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 538-539

For me personally, the most powerful idea for why the Lord required such enormous sacrifice, even to the point of basically causing the death of His prophet, is that it was crucial to the future survival and growth of His restored church. The church would not have accepted plural marriage from any other prophet. Brigham Young could not have done it. John Taylor could not have done it, and on down the list. Even though many later wrongly felt the practice originated with him, Brigham did not have the prophetic credentials of Joseph. For such an earth shaking doctrine to be initially accepted, it had to be introduced by one through whom the Lord had accomplished so many miracles that it had the force to overcome the natural societal resistance and revulsion to such a practice in an already monogamous culture. If it was going to be accepted by the Church, it had to be introduced by Joseph, and he had to practice it fully in every aspect so that there was no reason for the faithful to doubt.

Why would it have been so critical to the future of the church? Two possible reasons come to mind.

### **Critical Population Mass**

An idea related to the theory of evolution that could be called, *critical population mass*, suggests that there is such a thing as a minimum population size that needs to be achieved for new species groups to grow and thrive, and especially to avoid eventual extinction from predators, accidents, species competition, and other circumstances. Given the persecution of the early church even before Plural Marriage was publicly taught, it is very possible that the newly organized church could have just eventually disappeared from the various forces acting on it, or at least not survived in the form the Lord desired (see more discussion on this idea below). It can be argued that plural marriage was the catalyst that forced the Saints into an isolated environment in the western United States where it could incubate and grow in relative safety for several decades before the outside world showed up again. Plural Marriage also provided a population increase that may have been crucial to not only keeping the newly organized church in existence in the form the Lord desired, but perhaps to also set it up for the explosive growth that it eventually realized.

## **A Culture of Obedience and Sacrifice**

Business theorists often talk about the incredible power that certain kinds of corporate cultures have on the success of their organizations. Microsoft, Apple, IBM, and Google are just a few examples.

It is interesting to note that of all the religious offshoots from the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the only one that has had significant success in spreading its message is the one that was obedient to the Prophet Joseph's command to practice Plural Marriage, and then was obedient to a later prophet's command to stop practicing it. Because of the huge sacrifice and emotional commitment to practicing something so difficult, in some ways it may have been just as hard for the church to stop its practice as it was to start.

The practice of Plural Marriage was a significant element, among many elements, that taught the early Saints and their literal and cultural descendants to be obedient and to make incredible sacrifices for the Lord's kingdom. The ripple effects of the enormous sacrifice of Joseph Smith and the many early Latter Day-saint men and women who practiced plural marriage has created a culture of obedience and sacrifice in a very large group of people. Through such a culture the Lord has been able to send out thousands and thousands of missionaries to spread His message; and not only that, they and their families and friends pay for the privilege —unheard of in most churches. Through such a culture the Lord has cultivated a core group of people that —aside from their already heavy obligations to provide for and care for their own families— will joyfully and faithfully pay their tithes and offerings, voluntarily accept challenging church callings, work to redeem the dead, take care of the poor, send their children on missions, serve missions in their old age, and experience otherwise unachievable personal growth while doing so.

## **The Repercussions of Fully Renouncing the Doctrine of Plural Marriage**

From time to time a faithful member of the church who struggles with the doctrine of plural marriage and the vestiges of its practice—most notably that men can still be sealed for eternity to multiple women as long as their previously sealed wives are deceased—will call for the church to fully renounce the doctrine and deny the claim that the revelation on plural marriage ever came from God. Such a request suggests that the full repercussions that this action would have on the doctrines of the church have not been fully thought out.

First of all, if Joseph cannot be trusted to tell the difference between a revelation from God, or not, then how can any of his revelations really be trusted? Especially since he so adamantly claimed that the revelation on plural marriage came from God? If we can ignore that problem, it still does not seem even remotely tenable to claim that the Prophet was receiving the voice of God during the verses of Section 132 describing eternal marriage, and then in the very next moment, that he was under the influence of the devil, or his libido, in the versus describing plural marriage. So, fully rejecting the doctrine of Plural Marriage would, at a minimum, necessarily

require the rejection of eternal marriage as a true doctrine, probably the most cherished of all the doctrines revealed through the Prophet.

Furthermore, the temple endowment and redeeming work for the dead would also need to be rejected, since those were revealed to the Prophet during the time of his greatest involvement in plural marriage. Such a loss would be to lose pillars of the faith. The temple endowment is a significant witness to the prophethood of Joseph due to its replication of ancient temple practices among Christians that Joseph could have had no knowledge about. Similarly, the loss of the redeeming work for the dead would be to lose one of the greatest evidences of God's love for his children in making sure that every human soul has a chance to receive and accept saving ordinances. The loss of the Temple and its associated ordinances would likely be catastrophic for the church, since it can be argued that the temple endowment, work for the dead, and the holding of a temple recommend required to participate in such ordinances, are significant motivators in the lives and activity levels of the Latter-day Saints.

Aside from those obvious doctrinal losses, it could be argued that every revelation received after his first plural marriage in 1835 or 1836 should be rejected.

Ultimately, renouncing plural marriage logically requires that the church declare Joseph became a fallen prophet at some point. And if he was a fallen prophet, can it be believed that he could have had priesthood keys to give to the Quorum of the Twelve before he was murdered? And at any rate, how could the Twelve have possibly received priesthood keys since almost all of them were practicing plural marriage? Therefore, none of the saving ordinances performed by the church since 1836 would have any validity in the eyes of the Lord, and the Lord's purposes in revealing the Book of Mormon and restoring his True Church would be frustrated.

## **Conclusion**

“What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself;” D&C 1:38

The above scripture as applied to the doctrine of Plural Marriage speaks for itself. All of the data properly analyzed support that Plural Marriage was a revelation and command given to the Prophet Joseph Smith, which he struggled and stumbled in implementing. It was likely the greatest trial and challenge of his life. It was probably the issue that led to his death. But he stayed true to his prophetic calling and completed the task. Of this controversial and challenging doctrine, one can imagine Joseph echoing the words of Nephi in the Book of Mormon:

“...hearken unto these words and believe in Christ; and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ. And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; ...

And if they are not the words of Christ, judge ye—for Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness.” -2 Nephi 33:10-11