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MUCH MORE THAN A PLURAL MARRIAGE REVELATION

Craig L. Foster

Abstract: *Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants: The Plural Marriage Revelation is a textual study of Section 132. It offers some interesting information as the author attempts to understand and place within context the revelation, which is, as the heading for this section in the scriptures reads, “relating to the new and everlasting covenant, including the eternity of the marriage covenant and the principle of plural marriage.” The book has its strengths but is also hampered by some weaknesses, as discussed in this review.*

Review of William Victor Smith. *Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants: The Plural Marriage Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018), 273 pp. \$26.95.

Near the beginning of William Victor Smith’s¹ ambitious attempt of an in-depth discussion of Doctrine and Covenants section 132, he noted that “short introductions of varying complexity have been supplied over the years” (23). Section 132 is perhaps one of the most complex and controversial in the Doctrine and Covenants, and various articles, essays, and books have attempted to study the revelation within a historical and social context. Smith has produced a textual analysis and has provided some very interesting and enlightening information, which readers will certainly enjoy.

Scholars and their works reflect certain worldviews and idiosyncrasies, and the idea of being completely neutral is more fantasy than reality. Usually, the best scholars and authors can do is to recognize their biases, address them, and at least acknowledge differing points

1. The author is hereafter referred to simply as “Smith.” To avoid confusion, references to other Smiths (such as Joseph Smith) will include first names.

of view, even if only to show where they disagree. In spite of what appears to be a significant amount of research and some very interesting insights interspersed throughout, Smith's book suffers from evident (but seemingly unrecognized) biases, inaccuracies, and idiosyncrasies.

These problems can be distilled down to several issues: ignoring authors and works with which he disagrees, ignoring or misunderstanding aspects of history, and demonstrating unrecognized bias. I will address each of these issues.

Ignoring Authors and Works

The author tends to ignore works with which he doesn't agree. In one case, I was astounded not at what he included in his analysis but what he did not include. In one part, Smith mentioned the possibility of a woman's being married to one man but appointed to another and thus able to have sexual relations with both men. Citing Samuel M. Brown's *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death*, Smith stated that "it may be interpreted (together with verses 42 and 61) in terms of polyandry or 'dual wives'" (117–18). He also mentioned, "Rumors of [Joseph] Smith's involvement of married women were circulating from the time of John C. Bennett," and stated that Joseph Smith's proposal to Sarah Pratt caused "a deep fissure between her and husband Orson Pratt" (118n53).

The above was not shocking and certainly did not plow new ground in the history of LDS plural marriage. However, while Smith cited Samuel Brown and made reference to John C. Bennett's claim, he cited none of the works of Brian C. Hales. He didn't cite Hales' "John C. Bennett and Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Addressing the Question of Reliability,"² which called into question Bennett's claims concerning Joseph Smith. He didn't cite "Joseph Smith's Personal Polygamy,"³ nor did he mention Hales' 2012 FairMormon talk, "Joseph Smith's Sexual Polyandry and the Emperor's New Clothes: On Closer Inspection, What Do We Find?"⁴ and didn't mention Hales' essay, "Joseph Smith and the Puzzlement of

2. Brian C. Hales, "John C. Bennett and Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Addressing the Question of Reliability," *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 2 (April 2015): 131–81.

3. Brian C. Hales, "Joseph Smith's Personal Polygamy," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 163–228.

4. Brian C. Hales, "Joseph Smith's Sexual Polyandry and the Emperor's New Clothes: On Closer Inspection, What Do We Find?" 2012 FairMormon Conference, accessed 12 May 2018, <https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2012/joseph-smiths-sexual-polyandry-and-the-emperors-new-clothes-on-closer-inspection-what-do-we-find>.

Polyandry.”⁵ He didn’t even mention Hales’ lengthy discussion about polyandry in his three-volume *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy* series, in spite of the fact they were published by the same publisher.⁶

This does not seem to be an oversight, given that in a footnote later in the book (164n29) the author writes about “romantic love often being a part of plurality, even ‘polyandrous’ or dual wives.” For this assertion, he references Turner’s *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* and Hinton’s “John D. T. McAllister: The Southern Utah Years, 1876-1910.”⁷ That is fine and good — as far as it goes — but the author completely ignores Hales’ work relative to polyandry. This is despite the fact that Hales is regarded by many as the premiere authority on the topic, and he is even cited in the LDS Gospel Topics essay “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo.”⁸ Hales’ interpretation of Nauvoo polyandry was completely ignored in *The Plural Marriage Revelation*, an oversight (or choice) by the author that is never explained.

As another example, Smith discusses how “the revelation created an expanding network of interconnected familial sealings with dynastic overtones” (3). Later, he noted “the establishment of sealing networks, in which families were joined to each other through sealing bonds” (137). These thoughts are similar in some ways to a discussion in *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy* of how the sealing ordinances would connect the Saints to each other. “They would be an eternal family, with one generation sealed to another in a continuous chain from God the Father to Adam and from Adam down to the present.”⁹ And also:

5. Brian C. Hales, “Joseph Smith and the Puzzlement of Polyandry,” in Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster, eds., *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy* (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 99–151.

6. Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2013).

7. John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012), 134–35; and Wayne Hinton, “John D. T. McAllister: The Southern Utah Years, 1876–1910,” *Journal of Mormon History* 29, no. 2 (2003): 86–125.

8. “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo,” Gospel Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed 12 May 2018, <https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>.

9. Craig L. Foster, “Doctrine and Covenants Section 132 and Joseph Smith’s Expanding Concept of Family,” in Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster, eds. *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy* (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 94.

Joseph Smith's expanding theology regarding salvation and the eternal family allowed Latter Day Saints to believe family relationships did not stop with mortality nor with the traditional nuclear family. The concept of family extended to more distant relations; as well as went beyond the grave and became multigenerational. This was eventually accentuated even further by the numerous and intricate family relationships created through plural marriage.¹⁰

While some of these concepts are similar to Smith's discussion of "interconnected familial sealings" and "sealing networks" that joined families to each other, the latter work was neither quoted nor cited. My own essay¹¹ was not referenced, though it specifically deals with Doctrine and Covenants 132, whereas both essays on Section 132 by my co-editor, Newell Bringhurst, were cited. Bringhurst's essay, "Section 132 of the LDS Doctrine and Covenants: Its Complex Contents and Controversial Legacy,"¹² was cited twice (1 and 23) while his other essay, "RLDS Church reactions to the LDS Doctrine and Covenants' Section 132: Conflicting Responses and Changing Perceptions,"¹³ was also referenced.

Why did the author quote from and reference only Bringhurst's essays? I can only conclude that, like Smith's not agreeing with and thus ignoring Brian Hales' extensive work regarding Joseph Smith and non-sexual polyandry, he did not agree with my published assertion that plural marriage was just one aspect of D&C 132 that also deals with sealing and an eternal concept of family. Bringhurst's essays, on the other hand, emphasize the polygamy part of Section 132, with which Smith apparently agrees.

Ignoring or Misunderstanding Aspects of History

In at least a handful of instances, Smith appears to have misunderstood aspects of Mormon history and doctrine. For example, while discussing

10. Ibid., 98.

11. Ibid., 87–98.

12. Newell G. Bringhurst, "Section 132 of the LDS Doctrine and Covenants: Its Complex Contents and Controversial Legacy," in Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster, eds., *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy* (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 59–86.

13. Newell G. Bringhurst, "RLDS Church reactions to the LDS Doctrine and Covenants' Section 132: Conflicting Responses and Changing Perceptions," in Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster, eds. *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy* (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 257–83.

the revelation's meaning regarding adultery and that the guilty "shall be destroyed" (D&C 132:41, 63), Smith writes, "In the isolation of Utah, such adultery was called out as a capital offense." He quotes a *Deseret News* editorial regarding adultery, which stated, "Public opinion here pronounces the penalty of death as the fitting punishment for such crimes." And in the footnote he mentions Jedediah M. Grant's instructing missionaries to teach that "every adulterer should die" (118n55).

Perhaps too much is being read into the Latter-day Saint reaction to adultery, but the comment about "the isolation of Utah" appears to suggest that such sentiment was present and accepted only in isolated communities of Mormon-controlled Utah. That would give an incorrect impression or suggestion of nineteenth-century Mormon fanaticism and a level of violence dissimilar to the rest of the nation — particularly over sexual crimes like adultery.

That simply was not the case; it is a misrepresentation of history. In most of nineteenth-century America, crimes such as adultery and seduction were looked upon with abhorrence. While legal statutes might not have been as severe, extra-legal justice could range from tarring and feathering to beating and whipping, being ridden out of town on a rail, and even castration or death.

In addition, the forms of death could be rather gruesome. In 1880, a man in Georgia was arrested for running away with his wife's sister. An angry mob took him out and beheaded him.¹⁴ There were a number of cases of shooting one aggrieved party or the other in wide-ranging places such as California, Illinois, Louisiana, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, Texas, Virginia, and even Canada. The Canadian shooting resulted in the death of the adulterer and arrest of the cuckolded husband who was, in turn, found innocent by a jury ruling the killing as justifiable homicide.¹⁵

Punishment against seducers could be even more violent and was more often condoned by the general public. There are numerous examples of victims of seduction shooting their seducers. These actions were met with sympathy and approval by much of society, and such sentiments were expressed in more than one news article of the time. One news editorial stated, "The Georgia juror who would convict a

14. *Weekly Herald* (Cleveland, Tennessee), 26 August 1880. It is not known if any mob members were arrested. Some of these acts and the perpetrators of extralegal punishment were then legally punished by the law. However, many of these acts were ignored by law officials and were lauded in the press.

15. "Miscellaneous News," *Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle*, 21 March 1857.

man for shooting another man for seducing his daughter was kicked to death by a well-educated mule more than forty years ago.”¹⁶ While not as colorful, similar thoughts were expressed in the *Sacramento Daily Union*, which reported a young woman being seduced and then shooting the seducer. The article ended with “society looks with lenient judgement on the deed.”¹⁷ Two Minnesota newspapers also commented on seduction: “Death and destruction to the seducer,”¹⁸ and “Our written law says that killing is murder, but there is an unwritten law which says that he who slays a seducer shall be justified in the act.”¹⁹

Another example from Smith’s book seems to combine a misunderstanding of history with the author’s negative bias. The author mentions several of Joseph Smith’s plural wives in the book. While Emily and Eliza Partridge are described as “young wives,” only the ages of Helen Mar Kimball and Nancy Maria Winchester are given. They, of course, were the two 14-year-old wives. The question is why the ages of the 14-year-olds were given when the ages of no other plural wives were provided. I suspect the answer relates to shock value. Why else would their ages be given, other than to assault our twenty-first-century sensitivities?

While the thought of an adult marrying a 14-year old is foreign, even repulsive, to most modern Americans, the historical reality is that early marriage age was not uncommon and was socially acceptable. In other words, people in the past had a different understanding and definition of childhood, adolescence, and the appropriate age to marry. As Nicholas Syrett explained, “For most of American history there was no distinction between the marriage of two minors or that between one party who was older (sometimes considerably so) and one who was younger.” Furthermore, according to Syrett, “[M]arrying at the age of fourteen was not at all uncommon ... throughout the nation in the middle of the nineteenth century.”²⁰

Furthermore, the issue of teen marriage and the ages of some of Joseph Smith’s wives was specially addressed in a book the author cited for

16. *Milan Exchange*, 11 June 1874.

17. “The Lady and the Pistol,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, 30 June 1886.

18. “Beecher-Tilton — Incidents of the Great Trial,” *Grange Advance*, 19 January 1875.

19. “Are We Invoking a Shower of Fire and Brimstone?” *St. Paul Daily Globe*, 22 March 1885.

20. Nicholas L. Synett, *American Child Bride: A History of Minors and Marriage in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2016), 3 and 1.

different purposes.²¹ But once again, the author appears to have ignored this essay because it doesn't fit his worldview. While demonstrating a lack of knowledge regarding nineteenth-century American marriage, Smith seems to have focused on the ages of the youngest wives because of bias.

Unrecognized Bias

There are other examples of bias throughout the text, but perhaps the main example is a disdain for plural marriage, which seems to permeate the book. For example, the author states, "One alternative in dealing with [Section 132], given that it focuses on a practice that is forbidden in the present LDS Church, is to simply delete it from the Doctrine and Covenants" (180). He also suggests a possible revision of the section "modified to eliminate the imperative to practice plural marriage" (181). While the revised revelation was interesting to read and consider, it served to reinforce the feeling of disgust toward plural marriage on the author's part. At another point he mentions "inherent male-female balances [caused by plural marriage that] leave its imprint on Mormons still" (157) but does not give any examples or source citations.

Perhaps the most perplexing indication of bias is the almost constant use of the phrase "the plural marriage revelation" throughout the book. I could not figure out if the overuse of this phrase was to reinforce the idea that Doctrine and Covenants Section 132 is just the plural marriage revelation (which Smith would like to significantly modify or completely expunge from the canon) or if he just wanted to reinforce the theme and subtitle of his book.

Either way, the phrase, which appears 159 times in the book,²² started out as distracting and quickly became annoying. Two pages included the phrase five times, two of them appearing in one sentence right after the other (138–39). So intent was the author in pushing this phrase that when quoting Joseph F. Smith about the background of Section 132, he added the phrase so the quote would read as follows, "When the [plural marriage] revelation was written, in 1843, it was for a special purpose" (179).

21. 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, eds. *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy* (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 152–83.

22. I would like to thank Brian Hales, who demonstrated more patience and fortitude than I by taking the time to count the number of times the phrase was used, for allowing me to use the number he came up with.

I actually do not blame the author for the overuse of the phrase; I blame the editors. Every author wants to make sure the message is getting across to the reader and he or she sometimes goes overboard in trying to do so. Smith, not trusting in the art of gentle persuasion, seemingly decided to hammer the book's theme over the reader's head. It was up to the editors to suggest to the author that perhaps he was using that phrase too many times and then to strike out at least half of those phrases.²³

Conclusion

Ultimately, there is much more to Doctrine and Covenants Section 132 than just plural marriage. This is not to downplay the importance of plural marriage in either this section of scripture or in Church history and doctrine. Plural marriage and the attempt by Church members to live this principle played an important role in Church history as well as the cultural social fabric that, in part, made us the "Mormon people" we are today. Unfortunately, the author has downplayed the other essential teachings found in this section, such as eternal marriage, so that they have practically been lost by the author's reductive emphasis on the "plural marriage revelation." And that is truly a shame, as there is a rightful place and doctrinal cohesion for all of the teachings in this pivotal revelation.

While the book does include some good information, that information has been selectively gleaned and presented, as already discussed. In the end, I believe the problems far outweigh the positives of the book, and I would be very hesitant to recommend it — especially for those without a firm understanding of a sensitive topic and a prickly era of our history.

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23. Another complaint I have with the publisher's side of the project is that the index is not comprehensive. If I had not made careful notes, I would have had a very difficult time finding Helen Mar Kimball, Nancy Winchester, or Emily and Eliza Partridge, given that their names do not appear in the index. Surely the plural wives of Joseph Smith warranted appearance in the index.