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Providing a Better Understanding for All Concerning the History of Joseph Smith's Polygamy

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PROVIDING A BETTER UNDERSTANDING FOR ALL CONCERNING THE HISTORY OF JOSEPH SMITH'S POLYGAMY

Suzanne Long 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.

I grew up in a family that discussed Joseph Smith's polygamy relatively openly. Don't get me wrong; it wasn't a topic brought up while we were eating dinner, but when we talked about our genealogy it was almost inevitably mentioned. This is because I am descended by blood through Brigham Young, but my sealing lines are through Joseph Smith. I am a descendent of Emily Partridge, and her children were considered to be Joseph Smith's even though they were born many years after the martyrdom. I am sure when I was really young, I didn't understand the reasoning behind that, but by the time I was a teenager I was well aware Joseph Smith was a polygamist.

Then I got married to a man who loves studying and writing about Church history, and I learned a great deal more about the history of polygamy and how it was lived both in the past and even in the present. I have absorbed a lot of information over the years of discussions, lectures, and papers.

That being said, however, I would not consider myself an expert about Joseph Smith's polygamy and the way it started and developed. I never had problems with it, but didn't really know very much about the details. This book, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Towards a Better Understanding* by Brian and Laura Hales, is an interesting read which explains in clear and easy language a great deal about the first few years of polygamy in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I appreciated the way the book was laid out in a very straightforward manner, allowing me as a reader to follow the process by which Joseph started practicing plural marriage and how he lived it through the rest of

his life. It was very interesting to me to see the steps he followed, how he revealed it to those he was close to, and how he required repeated visits by angelic messengers to actually get the process fully implemented.

The preface and introduction to the book do a very good job of bringing any readers, no matter how little they know about Joseph Smith's involvement with polygamy, into the book by discussing well-known parts of his life and other scriptural accounts of commandments which were difficult to follow. The preface and introduction make fairly clear that the book is geared toward members of the Church who need, well, a better understanding of the particular topic of polygamy but are generally believers. Because I am a believing member, the tone and language of these two sections of the book were welcoming. I felt very comfortable forging ahead into the text of the book, knowing it is directed toward members like myself.

The first chapter of the book jumps right into the topic by discussing the reasons behind polygamy's introduction in fairly good detail, based on Joseph Smith's revelation now known as Section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The first three listed reasons are explored in more detail, with supporting evidence from the scriptures and other historical sources. The fourth reason listed in this chapter is actually not discussed until Chapter 2 because it is complex and requires a lot of undergirding to explain thoroughly.

Within chapter 2, a great many complicated and uniquely Mormon doctrines are discussed in detail, all for the purpose of explaining the fourth reason polygamy was instituted. These topics include a discussion of eternal marriage and the necessity for both men and women to be sealed in an eternal marriage in order to be exalted. These principles are already familiar to most members of the church, but having them explained here clearly and tying them to the reasons for polygamy are very useful.

Chapter 3 then discusses the fact that Joseph was commanded by God to practice polygamy and why sometimes it is commanded and sometimes it is not. Several different circumstances for the commandment are discussed and historical details given about when it was and was not in effect. Quite a bit of detail is presented about the first and the second manifesto and how the Church members and the leadership dealt with the ending of the polygamous system. Placing the process of ending this period of allowed polygamous marriages within the historical context of other times when polygamy was and was not allowed made it much more understandable to me.

Chapter 4 then discusses three different types of marriage sealings: time only, eternity only, and time and eternity sealings. Each of these three are discussed quite thoroughly as to when they might be appropriate and when they were actually performed in Joseph Smith's lifetime. There is also a small section in this chapter discussing polyandry and why it is never commanded or even allowed.

It is only when the reader gets to Chapter 5 that the actual history of Joseph Smith's polygamy is addressed. Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 address different periods in the history of polygamy during Joseph Smith's lifetime and what events precipitated the changes between these periods. Of course, each marriage is described carefully with as much information as is known. For me, this was a very interesting part of the book. Maybe it's just my non-historical mind, but I never really understood the progression and changes in the polygamous system. Seeing the various stages laid out this clearly and understanding what earthly and spiritual events brought these stages into being were fascinating. I was easily able to follow the "story" and understood the happenings much more by the time I finished it. Of course, reading the history of Joseph's marriages to the Partridge sisters, Emily and Eliza, was particularly poignant for me.

Chapter 10 discusses the troubling history of John C. Bennett and what he did or did not see and understand about polygamous marriages in Nauvoo. This was an eye-opening chapter for me, although others who are more historically astute may already know most of the information. I learned a great deal about Bennett's life and how his accusations against Joseph Smith caused upheaval in the Church and a huge problem with anti-Mormon rhetoric. Because many of his accusations are still bantered about within anti-Mormon circles today, it is useful to understand the truth and the lies behind them.

Chapter 11 discusses the practice of polygamy in Nauvoo. This chapter addresses many difficult and problematic topics that many members worry about. For example, the chapter spends quite a bit of time on the children fathered by Joseph Smith with women other than Emma and why there were so few, if any. The controversy of Joseph's extremely young wives is also covered. There is also a section of this chapter that covers the subject of the Church leaders denying polygamy was happening when it clearly actually was. Many members are extremely troubled by these various topics when they read about them in anti-Mormon literature or on ex-Mormon websites, and it causes great upheaval in their testimonies. Seeing each of these addressed rationally

and within the context of the entire history of the movement makes the topics more understandable and less frightening.

Chapters 12 and 13 both address Emma Smith and her difficulty in accepting plural marriage and her wide swings between acceptance and abhorrence. They discuss her treatment of the wives, which vacillated for various reasons, her approval of some marriages, and they even address the oft-quoted story about her pushing Eliza R. Snow down the stairs, causing a miscarriage of the baby she was supposedly carrying.

The photos in this last section helped me to visualize the setting where this was supposed to have taken place. Again, for me this was a very informative and useful chapter and is likely to be for others, too. I was well aware of the troubles Emma had with polygamy — indeed most members probably are, but it was good to see the entire story listed in a coherent timeline. Some explanations for Emma's changes of heart are presented, although there is little first-hand evidence. Most of the quotes are actually from the Prophet's plural wives who gave their histories years later, so her true motivations are only theorized. Despite that, it gives a fairly sympathetic picture of a woman caught in a very difficult situation.

Chapter 14 discusses the last days before the martyrdom and how the Law brothers and their infamous article in the *Nauvoo Expositor* about polygamy brought about the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. As a reader, I was interested to see how polygamy, the source of so much trouble during Joseph Smith's life, was part of the cause of his death as well. Again, I was aware of the *Expositor* situation, but it was worthwhile to see it in the context of the entire history of Nauvoo polygamy. Chapter 15 discusses briefly how the church handled the care of Joseph's polygamous wives but does not further address how polygamy continued for the next sixty years. That is, instead, the topic for other books.

This chapter also includes a retrospective look at Joseph's experience of polygamy and a section of "historical hindsight" and "recommendations." This short section lists several things that the Haleses apparently wish Joseph Smith had done differently in his implementation of polygamy to make it easier for Church members to accept. It is true that people today have problems with some aspects of polygamy, but we are often remarkably incapable of looking back at people in the past and understanding that they lived by different societal rules than we do now. That process will undoubtedly continue, and years from now, our descendants will surely look at some of the things we

do and think we were being primitive and unrefined. Joseph Smith had no obligation to live his life in order to make our lives easier somehow. He only had to justify himself to God. And, if a reader has a testimony that he was a true prophet until he was killed in Carthage, that reader can be assured that he did so. If, on the other hand, the reader has no such conviction, anything Joseph did or did not do to “soften” polygamy somehow and make it more palatable to our modern sensibilities is wasted in any case. Disgusting as a non-believer might find polygamy, Joseph’s audacity in stating that he spoke with God and Jesus Christ and establishing the only true church of God on earth is certainly even more egregious.

The next section of the book leaves the history altogether and instead provides a listing of every woman Joseph Smith is thought to have married and a substantial biographical sketch. This is a fascinating section with many first-person histories, even including pictures. Of course, most of the pictures were from the wives’ later years, so it is sometimes hard to imagine them young so many years before when they were married to the prophet. Oddly, the women are listed in alphabetical order by their first name. This is quite a strange way to do it, but it does work, once the reader realizes this is what was done. I enjoyed reading the histories and found the one about Emily Partridge, my direct ancestor, to be accurate and thorough.

In conclusion, I can say that I enjoyed this book and found it very helpful. I am not sure how much new information I actually learned because I was already quite familiar with the topic of Joseph Smith’s polygamy. However, the book did help to place a lot of the information into a coherent timeline that allowed me to understand the relationships between events more clearly than I have before. I found the book to be faith-affirming and a further testimony of Joseph Smith’s life as a prophet of God. I would recommend it for those struggling with the topic as well as those who want to know more so they can be prepared for questions from others.

Suzanne Long Foster was raised in Las Vegas before attending Brigham Young University and getting a bachelor’s degree in International Relations with a minor in Russian. Living in Utah with her husband and three children has obviously not allowed her to pursue these fields. Instead, she trained as a medical transcriptionist

and did that for about 18 years. Most recently, she has been doing freelance writing as well as writing her own stories and working on a novel. She has also done a great deal of editing for her husband's articles, books, and presentations in Mormon History. Even though she does not have any formal training in history, she enjoys studying different historical subjects that interest her.

