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## **An Easier Way to Understanding Joseph Smith's Polygamy**

Craig L. Foster

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## AN EASIER WAY TO UNDERSTANDING JOSEPH SMITH'S POLYGAMY

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Craig L. Foster

Review of Brian C. Hales and Laura H. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015, 198 pages + index.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' history of plural marriage can be difficult and uncomfortable for even the most stalwart of modern members. Because of the Internet and easy access to both accurate and inaccurate information, accidental discovery and/or inadequate teachings about the Church's history and relationship to plural marriage have caused crises of faith which have alienated members of the Church and, in many cases, led to their eventual departure from the faith. Anti-Mormons and critics of the Church are constantly pushing and picking at members' faith in order to plant seeds of doubt and to destroy members' testimonies. Plural marriage has proven to be a prime weapon because knowing only a little of the truth can be devastating.<sup>1</sup>

This is particularly the case when confronted with Joseph Smith's polygamy. I am reminded of an experience I had almost thirty years ago. I commuted on the bus between Provo and Salt Lake City and enjoyed visiting with other regular commuters, all of whom were active members of the Church. During a conversation regarding Mormon history, I mentioned in passing that Joseph Smith had plural wives. One woman got an angry look on her face and exclaimed, "He did not! Brigham Young might have done that, but Joseph Smith never would."<sup>2</sup>

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1 Craig L. Foster, "Separated but not Divorced: The LDS Church's Uncomfortable Relationship with its Polygamous Past," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10 (2014): 68.

2 Ibid., 61-62.

In 2013 Brian Hales published a remarkable three volume work about Joseph Smith's introduction and practice of Latter-day Saint plural marriage. This in-depth study addressed all known controversial and difficult aspects of Joseph Smith's polygamy, placing them within doctrinal, historical, and social context. *Joseph Smith's Polygamy* will probably stand for years as the most comprehensive study of Joseph Smith's association with and influence on plural marriage.

In spite of the treasure-trove of information contained in the volumes, there is one major problem with Hales' three-volume work. And that is, it is three volumes. For most members of the Church, the thought of wading through three volumes is daunting, to say the least. Thus the more approachable, lessintimidating *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding* is a welcome addition to the available literature on Joseph Smith and plural marriage that is bound to be beneficial to Latter-day Saints seeking better understanding on this topic.

This book is an enjoyable read for experts and novices alike. The text flows well and is able to walk that fine line between being understandable for the layman but not insulting the intelligence of those who are more knowledgeable on the subject. Furthermore — and of extreme importance for the mission of this book — it does not hold back on the difficult issues or present an unrealistically sanitized version of the prophet Joseph Smith. Equally important for those trying to gain a real understanding of Smith as both a man and a prophet, the book also does not maliciously fill its pages with innuendo and sensationalistic descriptions of Joseph Smith's polygamy.

The book's prologue and introduction lay the groundwork for Brian and Laura Hales's discussion and explanation of the topic. They observe that plural marriage, particularly as it dealt with the Prophet, is an "often misrepresented aspect of Joseph's life [that] may be less familiar to Church members."<sup>3</sup> Even more importantly, they recognize the fallibility of all men, including prophets of God.

During the implementation process, things didn't always turn out as the Prophet or we may have wished. The Lord commanded the practice, but [H]e didn't micromanage its execution any more than he instructed the Brother of Jared from the Book of Mormon regarding the best manner to

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3 Brian C. Hales and Laura H. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), ix.

provide light in the barges built to convey his people across the sea.<sup>4</sup>

Plural marriage was the “hardest trial” Joseph Smith and “the Saints would ever have to test their faith.”<sup>5</sup> The authors give examples throughout the book of early Church members being shocked and disconcerted to their very core at the prospect that plural marriage was to be practiced once again. The principle was naturally most difficult for Joseph Smith’s wife Emma. But even as other women and men received spiritual confirmation that this was truly of God, so did Emma receive her confirmation.

The principle of plural marriage is right, but I am like other women, I am naturally jealous hearted and 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 that principle is right, it is from our Father in Heaven.<sup>6</sup>

Reassuring to the reader is the authors’ declaration that “Asking questions does not necessarily equate with having a crisis or displaying a lack of faith.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, asking difficult questions is exactly what the authors did. They examined all available documents regarding Joseph Smith’s polygamy and did not shy away from what was potentially uncomfortable or unpleasant and ultimately found peace and comfort in their understanding of Joseph Smith and plural marriage.

In this book, we have done our best to fit together the puzzle pieces of the early practice of polygamy in the Church. Because of poor documentation, there are gaps and holes that leave the picture incomplete. Admittedly, like all historians, we are not biasfree in this process. Nevertheless, our examination of the historical record has reinforced our convictions that Joseph was a virtuous man and a true prophet of the living God.<sup>8</sup>

And with that reassurance, they invite the reader on a journey of discovery in what for many will be *terra incognita*.

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4 Ibid., ix.

5 Ibid., x.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., xvii.

The book itself is divided into fifteen chapters that discuss the doctrinal and historical reasons for practicing plural marriage, what exactly involved the New and Everlasting Covenant, the different interpretations of marriage, sealings and relationships, as well as a detailed discussion of the fitful introduction of plural marriage, the difficulties caused by practicing the principle, and Smith's martyrdom and the aftermath. The second part of the book includes over seventy pages of biographical essays of Joseph Smith's known plural wives.

Happily, in the course of their book, the Haleses not only take on and clarify some of the most controversial and challenging aspects of Mormon polygamy, they also shatter some of the more annoyingly erroneous ideas and folklore that arise even among Church members. For example, the authors discount the idea that the primary reason for plural marriage was to "multiply and replenish the earth," stating that it was just one of the reasons for the practice.<sup>9</sup> It would have been even better if they had specifically mentioned the misconception that polygamy was practiced to make up for all of the Mormon men killed by mobs or who died crossing the plains to Utah.

Another fallacy shot down by the Haleses is the ridiculous notion that polyandry or a plurality of husbands was, will, or should be practiced by the Church.<sup>10</sup> Early Mormon leaders condemned polyandry. Apostle George A. Smith taught that "a plurality of husbands is wrong." Orson Pratt explained, "As a plurality of husbands, would not facilitate the increase of posterity, such a principle never was tolerated in scripture." And Joseph F. Smith wrote in 1889, "Polyandry is wrong, physiologically, morally, and from a scriptural point of order. It is nowhere sanctioned in the Bible, nor by the law of God or nature and has no affinity with Mormon' plural marriage."<sup>11</sup>

Because critics of Joseph Smith, both within and without the Church, have placed such emphasis on Joseph Smith's so-called polyandrous marriages, the authors discussed this in detail and made reference in several parts of the book:

Of all the details regarding Joseph Smith's controversial practice of plural marriage, it seems none is more commonly mentioned than his sealings to legally married women. Without understanding the theological principles underlying

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9 Ibid., 5.

10 Ibid., 12-13.

11 Ibid., 25-26.

this practice, including the need for an eternal spouse to be exalted, eternalityonly sealings, and the repeated explicit condemnation of a plurality of husbands, some may mistakenly conclude that the Prophet engaged in sexual polyandry.<sup>12</sup>

There were a few places within the text where the authors actually could have gone further or added additional documentation to help explain the point they were making. For example, while discussing whether or not Eliza R. Snow really had been impregnated by Joseph Smith, they write, “there is no persuasive evidence supporting that Eliza was pregnant at any time in her life.”<sup>13</sup> They could have bolstered their argument if they had included the comment by Lorenzo Snow, “My sister Eliza R. Snow, was just as good a woman as any Latter-day Saint woman that ever lived, and she lived in an unmarried state until after she was beyond the condition of raising a family. She was sealed to Joseph Smith, the Prophet; but she had no children to bear her name among the children of men.”<sup>14</sup>

Also, as with any work of this nature, authors and readers are not always going to agree on everything. For example, as a reader and reviewer, I was uncomfortable with some recommendations given by the authors:

If it were possible to return to Joseph Smith’s day and offer him some advice, observers with the benefit of historical hindsight might make at least five recommendations:

1. Carefully consider marrying Fanny Alger without telling Emma. If possible, convince the angel that Emma needs to be involved from the start.
2. Carefully consider being sealed to fourteen-year-old plural wives even if the marriages are not consummated. It might generate accusations of pedophilia a hundred years later.

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12 Ibid., 29.

13 Ibid., 75.

14 *Millennial Star*, 31 August 1899, 547-48. This comment by Snow was also included in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow*, Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012, 130-131. Inexplicably, in the lesson manual the part about Eliza R. Snow being sealed to Joseph Smith was replaced by ellipses.

3. Carefully consider being sealed to legally married women even if for eternity only. Encouraging those women to be sealed to their civil husbands, if worthy, may be a better choice.
4. Carefully consider the number of plural wives you marry. Even if Old Testament patriarchs had dozens of plural wives, limiting the number of your wives, whether the marriages are for eternity only or time and eternity, might be more easily understood by onlookers years later.
5. Carefully consider limiting your involvement in politics. Letting someone else be the mayor of Nauvoo may insulate you from liability in dealing with the *Nauvoo Expositor*.<sup>15</sup>

After carefully reading these suggestions, I was left with mixed thoughts and emotions. I could certainly understand our desire, with twenty-first century hindsight and understanding, to realize how it would have been much better if Joseph Smith had immediately been up front and told Emma Smith about the revelation on plural marriage and his marriage to Fanny Alger. Emotionally, I can also understand the sentiment with some of the other suggestions. But these recommendations were also bothersome to me for several reasons.

First of all, these recommendations seemed to me to be almost an unspoken acknowledgment of a degree of turpitude on the part of Joseph Smith. That these suggestions were perhaps a silent surrender in spite of the previous pages filled with excellent information and analysis showing Smith to be a man of God rather than some oversexed, lascivious womanizer. These recommendations appeared to be a sort of wishful “if we could only do it all over.” Thus for me, these suggestions awkwardly and unpleasantly stood out from an otherwise inspiring defense of the prophet Joseph Smith.

Another troublesome point was this recommendation: “If possible, convince the angel that Emma needs to be involved from the start.” Having never had an angelic visitation, I don’t know personally how it would be, but I can certainly imagine. So to me, this helpful statement seemed to be a little unrealistic. For that matter, how do we know Joseph Smith didn’t broach the subject with Emma at one point or another? As the Haleses correctly noted, we have very little documentation of early

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15 *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding*, 99-100.



plural marriage. We have even less information regarding the quiet, intimate conversations between Joseph and Emma Smith.

Third, and along the same line of discussion, how do we know that Joseph Smith didn't try to talk at least some of the married women he took as eternal wives into being sealed to their husbands instead of him?

Fourth, it was suggested Joseph should carefully consider the number of plural wives to marry because fewer marriages might be more easily understood by onlookers years later. Perhaps I'm being a little too simplistic or naïve, but I like to believe that Joseph Smith was inspired to select the specific women whom he married. Who are we to feel we are in a position to tell him whom he should or should not have married?

Fifth, while fourteen was on the younger side to get married, given Joseph Smith's time and place, such marriages were not unheard of and certainly were not considered pedophilic. Research has shown this to be the case.<sup>16</sup> As would be expected, the thought of girls in their early to mid-teens getting married in America today rightfully causes shudders. I remember during a discussion about Joseph Smith's marriages to teen brides, I was asked if I would be okay with one of my daughters marrying at age fourteen. I naturally said no. But then I added that such a comparison was like comparing apples to oranges, given that life expectancy was now higher, societal conditions had changed, and that during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries childhood had been pushed back and prolonged to a greater degree than in any other time in history.

It's easy for people to project their own worldview and values onto those of another place and time. But that should not be done. Nor should we as members of the Church apologize now for what would have been considered normal and respectable in another time. Critics are going to find fault no matter what, and while one potential criticism would be silenced, others most certainly would arise. If Joseph Smith had not married at least one and probably two fourteen-year-olds, the critics would have complained about the seventeen- or eighteen-year-olds he married. For that matter, given the way the average age at marriage has risen in the past few decades, thirty years from now it will probably be much higher and no doubt there will be a portion of our population who will look askance at any marriages that occur before age twenty-one,

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16 Craig L. Foster, David Keller, and Gregory L. Smith, "The Age of Joseph Smith's Plural Wives in Social and Demographic Context," in Newell G. Bringham and Craig L. Foster, *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy* (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 152-183.

twenty-two, or maybe even twenty-five.<sup>17</sup> So should we then be concerned about the outside world and the fact that social morés and perceptions are going to change and what was once acceptable and accepted are no longer? A decade or so from now same-sex marriage will no doubt be much more prevalent and widely accepted. Should we reflect the world's definition of what is and is not acceptable and thus be uncomfortable with and apologize for the fact that Joseph Smith or Brigham Young didn't marry a few husbands along with their wives?

Overall, and in comparison to the book as a whole, my criticisms are small and few. Thus, these minor quibbles notwithstanding, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding* is an excellent and essential volume that will not only answer questions and offer solace to "truth seekers [who] may encounter details that are uncomfortable when studying early polygamy" but will also be a useful and interesting volume for those who have spent years studying the subject. I wholeheartedly recommend this book to all.

**Craig L. Foster** earned an MA and MLIS at Brigham Young University. He is also an accredited genealogist and works as a research consultant at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. He has published articles about different aspects of Mormon history. He is the author of two books, co-author of another, and co-editor of a three-volume series discussing the history and theology of plural marriage. Foster is also on the editorial board of the John Whitmer Historical Association Journal.

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17 As an example, a couple of years ago a friend of mine from Ireland was shocked when I mentioned that one of my daughters was getting married at age twenty. He kept repeating how that was much too young to get married and that they should wait until she was older.



