

INTERPRETER

A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 29 · 2018 · Pages 197 - 218

The Case of the Missing Commentary

Brian C. Hales

Offprint Series

© 2018 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at InterpreterFoundation.org. You can find other articles published in our journal at MormonInterpreter.com. You may subscribe to this journal at MormonInterpreter.com/annual-print-subscription.

THE CASE OF THE MISSING COMMENTARY

Brian C. Hales

Abstract: *The first published commentary on Doctrine and Covenants Section 132 is a lengthy volume with much material that deals directly with the revelation as well as extended discussions that go well beyond Joseph Smith's dictated text. Much of the included material has been previously published, although several new historical items are presented, including a detailed examination of the provenance of the revelation. An apparent weakness of the book involves key themes mentioned in the revelation but minimized or otherwise ignored in this extended commentary. Examples include the possible meanings of the "law" (v. 6), importance of sealing authority (vv. 7–20), possible polyandry (v. 41), Emma's offer (v. 51), and others.*

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.

As part of their "Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants" series, Greg Kofford Books introduces *The Plural Marriage Revelation* (hereafter *TPMR*) by BYU mathematics professor William Victor Smith. That no theologian or historian has previously published a treatise of what is now LDS Doctrine and Covenants, Section 132 is not surprising. Openly discussing the topic of plural marriage has become more comfortable for mainstream Church members only since the release of the 2013 Gospel Topic essay "Plural Marriage at Kirtland and Nauvoo."¹

1. See "Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo," Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 2014, <https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>.

The author of *TPMR* has accumulated a great deal of material in this extensive volume, much of which is directly related to Section 132. He begins by discussing the provenance and publication of the revelation, providing readers with a valuable basic introduction (1–20). Also included is a short chapter addressing the different introductory headings applied to the revelation in each published version. Subtle differences suggest that over time, the revelation may have been viewed differently by Church leaders (23–26).

Chapters three through ten explore Section 132, usually by quoting a few verses at the beginning of a chapter and then using excerpts from verses as subheadings throughout the remainder. The included discussion contains useful explanatory analyses of many parts of the revelation. In addition, the author routinely projects the theme in the verses forward chronologically, sometimes well into the 20th century (47, 53, 67, 75, 79, etc.). This seems to be a primary reason for the increased size of the volume. The additional historical data may interest general readers but may be less helpful to individuals who seek to drill down on the teachings and history of Section 132.

Like many history books by first-time authors, *TPMR* has problems, including historical inaccuracies,² indications of insufficient research,³

2. *TPMR*: “Soon after Smith’s death in 1844, sealing of the living to the dead began to be performed in the Nauvoo Temple. These sealings would cease when Brigham Young’s followers began their trek west, and they were not resumed until the temple in St. George, Utah, was completed in 1877 — even though sealings between living persons were being performed in the Salt Lake Endowment House and in Utah homes throughout the intervening time.” (66–67) This is partially inaccurate: 37,715 marital sealings for the dead were performed vicariously between 1846–1877. See Richard O. Cowan, *Temple Building Ancient and Modern* (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 1971), 29. See also pages 15–16, 35–36, 58, etc.

3. The author accepts accounts describing how Emma Smith burned the revelation (15, 101, 154) as recounted in Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 17 (August 9, 1874):159. Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses* 13 (October 7, 1869):193. Andrew Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” *Historical Record* 6 (July 1887): 226. But other historical accounts are ignored that portray the destruction differently, as in William E. McLellan, M.D. to President Joseph Smith [III], Independence, Jackson Co. Missouri, July 1872, original in Community of Christ CHL, copy at CHL, MS 9090; Isaac Sheen in Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy* (Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Co., 1914), 153; Mary B. (Smith) Norman, Idaho Falls, Idaho, to Ina (Smith) Coolbrith, 27 March 1908, original and typescript, Miscellaneous Letters and Papers, P13, f951, Community of Christ Library Archives. See also pages 15, 101, 149, 154, 156.

redundancies,⁴ and other potential deficiencies. I found the overall organization sometimes to be muddled, as primary topics shift rapidly back and forth. The discussion often relies on the same secondary sources, when primary documents might have been more useful.

Yet, rather than focus on these smaller issues, this review will concentrate on several significant topics mentioned in the revelation which *TPMR* seems to ignore or discuss incompletely. It appears that many readers of a commentary like *TPMR* will wish for a more expanded discussion on these subjects. For this reason, the remainder of this article will deviate from the normal book-review format in an attempt to provide a few samples of what that additional analysis might have looked like.

Verse 41 and Polyandry

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Joseph Smith's polygamy is the accusation of polyandry: the act of a woman having two simultaneous husbands with whom she could experience sexual relations and have children.⁵ Verse 41 may allude to such a state:

And as ye have asked concerning adultery, verily, verily, I say unto you, if a man receiveth a wife in the new and everlasting covenant, and if she be with another man, and I have not appointed unto her by the holy anointing, she hath committed adultery and shall be destroyed.

Concerning this verse, *TPMR* explains:

Although a husband and wife might be sealed, the revelation leaves open the possibility of the wife being "appointed" to someone else. Thus, sexual relations with another man would only be adultery if she were not appointed to him. Though the language here is somewhat confusing, it may be interpreted (together with verses 42 and 61) in terms of polyandry or "dual wives." (117-18)

TMPR clarifies in a footnote: "Samuel Brown coined the term 'dual wives' for Joseph Smith's sealed wives who were simultaneously married to other men" (118n53).⁶

4. See "Sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise" subheading (44, 67) and quotations from Clayton's diary (59, 77).

5. See *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically*, 2nd ed. (1971), s.v. "Polyandry."

6. It might be argued that "dual wives" provides a clearer explanation than "polyandrous wives," while conveying the same meaning.

Unfortunately, *TPMR*'s commentary here seems to address verse 41 very superficially. A closer look shows that it speaks of a woman who is *first* sealed in "the new and everlasting covenant." Then she is "with" a man she may have been "appointed" to in a "holy anointing."

Up to 14 women with legal husbands were *sealed* to Joseph Smith (in the new and everlasting covenant). None reported that their ceremonies were anointings or appointments. For verse 41 to apply to his circumstances and to create polyandry or dual wives, the following sequence would have needed to occur:

1. A woman is sealed to Joseph Smith in "the new and everlasting covenant."
2. The woman is also appointed to another man in a holy anointing, ostensibly her legal husband (some of whom were not members of the Church).⁷
3. Last, observers must accept the assumption that the holy anointing creates a second husband-wife relationship so she can "be with" the second man without committing adultery. An alternate interpretation is that the appointment superseded the sealing (which would have left the woman with still only one husband).

Rather than investigate these details, *TPMR* offers a rather simplistic if not inaccurate interpretation, declaring that verse 41 refers to polyandry or dual wives. Understandably, *TPMR* may not wish to enter the controversy surrounding the question of polyandry in Nauvoo. Yet explicating the possible meanings of the "holy anointing" and being "appointed" in verse 41 are potentially some of the most important historical and theological discussions *TPMR* could have supplied its readers. Instead, *TPMR* embraces the idea that Joseph practiced polyandry, then quotes a modern author (Sam Brown), then moves on.⁸

7. Verse 41 describes the woman as first being sealed to a husband and then "with" a second "man" to whom she had been appointed. Unspecified is the timing of the appointment — before or after the sealing? Historically, Joseph was sealed only to his plural wives. Since none of the available accounts of any Nauvoo polygamous unions use the words *appointment* or *holy anointing* to describe the ceremony joining them in plurality, it appears the sealing would have occurred first.

8. It might be argued that the concept of "dual wives" as discussed by Samuel Morris Brown [*In Heaven as it is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2012), 242] fails to address the issue of Joseph Smith's sealings to legally married women either theologically or historically.

When I first started studying polyandry around 2009, virtually every published author who had addressed Mormon polygamy in any depth assured his or her audience that Joseph Smith practiced polyandry.⁹ As I researched the historical documentation surrounding the topic, I soon recognized that there is no unambiguous evidence to support it. I wondered why these accomplished writers would be so secure in their conclusions. Several years passed before I realized a possible connection. In their books and articles, these authors portray Joseph Smith as a hypocrite and an adulterer. In their chapters and essays, they may not openly tell their readers or speak critically, but their descriptions of his behavior portray him as contradicting biblical teachings and violating his own instructions in his plural marriage activities.

Evidently for this set of authors, believing that Joseph simply added polyandry (one woman with multiple husbands) to polygyny (one man with multiple wives) didn't take much convincing. Their conclusions were, in my opinion, not based on a critical analysis of the pertinent historical data.

Predictably, observers who already believe Joseph was driven by libido may conclude (without requiring compelling supportive evidence) that he augmented polygyny with polyandry. It seems that in their eyes, Joseph-the-fraud might be expected to behave that way. Because most non-Mormons embrace this perspective by default, it is easy to see how consensus rather than documentation could create and perpetuate social momentum in support of this position.

Historical Unreality?

It seems that reconstructions that depict Joseph Smith as a polyandrist contain an element of unreality regarding the expected reactions of 1840s members, nonmembers, and even detractors. Modern historians have described how Joseph struggled to introduce polygyny, encountering significant pushback from his wife Emma, several leaders, and other potential plural wives, not to mention the onslaught of condemnations from critics. Ironically, those same writers often portray Joseph as introducing polyandry — a much more controversial practice — without any identifiable additional challenges.

It seems Joseph would have faced obstacles to polyandry that didn't exist for polygyny. The Old Testament describes Abraham (Genesis 16:1-6) and Jacob (Genesis 29:30) as engaging in plural marriages. In contrast, polyandry is condemned as "adultery":

9. Included were Fawn Brodie, D. Michael Quinn, Lawrence Foster, Todd Compton, Gary Bergera, George D. Smith, and others.

For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to *her* husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of *her* husband. So then if, while *her* husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man. (Romans 7:2-3.)

Likewise, all known references to polyandry by early Church leaders and members also condemn it. Brigham Young asked in 1852, “What do you think of a woman having more husbands than one?” and then answered, “This is not known to the law.”¹⁰ Six years later Orson Pratt instructed: “God has strictly forbidden, in this Bible, plurality of husbands, and proclaimed against it in his law.”¹¹ Belinda Marden Pratt wrote in 1854: “Why not a plurality of husbands as well as a plurality of wives? To which I reply: 1st God has never commanded or sanctioned a plurality of husbands.”¹² On October 8, 1869, Apostle George A. Smith taught that “a plurality of husbands is wrong.”¹³ His wife, Bathsheba Smith, was asked in 1892 if it would “be a violation of the laws of the church for one woman to have two husbands living at the same time.” She replied: “I think it would.”¹⁴ These statements do not mean that Joseph Smith did not practice polyandry, they just indicate that he probably could not have done it *effortlessly*, as some polygamy authors portray.

Here it should be pointed out that it is impossible to prove a negative. The lack of evidence is not the evidence of lack. So no matter what historical documentation is presented to indicate that Joseph did not engage in true polyandry, proof will not be achieved. Despite such limitations, the idea that verse 41 describes dual wives, as *TPMR* suggests, would be strengthened by providing explanations for the following observations:

- There is no unambiguous evidence that a woman in Nauvoo believed she had two husbands at the same time with whom she could experience sexual relations without committing adultery.

10. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 1 (August 1, 1852):361.

11. Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses* 18 (July 11, 1875):55-56.

12. Belinda Marden Pratt, “Defense of Polygamy: By a Lady of Utah, in a Letter to Her Sister in New Hampshire,” *Millennial Star* 16 (July 29, 1854): 471.

13. George Albert Smith, *Journal of Discourses*, 13 (October 8, 1869): 41.

14. Bathsheba Smith, deposition, Temple Lot transcript, respondent’s testimony (part 3), page 347, question 1142.

- There is no evidence of a woman being appointed to a man in a holy anointing in Joseph's lifetime.
- Polyandry would have been an explosive teaching and practice, much more controversial than polygyny.
- No Nauvoo polygamists complained about polyandry, but they did complain about polygyny.
- Section 132 condemns polyandry in verses 42, 61–63.
- No legal husband (of the alleged polyandrous wives) left any complaint against Joseph Smith.
- No alleged polyandrous wife or family member later defended polyandry as an acceptable martial relationship or as a teaching originating with Joseph Smith.
- Antagonists like John C. Bennett, or polygamy-insider William Law, never complained about polyandry.
- No mention of polyandry, either favorably or critically, is mentioned in any publication during Joseph's lifetime or for years afterwards.
- Based on D&C 22:1 and 132:4, it is possible a time-and-eternity sealing ceremony would have caused the legal marriage to be “done away,” thus creating the equivalence of a Church divorce between the woman and her civil spouse.

Polyandry proponents (including apparently the author of *TPMR*) may continue to defend Joseph Smith as a second husband for some Nauvoo women no matter what evidence is presented. Yet transparency in contextualizing the purported behavior provides important insights regarding the possibility that it occurred.

Returning now to verse 41 and possible meanings of the “holy anointing,” traditionally the word *holy* can refer to a temple activity or rite. *Anointing* too is a ceremony that commonly occurs in a temple setting. Temple ordinances that are administered to couples rather than to individuals include marriage sealings and the highest temple ordinances. One interpretation posits that the higher ordinance is the “holy anointing” mentioned.¹⁵ Because there is no evidence that this type of priesthood dynamic — a holy anointing appointment that supersedes a marriage sealing — ever occurred, this interpretation cannot be documented by historical data.

The possibility that Joseph Smith entered into polyandrous relationships will continue to be a lightning rod for critics, despite the evidentiary

15. I appreciate Don Bradley, who first suggested this interpretation to me.

problems. Regardless, it seems that discussing the various interpretations of verse 41 (and their respective accompanying controversies) would be useful in any book that attempts to explicate Section 132.

Verse 51 and Emma's "Offer"

One of the more common questions raised by readers of Section 132 involves the "offer" to Emma mentioned in verse 51 (142-43):

Verily, I say unto you: A commandment I give unto mine handmaid, Emma Smith, your wife, whom I have given unto you, that she stay herself and partake not of that which I commanded you to offer unto her; for I did it, saith the Lord, to prove you all, as I did Abraham, and that I might require an offering at your hand, by covenant and sacrifice.

A strength of *TPMR* comes as it discusses possible "offers," including that it was "maybe an economic one" (143). Also in support of either polyandry or a divorce, it mentions giving Emma "the choice of another partner" (143). "[William] Law claimed that Joseph had offered Emma another husband as compensation if she would cease opposition to polygamy. Given the strange relationships and secret practices of Nauvoo, Law's accusation can't be dismissed completely" (144).

TPMR's discussion of divorce and a possible financial settlement is commendable; it provides new research and previously unpublished data (148). However, a problem for me occurs as it stops by listing only three potentialities (divorce, polyandry, or an economic offer).

A fourth interpretation — the most likely in my view — is that the offer represented a physical separation, perhaps a local move or even taking their children to New York for a time, where she would be away from the tensions and turmoil of plural marriage. Mary Ann Barzee Boice recalled that at one point, "It was rumored ... that she [Emma] got in such a rage about it [plural marriage] that she left home and went down to Quincy, but came back again while I was there."¹⁶ The timing of this incident is unknown. Nauvoo Church member Joseph Lee Robinson recalled the more substantial plan:

She [Emma] was determined he should not get another [plural wife], if he did she was determined to leave and when she heard this, she, Emma, became very angry and said she

16. John Boice and Mary Ann Boice, "Record," MS 8883, Microfilm of manuscript, 1884-1885, 178-79.

would leave and was making preparations to go to her people in the State of New York. It came close to breaking up his family. However, he succeeded in saving her at that time but the prophet felt dreadfully bad over it.¹⁷

Rather than supporting one of the possibilities as the most likely, the issue is left open-ended in *TPMR*.

TPMR's Polygamy Tunnel Vision

Another discussion that seems to be missing from *TPMR* is the exploration of the different views regarding the importance of plural marriage in Joseph Smith's overall cosmology. Instead, it consistently manifests a type of polygamy tunnel vision of a "seeming inseparability of polygamy and eternal sealing" (2). "So much of Mormon theology [is] centrally tied to plurality" (4). "The ability to retain or remit sins in the context of the revelation highlights the importance of plural marriage in Joseph Smith's broader narrative of salvation and exaltation" (132).

Consistent with this view, *TPMR* refers to Section 132 as the "plural marriage revelation" 159 times and as the "polygamy revelation" three times. In contrast, it is referenced as the "celestial marriage revelation" or "eternal marriage revelation" zero times. These latter two labels could also be appropriately used, depending on context, but that context is generally absent in *TPMR* (see below).

This view is important, especially when interpreting the word "law" in verse 6: "And as pertaining to the new and everlasting covenant, it was instituted for the fulness of my glory; and he that receiveth a fulness thereof must and shall abide the law, or he shall be damned, saith the Lord God." What is this "law" that must be obeyed to avoid damnation?

TPMR offers an opinion: "The meaning of the word 'law' in this particular revelation was historically interpreted as referring to authorized polygamy" (37) and further explains: "The revelation [makes] clear that after receiving knowledge of the *law of plural marriage*, a failure to participate resulted in damnation (v. 4)" (86; emphasis added). This narrow interpretation is reflected elsewhere: "In order to be exalted in God's presence one must fulfill all of the sacraments including, in this case, participation in polygamy" (35).

17. Joseph Lee Robinson, *The Journal of Joseph Lee Robinson: Mormon Pioneer*, Dr. Oliver Preston Robinson and Mary Robinson Egan, ed., 82. See also W. Wyl, pseud. [Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal], *Mormon Portraits, or the Truth about Mormon Leaders from 1830 to 1886* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing Co., 1886), 57.

While LDS leaders and members in the past have used words like *law*, *covenant*, *practice*, *principle*, and *commandment* interchangeably, plural marriage was more commonly referred to as a *doctrine*, *principle*, or *practice*. A review of references to the practice in early general conference discourses shows that polygamy and plural marriage were seldom referred to as a *law*.¹⁸ (See the summary in the table on the opposite page.)

In addition, it doesn't appear that Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and John Taylor ever taught that polygamy was God's law commanded of all peoples in all places and times.¹⁹ In 1883, President Taylor recognized a distinction between the "law of celestial marriage" and the "principle of plural marriage": "He [God] has told us about our wives and our children being sealed to us, that we might have a claim on them in eternity. He has revealed unto us the law of celestial marriage, associated with which is the principle of plural marriage."²⁰

Between the early 1840s and 1890, plurality was taught as a commandment to Church members, who were generally expected to comply. Yet like the religious practices of circumcision or animal sacrifice in past millennia, polygamy was historically a temporary commandment, not an eternal law. Teachings from the New Testament church and the Book of Mormon demonstrate that polygamy was not then practiced or commanded.

Monogamists "Receive Me Not?"

TPMR drives home its troubling interpretation that the "law" is strictly polygamy in a subsection entitled "They Receive Me Not" (82), which quotes a portion of verse 25: "Broad is the gate, and wide the way that leadeth to the deaths; and many there are that go in thereat, because they receive me not, neither do they abide in my law." According to *TPMR*, this verse makes "the revelation a natural touchstone for later claims of polygamy being a requirement for the highest of heavenly exaltations" (76).

18. See LDS General Conference Corpus, Brigham Young University, accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www.lds-general-conference.org/>.

19. Joseph F. Smith explained that plural marriage "is a law of the Gospel pertaining to the celestial kingdom, applicable to all gospel dispensations, when commanded and not otherwise, and neither acceptable to God or binding on man unless given by commandment, not only so given in this dispensation, but particularly adapted to the conditions and necessities thereof." Joseph F. Smith, *Journal of Discourses* 20 (July 7, 1878):26-27.

20. John Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 24 (1883):229; emphasis added.

	All	1800s					1900s										2000s	
		'50s	'60s	'70s	'80s	'90s	'00s	'10s	'20s	'30s	'40s	'50s	'60s	'70s	'80s	'90s	'00s	'10s
Doctrine of Plural Marriage	14		2	3	6			1	1	1								
Doctrine of Polygamy	12	3	4	3	2													
Doctrine of Plurality of Wives	17	5	5	6	1													
Doctrine of a Plurality of Wives	5	4		1														
Principle of Plurality of Wives	6	1	3	1	1													
Principle of Plural Marriage	10		1	3	3	2			1									
Principle of Polygamy	2		1	1														
Practice of Polygamy	6	2	1		1			2										
Practice of Plural Marriage	9				1	1	2			1	3					1		
Practice of a Plurality of Wives	1				1													
Practice of Plurality of Wives	1			1														
Law of a Plurality of Wives	0																	
Law of Polygamy	1			1														
Law of Plural Marriage	2				1									1				
Law of Plurality of Wives	0																	
Polygamy Law	0																	
Plural Marriage Law	0																	

Wording used to refer to plural marriage in LDS General Conferences, by decade.

In other words, rejecting polygamy is the same as not receiving Christ. “By 1935, Church leaders had reached a point where they encouraged law enforcement to break up polygamist families and raid collective compounds where polygamists gathered to practice their way of life. ... The Church gradually took a strong adversarial position after 1910” (83). For *TPMR*, Church leaders and members who rejected the unauthorized polygamists “after 1910” were guilty, according to D&C 132:25.

Section 132 mentions the word *law* 32 times. A few seem to refer specifically to plural marriage (see vv. 64–65), but *TPMR* leaves no room for other interpretations. This view will please Mormon fundamentalists who continue to marry polygamously. Critics too will enjoy an interpretation that alleges that all Church members today are going to be damned because they are monogamists.

TPMR defends this position by quoting Brigham Young: “The only men who become Gods, even the Sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy. Others attain unto a glory and may even be permitted to come into the presence of the Father and the Son; but they cannot reign as kings in glory” (77).²¹ However, earlier in the same discourse President Young proclaimed the more general commandment that the Saints were obligated to follow, telling the congregation, “If you desire with all your hearts to obtain the blessings which Abraham obtained, you will be polygamists *at least in your faith*, or you will come short of enjoying the salvation and the glory which Abraham has obtained.”²² Brigham Young pointed out that the principle of plural marriage, which constitutes one aspect of celestial marriage, must be faithfully accepted by all exalted beings, whether they practice it or not.

How Important Is Sealing Authority?

In defense of *TPMR*’s strict interpretation of the word *law*, the revelation was given in response to Joseph Smith’s question about plural marriage:

Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Joseph, that inasmuch as you have inquired of my hand to know and understand wherein I, the Lord, justified my servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as also Moses, David and Solomon, my servants, as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines. (D&C 132:1)

21. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 11 (August 19, 1866):269.

22. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

However, the possibility that Joseph's question elicited a broader response from God, one that included plural marriage but was not limited to it, is not considered. This situation occurred in 1833 when Joseph Smith asked God concerning the use of tobacco during Church meetings.²³ The Lord responded by giving the Saints a general health code we now call the "Word of Wisdom" (D&C 89). God's answer to Joseph's question included a discussion of tobacco use, but that topic comprised just one verse (v. 8) in a much broader explanation of health issues.

Three observations indicate that the "law" in verse 6 might be more than just polygamy. First, after verse 1, plural marriage is not specifically mentioned again until verse 34. Second, God states that he is revealing a *new* and everlasting covenant (vv. 4, 6); polygamy would not have been new to Joseph, who had been reading the Bible for many years. Last, the next 19 verses introduce and describe a novel theological concept — an authority that can seal marriages so they persist beyond death (see Figure 1.)²⁴

The idea that priesthood authority could seal a marriage so that it would continue after the resurrection was essentially unheard of in the 1840s. A few other religious authors had promoted the possibility of the continuation of gender and even marriage after death.²⁵ Yet, describing a priesthood authority that could create such unions and even seal children to their parents constituted a doctrinal innovation far more singular than polygamy.²⁶

23. See Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 12 (January 12, 1868):157–58.

24. Several scriptures known to Joseph refer to a general binding or sealing authority. Christ declared to Peter: "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). Similarly, a divine promise to a prophet named Nephi in the Book of Mormon explains: "Behold, I give unto you power, that whatsoever ye shall seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven; and thus shall ye have power among this people" (Helaman 10:7). Neither reference specifies marriages as within the scope of the sealing authority promised, but both mention a power that could create a bond that would persist into the afterlife.

25. For example, Swedish scientist, theologian, and minister Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) taught that marriage could continue in heaven. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and its Wonders and Hell from Things Heard and Seen* (Swedenborg Foundation, December 1, 2001), trans. George F. Dole, 382–83; and *The Delights of Wisdom Pertaining to Conjugal Love* (New York, American Swedenborg Printing and Publishing Society, 1892), 27–56.

26. *TPMR* discusses sealing a person up to eternal life, as mentioned in D&C 68:12: "And of as many as the Father shall bear record, to you shall be given power to seal them up unto eternal life." For example, Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner wrote that

[illegible]

**Question about plural marria
(verse 1).**

**The next 19 verses discuss
sealing authority.**

Figure 1.

God's Four-Example-Tutorial Teaching about Sealing Authority

One of the more remarkable and singular aspects of Section 132 is found between verses 7 and 20, where God provides a short tutorial to help His followers understand the sealing authority. Verse 7 begins by declaring that without special authority from God, “All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations” made between men and women on this world will end at death.

Verse 7 also announces a priesthood authority that can circumvent this natural order of dissolution, but it is strictly controlled: “One” man (who is described as “anointed” and “appointed”) must authorize all sealing ceremonies, and “there is never but one on the earth at a time on whom this power and the keys of this priesthood are conferred.”

in 1831, Joseph Smith had been inspired “to seal me up to everlasting life.” (Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Statement” signed February 8, 1902, typescript, Vesta Crawford Papers, copy, MS 125, bx 1 fd 11, Marriott Library. Original owned by Mrs. Nell Osborne.) These early sealings were performed for individuals, not couples, and were not seen as influencing relationships in the hereafter.

The next five verses (8–12) reemphasize the rigid regulations associated with this power: God’s house is a “house of order,” and the Lord will not receive “that which I have not appointed.”

The subsequent eight verses give four specific examples of how the sealing power functions:

- Example 1 (verses 13–14) deals with “everything that is in the world” that is not sealed by God’s word “shall not remain after men are dead.”
- Example 2 (verses 15–17) narrows the scope by dealing with marriage relationships. It declares that “if a man marry him a wife” but not using sealing authority, then their marriage is “not of force when they are dead.” To further emphasize the need for proper authority, these verses describe in some detail the eternal status of unsealed men and women:

Therefore, when they are out of the world they neither marry nor are given in marriage; but are appointed angels in heaven, which angels are ministering servants, to minister for those who are worthy of a far more, and an exceeding, and an eternal weight of glory.

For these angels did not abide my law; therefore, they cannot be enlarged, but remain separately and singly, without exaltation, in their saved condition, to all eternity; and from henceforth are not gods, but are angels of God forever and ever. (D&C 132:16–17.)

The consequences are clearly described. Without the sealing authority (controlled by the “one” man), people on earth might be civilly married, but those unions do not persist. In the next life they live “separately and singly” and are “without exaltation.”²⁷ We don’t know how that kind of eternal existence contrasts with an

27. *TPMR* might disagree, instead insisting that the temple endowment ceremony somehow contributed the needed authority: “For a marriage covenant to continue into the afterlife, the angels and gods guarding heaven must be able to recognize the authority by which that covenant was made. This may have referenced the endowment ritual” (68).

eternal marriage relationship, except that within the context of the revelation, it is a form of damnation.

- Example 3 (verse 18) explains that “if a man marry a wife, and make a covenant with her for time and for all eternity,” even employing the language of a temple sealing, if that ceremony is not authorized “through him whom I have anointed and appointed unto this power, then it is not valid neither of force when they are out of the world.” Toward the end of this verse God reiterates: “my house is a house of order.”

In other words, freelance ordinances mimicking the verbiage of an official ceremony will not be acceptable. Although participants might be sincere and claim personal revelations (whatever their source), the permission of the key holder is needed in every case.

- Example 4 (verses 19–20) represents a sort of climax of the lesson. After three examples of failed eternal sealings, these verses explain the rewards of a covenant entered into through proper authority. “If a man marry a wife,” that is, a monogamous couple, and the ceremony is performed “by him who is anointed” and they live worthily, then the marriage “shall be of full force when they are out of the world.”

Not only does their marriage persist beyond death, they receive “exaltation and glory in all things” and “shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them.”

Joseph Smith had alluded to these incomprehensible blessings in a discourse delivered three months earlier: “Here then is Etl. [eternal] life[,] to know the only wise and true God you have got to learn how to be a God yourself.”²⁸ Verses 19–20 describe this process, called *deification*.

28. Andrew F. Ehat, and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 350.

It requires a sealing ordinance performed by proper authority of a worthy couple. Polygamy is not mentioned.

Within verses 8–20, the revelation goes to great lengths to teach readers so they will understand (and not misunderstand) the new concept being revealed. As a divine teaching device, it may be unique in all scripture.

Nauvoo Teachings of Eternal Marriage Without Plural Marriage

While available accounts of Joseph Smith’s discourses contain few references to eternal marriage, a January 5, 1844, letter from Nauvoo Church member Jacob Scott to his daughter Mary Warnock indicates that such doctrines were known by rank-and-file members in late 1843. Scott wrote, “Several Revelations of great utility, & uncommon interest have been lately communicated to Joseph & the Church; but where you are you cannot obey them; one Tis that all Marriage contracts or Covenants are to be ‘Everlasting[’, that is: The parties (if the[y] belong to the Church) and will obey the will of God in this relationship to each other; are to be married for both Time and Eternity.”²⁹ He then discusses proxy marital sealing ordinances:

And as respects those whose partners were dead, before this Revelation was given to the Church; they have the privilege to be married to their deceased husbands, or wives (as the case may be) for eternity, and if it is a man who desires to be married to his deceased wife; a Sister in the Church stands as Proxy, or as a representative of the deceased in attending to the marriage ceremony; and so in the case of a widow who desires to be joined in a everlasting covenant to her dead husband.³⁰

Next, paraphrasing the information found in verses 16–17, Scott explained to his daughter, “if they are not thus married for Eternity, they must remain in a state of Celebacy [sic], & be as the angels, ministering spirits, r [are] servants to the married to all eternity, and can never rise to any greater degree of Glory.”³¹

Remarkably, Scott then described how the teaching *and practice* were expanding and how he anticipated his “second nuptials”: “Many members

29. Jacob Scott, Letter, to Mary Warnock, (Trafalgar, U.C.), January, 5, 1844, Paul M. Hanson Papers, P12-1, f5, Community of Christ Archives, https://archive.org/stream/jacobscott/jacobscott_djvu.txt.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

of the Church have already availed themselves of this privilege, & have been married to their deceased partners ... & I intend to be married to the wife of my youth before I go to Ireland, I would be unspeakably glad to have you all here to witness our Second Nuptials. The work of Generation is not to cease for ever with the Saints in this present life.”³²

Jacob Scott lived outside of Nauvoo’s polygamy insider circle, but according to this letter, he possessed a working understanding of eternal marriage ceremonies while making no mention of a connection to plural marriage or a need to engage in polygamy in order to be eternally sealed.

TPMR, quoting briefly from Scott’s letter (citing it from a secondary source), concludes: “Scott’s remarks reflect public explanations in the face of the rumored revelation” (60fn56). A full examination of the letter indicates that the “public explanations” were rather detailed concerning eternal marriage and proxy sealings without tying them to plural marriage.

Sealing Authority Used for More than Plural Marriage

The sealing authority mentioned in D&C 132: 7–20 applies not just to eternal marriages, it can also create eternal families. John Taylor explained in 1866:

The times of restitution spoken of by the prophets must take place; the restorer must come “before that great and terrible day of the Lord.” The hearts of the fathers must be turned to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers, or the earth will be cursed. *This great eternal marriage covenant lays [sic] at the foundation of the whole*; when this was revealed, then followed the other. Then, and not till then, could the hearts of the fathers be turned to their children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers; then and not till then, could the restoration be effectually commenced, time and eternity be connected, the past, present, and future harmonize, and the eternal justice of God be vindicated. “Saviors come upon Mount Zion to save the living, redeem the dead, unite man to woman and woman to man, in eternal, indissoluble ties; impart blessings to the dead, redeem the living, and pour eternal blessings upon posterity.”³³ (emphasis added)

The sealing authority allows two types of ordinances: sealing husbands and wives (horizontally) and sealing children to parents

32. Ibid.

33. John Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 11 (April 7, 1866): 222–23.

(vertically). Joseph Smith alluded to this in 1844: “Again the doctrine or sealing power of Elijah is as follows if you have power to seal on earth & in heaven then we should be Crafty, the first thing you do go & seal on earth your sons & daughters unto yourself, & yourself unto your fathers in eternal glory, & go ahead and not go back, but use a little Craftiness & seal all you can.”³⁴ Brigham Young explained, “The ordinance of sealing must be performed here [on earth] man to man, and woman to man, and children to parents, etc., until the chain of generation is made perfect in the sealing ordinances back to father Adam.”³⁵

TPMR’s approach to the teachings of sealing authority found in verses 7–20 seems to assume it was needed in order to establish plural marriage. But Joseph could have easily restored one without the other. He could have said, “Abraham had plural wives and I’m restoring that practice,” without mentioning eternity. He also could have said, “I’ve received authority to seal marriages,” without referring to polygamy as a commandment.

Polygamy is certainly more controversial and more enticing for authors to discuss, but it is not an ordinance, a covenant, or a ceremony. Plural marriages are simply a repetition of the sealing rite, except the man had been sealed before — a fact that did not need to be divulged, although the first wife may sometimes place the new wife’s hand on her husband’s hand to show approval.

In contrast, the authority to seal not only allows eternal marriage but creates eternal couples who, if they live worthily, are promised exaltation. Polygamy without the sealing authority makes no such promises. It seems the significance of Joseph Smith’s plurality is not in multiple wives but in the authority that seals those wives — authority that can also seal eternal families.

While *TPMR* might insist the “law” in verse 6 requires polygamy, verses 16–17 teach that those who are not sealed in a marriage (no mention of plurality) using the newly restored priesthood authority remain eternally single, which is damnation all by itself. Whether the law also demands plural ceremonies (apparently to avoid additional damnation) will likely remain controversial.³⁶

34. Ehat and Cook, eds. *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 331–32.

35. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 12 (February 16, 1868):165; see also Brigham Young, “Discourse,” *Millennial Star* 31 (March 27, 1869) 13:203.

36. I don’t wish to present a straw-man argument regarding *TPMR*, but if its author insists that the “law” in verses 17 and 19 means plural marriage rather than speaking of monogamous marriages joined by proper priesthood authority, it would require that the promises of *not* living “separately and singly” (in verses 16–17) and of exaltation (in verse 19) would apply to the man and wife only after

Polygamy and Sealing — What is the Relationship?

At this point, an unanswered question persists: “Why would God respond to Joseph’s inquiry about polygamy with an immediate and detailed discussion of sealing authority? What is the relationship — if any?”³⁷

It seems that even if Joseph had introduced sealing authority without mentioning polygamy, the issue would have soon emerged because his brother Hyrum was a widower. Could a man be sealed to a living wife and a dead wife? Joseph might have said, “Nope, a man can only be sealed to one woman” — end of discussion.

Within the first 20 verses is a possible answer to the question. Those verses establish that all exalted beings will have been previously sealed in a marriage ceremony authorized by the “one” man holding the keys. As quoted above, those who are not so sealed remain “separately and singly, without exaltation, in their saved condition, to all eternity.”

If there were going to be more worthy women than men at the final judgment, then polygamy (in the form of polygyny) could allow those women to enter into the requisite eternal marriage sealings. This seems to be Brigham Young’s conclusion:

If men, since fall [of Adam], had done right, had kept the commandments of God, women would have been willing to go with them and be Saints; and at the present time there are thousands and millions of females who will receive the gospel whose husbands, fathers, and brothers will reject it, and it crowds the necessity of taking more wives than one upon the elders of Israel; for if they were not to do a great many women never could attain to the same exaltation.³⁸

The fact is, let the pure principles of the kingdom of God be taught to men and women, and far more of the latter than

the man marries a second time. The first sealing would not bring those blessings until the man became a polygamist. This extreme interpretation has never been defended by presiding Church authorities.

37. *TPMR*’s polygamy focus is again detected in its perceived purpose for plurality: “Indeed, reproduction seems to be the primary purpose behind polygamy” (156). If D&C 132 is a revelation about strictly polygamy, and reproduction is the primary purpose behind it, the conclusion that the revelation is about sex might be advanced by critics.

38. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *The Complete Discourses of Brigham Young*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2009), 3071; see also Scott G. Kenney, ed. *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, Typescript. 9 vols. (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983–85), 6:470–71.

the former will receive and obey them. What shall we do with them? They want exaltation, they want to be in the great family of heaven, they do not want to be cast off, then they must be taken into the families of those who prove themselves worthy to be exalted with the Gods.³⁹

He even speculated on what might happen if men were more righteous:

If we could make every man upon the earth get him a wife, live righteously and serve God, we would not be under the necessity, perhaps, of taking more than one wife. But they will not do this; the people of God, therefore, have been commanded to take more wives. The women are entitled to salvation if they live according to the word that is given to them.⁴⁰

This apparent connection between polygamy and sealing authority may be the only connection, but there are potential problems. First, Brigham did not attribute this idea to his own revelations or to Joseph Smith's teachings, a suggestion that it might be a logical conclusion rather than a revealed doctrine. Second, this interpretation has not been embraced and repeated by modern apostles as the reason for restored plural marriage. For example, the Gospel Topics Essays on plural marriage do not mention it.

A third issue involves the idea of *eternal* polygamy and what such a marital dynamic might look like in eternity. On earth plural marriage is unequal — meaning unfair, even sexist. Observers today sometimes assume that if eternal polygamy exists in the next life, it is also unfair. They further claim that women in the Church today should fear it, denounce it, and even feel victimized by the possibility.⁴¹ This is unfortunate because we know almost nothing of eternal marriage and even less about eternal plural marriage.

Fearing the unknown — xenophobia — is useless, especially in light of God's promises of eternal joy for the exalted. His plan is the "great plan of happiness" (Alma 42:8, 16) and not a plan of coercion or eternal submission. Specific fears about relationships in the next life could be contextualized within promises that exalted beings "shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Isaiah 35:10).

39. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 18 (June 23, 1874): 248-49.

40. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 16 (August 31, 1873): 166-67.

41. See Brian C. Hales, "Opportunity Lost," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 23 (2017): 91-109, <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/opportunity-lost/>.

Conclusion

The discussions above are but a few examples of the types of narratives I would have liked to see in William V. Smith's *Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants: The Plural Marriage Revelation*. Whether readers agree or disagree with my interpretive elements is probably less important than whether they wanted additional analyses anchored closer to the revelation.

Publishing a commentary on Section 132 is a bold undertaking, and a successful commentary will likely require deep research into every nook and cranny of the revelation. *TPMR* certainly contains much useful information that repeatedly expands beyond the revelation itself. Whether it treats the background history and thematic messages of the revelation comprehensively enough to negate the need for someone to publish an additional commentary on Section 132 remains to be seen.

Brian C. Hales is the author of six books dealing with polygamy, most recently the three-volume, Joseph Smith's Polygamy: History and Theology (Greg Kofford Books, 2013). His *Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations after the Manifesto* received the "Best Book of 2007 Award" from the John Whitmer Historical Association. He has presented at numerous meetings and symposia and published articles in *The Journal of Mormon History*, *Mormon Historical Studies*, and *Dialogue* as well as contributing chapters to *The Persistence of Polygamy* series. Brian works as an anesthesiologist at the Davis Hospital and Medical Center in Layton, Utah, and has served as the president of the Utah Medical Association.