

A TALE OF TWO MARRIAGE SYSTEMS: PERSPECTIVES ON POLYANDRY AND JOSEPH SMITH

by Samuel Katich

Perhaps one of the most misunderstood aspects of Joseph Smith is that of his plural marriages to women that were already married to other men. This paper examines the forms of marriage in practice and looks at each of the women and men involved in the relationships in an attempt to better understand these unique marriages.¹

Joseph Smith was eternally married to what currently are argued to be between eight² and eleven³ already married women. If we consider only those eight marriages that can be adequately documented, we find that six of the marriages occurred within an eight-month period between late October 1841 and June 1842. Two more marriages occurred early in 1843. The women ranged in age from 20 to 47, with an average age of 29. Of those eight marriages, five were to women who had Mormon husbands and three were to women married to disaffected members or non-Mormons. Three of the women's first marriages to Mormon husbands and two of the marriages to non-Mormons lasted until death. The other three remaining marriages ended later in life after Joseph's death in 1844. In all cases the women continued to live with their first husbands.⁴

Technically, a woman with more than one husband is defined as being involved in a polyandrous relationship, or practicing polyandry.⁵ Applying the definition of polyandry to describe these marriages, however, is misleading, as its compatibility deviates from LDS marital theology.⁶ In the case of Joseph Smith, the traditional definition for "polyandry" simply does not apply and the term must be redefined in light of the eternal perspectives of those involved and the lack of temporal extent those marriages entailed.

While the sole term of *marriage* is often used to describe Joseph's union with these women, the relationships are more correctly defined as *ce-*

lestial marriages, eternal marriages, or sealings. In LDS belief, marriages must be *sealed* or bound together by priesthood authority to be valid in the eternities. The marriages the women had with their existing husbands were of a completely different type of union than that formed with Joseph Smith. The nature of the "marriages," or eternal bonds, with Joseph had little effect during the mortal lives of these women. Similarly, the civil marriages of these women to their earthly husbands will have had little effect in the immortal lives that were to come for them.

Respected historians have correctly noted that due to the fact "celestial marriage transcends this world, it was possible for a person to be married to one spouse for this world and sealed to a different spouse for eternity."⁷ In addition, celestial marriage could be "performed between two living persons one or both of whom had living spouses. Such a marriage, however, had no binding effect during their lifetimes on the two people who entered into it. It simply meant that they would be united in the world to come."⁸

Joseph's marriages to these women functioned on two co-existent marital spheres and may be incomprehensible to those without understanding of LDS belief in the nature of the eternal family unit. Indeed, as John A. Widtsoe notes,

Such marriages led to much misunderstanding by those not of the Church and unfamiliar with its doctrines and practices. To them marriage meant only association on earth. Therefore any ceremony uniting a married woman, for example, to Joseph Smith for eternity seemed adulterous to such people. Yet in any day, in our day, there may be women who prefer to spend eternity with another than their husband on earth.⁹



Besides the sole underpinning commandment from God to practice plural marriage, each of Joseph's marriages had their own peculiar reasons and lessons to be learned. Important to note is the fact that Joseph did not specifically document the reasons, thus, the explorations of thought presented below are based on an interpretation that fits within the framework of LDS theology.

These unique types of marriage can be broken down into three groups in an attempt to lend understanding to this historical and theological issue:

1. **Marriage proposals that did not result in marriage.** These were done to prove and develop faith, a common thread found to some degree in all plural marriages.
2. **Marriages to women with disaffected or non-member husbands.** These marriages are based on the doctrine of exaltation.
3. **Marriages to women with active LDS husbands.** These were also exaltation based with threads of proving and developing the faith of those involved. Included in these marriages, as well as in a number of Joseph's other marriages to single women, was a desire for extended families to be linked to Joseph, thus creating loose dynastic links between families.

NAUVOO'S EARLY PROVING GROUND OF FAITH

The practice of this principle [plural marriage] would be the hardest trial the Saints would ever have to test their faith.¹⁰ —Joseph Smith

In some cases, Joseph's request for other men's wives did not result in actual marriage. These cases are interesting to examine as a preface to studying those incidents where the requests resulted in actual marriage. This "test," as it has been called, was a method to prove individual willingness to submit to the Lord's will. It was a challenge to try, prove, and develop a people for the trials that were ahead of them. Heber C. Kimball is one such example found on this proving ground of faith. Heber's first introduction to the plural marriage system came when Joseph informed him that he wanted his wife for himself. Heber was devastated at such a request after all that he had already sacrificed. He fasted and prayed for three days after which he apparently received spiritual direction. He took his wife, Vilate, to Joseph and presented her. Joseph wept at their act of "faith, devotion, and obedience."¹¹ It was never Joseph's intention to take Heber's wife. It was a trial that both had passed. Joseph then sealed Heber and Vilate to-

gether as eternal companions. John Taylor was another who faced this challenge and passed with the same results. After Taylor informed the prophet that he could have his wife, Joseph said that he did not want her; rather, he simply wanted to know where he stood.¹² Brigham Young was yet another who was willing to give his wife, but again was informed that it was only a test.¹³

Not all of those that Joseph approached were willing to submit themselves to this trial. In cases where Joseph approached the woman first, opposition was stiffly encountered. When Joseph approached Sarah M. Kimball, she did not accept Joseph's invitation to become his wife and her non-member husband, Hiram Kimball, at first learning of this incident spoke evil of Joseph. Yet, after what seems such an outrageous request, particularly from the perspective of a non-believer, we find Hiram later joining the Church and enlisting in missionary service. Sarah remained a faithful member of the Church her entire life.¹⁴

In another instance, this time with Sarah Pratt, Joseph was met with adamant opposition. Sarah apparently could not see past her earthly reasoning. Her husband, Orson Pratt, was excommunicated for five months after a confrontation with Joseph over the issue. Orson, however, went on after Joseph's death to be a husband of plural wives and became the chief apologist for plural marriage in the Church. Sarah went on to be one of Orson's plural wives for the next quarter of a century. She, however, later abandoned her faith in an 1868 anti-polygamy jealous rage,¹⁵ wherein she fled both Orson and the Church.

It was in these ways that Joseph's requests were an Abrahamic test of individual willingness to submit to the Lord's will.¹⁶ Those that willingly submitted themselves at all costs were proven and strengthened in faith as well as received a much larger responsibility in terms of fulfilling the commandment to take plural wives. In 1854, Jediah M. Grant gave insight into the reasons behind the challenging manner of proving the faith of certain Saints:

What would a man of God say, who felt aright, when Joseph asked him for his money? He would say, "Yes, and I wish I had more to help to build up the kingdom of God." Or if he came and said, "I want your wife?" "O yes," he would say, "here she is, there are plenty more."...I would ask you if Jehovah has not in all ages tried His people by the power of Lucifer and his associates; and on the other hand, has He not tried them and proved them by His Prophets? Did the Lord actually want Abraham to kill Isaac?

Did the Prophet Joseph want every man's wife he asked for? He did not, but in that thing was the grand thread of the Priesthood developed. The grand object in view was to try the people of God, to see what was in them. If such a man of God should come to me and say, "I want your gold and silver, or your wives," I should say, "Here they are, I wish I had more to give you, take all I have got." A man who has got the Spirit of God, and the light of eternity in him, has no trouble about such matters. I am talking now of the present day. There was a time when we could be tried pretty severely upon these points, but I now could pick you out hundreds of men that cannot be tried in this way, but they will hand over every thing they possess. They understand the nature of such doctrines, and the object of such requirements. They know it is to prove the people, both men and women, and to develop what they will do.¹⁷

Joseph's inquiries into the souls of these men and women highlight principles of faith and loyalty as well as jealousy and betrayal. They were made to prove and develop them as servants in the restored Church. They either went on to become stronger for the experience, or became faithless and departed from that which they once held as truth.

CO-EXISTENT MARRIAGES INVOLVING A NON-LDS SPOUSE

You will clearly perceive from the revelation which God has given that you can never obtain a fulness of glory without being married to a righteous man for time and for all eternity. If you marry a man who receives not the gospel, you lay a foundation for sorrow in this world, besides losing the privilege of enjoying the society of a husband in eternity.¹⁸ —Orson Pratt

Three of Joseph's marriages were to women married to disaffected members or non-Mormons. The above quote from Orson Pratt demonstrates the importance of eternal marriage to achieving one's divine potential. Joseph's marriages to these women are best understood in this way through the LDS doctrine of exaltation, which, not to be confused with general salvation, is "salvation in the ultimate sense."¹⁹ Eternal marriage covenants made in the temple are essential to achieving exaltation, "the greatest of gifts and attainments possible."²⁰ Exaltation "consists in the continuation of the family unit in eternity...those who obtain it gain an inheritance in the highest of three heavens within the celestial kingdom."²¹ General salvation in contrast, as held in LDS belief, dic-

tates that through the Atonement of Christ all may be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel.²² Everyone, sons of perdition excepted, "will receive varying degrees of glory in the afterlife."²³

With the important view of exaltation in hand, we can take a brief glimpse at those women who, while married to another for their time on this earth, chose to be married to another for the eternities to follow.

Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner

Mary was married in 1835 to non-LDS husband Adam Lightner. Mary wrote: "The Prophet Joseph tried hard to get Mr. Lightner to go into the water, but he said he did not feel worthy, but would, some other time. Joseph said to me that he never would be baptized, unless it was a few moments before he died."²⁴ Adam was never baptized and Joseph went on to explain to Mary the importance of an eternal marriage to one who worthily held the priesthood.²⁵

Mary explained that Joseph was "commanded to take me for a wife." She also wrote that Joseph said, "I was his, before I came here."²⁶ Similarly, Mary wrote that she had premonitory dreams for several years that she would become Joseph's wife. This appears to reveal a pre-mortal connection, which hinted at the eternities that the two were seemingly destined to share. When the time came that Joseph did offer eternal marriage to her, she was skeptical and did not accept his proposal at first. She said that she would not agree to it unless she received a personal witness of the truth from heaven. Joseph told her to seek after the witness and it would come, as he had been promised as much. She later received that witness for herself via a heavenly visitation and agreed to be sealed to Joseph.²⁷ Mary went on in February 1842, at age 23, to be an instance of Joseph taking a wife of another who could not offer that which was necessary for exaltation (i.e. celestial marriage).

Many years later she shed some cryptic light on her reasons for being sealed to Joseph. She wrote: "I could tell you why I stayed with Mr. Lightner. Things the leaders of the Church does not know anything about. I did just as Joseph told me to do, as he knew what troubles I would have to contend with."²⁸ Later adding that she "could explain some things in regard to my living with Mr. L. after becoming the Wife of Another, which would throw light, on what now seems mysterious—and you would be perfectly satisfied with me."²⁹

Mary never explained in any detail that which would satisfy modern minds and the light she could have

thrown onto the subject left with her when she died in December 1913 at age 95, the last of Joseph's wives to pass from mortality.

Presendia Lathrop Huntington Jacobs

Presendia was married to Norman Buell in 1827 and had two children with him. The couple joined the Church in 1836 and by 1839 Norman had left the Church. She later wrote that after Norman departed the faith, "the Lord gave me strength to Stand alone & keep the faith amid heavy persecution."³⁰ On December 11, 1841, Joseph Smith assumed the role that Norman would never be able to fulfill; that of allowing Presendia, then age 31, the chance to reach her divine potential through eternal marriage.

Emmeline Wells³¹ wrote:

Joseph himself taught the principle of plural marriage to sister Presendia and her heart was humble, and her mind open to receive the revelations of heaven. She knew Joseph to be a man of God, and she had received many manifestations in proof of this, and consequently when he explained to her clearly the knowledge which he had obtained from the Lord, she accepted the sealing ordinance with Joseph as a sacred and holy confirmation.³²

Presendia finally left Norman after Joseph's death. Heber C. Kimball married her for time only in 1846 and took responsibility for her earthly welfare. She served in the Kimball family as a midwife.³³ Late in Presendia's life, before dying in 1892, she wrote:

[I]n 1841 I entered into the New Everlasting Covenant—was sealed to Joseph Smith the Prophet and Seer, and to the best of my ability I have honored plural marriage, never speaking one word against the principle... Never in my life, in this kingdom, which is 44 years, have I doubted the truth of this great work.³⁴

Ruth Vose Sayers

Ruth was married to Edward Sayers in 1841 and never had any children with him. Edward was friendly to the Saints and allowed Joseph to stay in the Sayer home at times.³⁵ Ruth married Joseph Smith in February 1843 at age 33. She was the last of Joseph's marriages that involved a non-LDS husband. Ruth remained married to Edward Sayers until his death. Edward never joined the Church and again Joseph had assumed a role that

would allow Ruth the possibility to achieve exaltation. For her, a marriage to Joseph may likely have seemed the only way to gain that hope.

While little is known about Ruth and Edward, Ruth's obituary tells a little about her and describes her faithfulness as a Latter-day Saint. It describes her as:

Tall and erect in figure, a countenance always beaming with human kindness, charitable to the poor and ever ready to comfort the disconsolate, she endeared herself to her associates. She was a woman of brilliant conversational powers and possessed a ready fund of valuable information... She was never tired of dwelling upon Gospel themes and the days of Joseph and Hyrum. She passed to her rest and joined those gone before whom she so revered in life; her record here was that of a brave and true Latter-day Saint.³⁶

Reflections on Kindred Personalities

Joseph did not select these three women at random nor did he marry every woman that was married to a non-member. In each of these marriages Joseph had a unique connection with the women. These marriages reconnected and linked kindred³⁷ to each other. The interaction of these kindred personalities stirred the bond of similarity and familiarity to their common origin in the antecedent life.

If we look at these three marriages in particular, we find Joseph coming to know Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner through stories of her great desire for the Book of Mormon. He wanted to meet this person who had such a thirst for truth. At meeting her, he gave her the Book of Mormon as a gift and gave her a great blessing.³⁸ Some years later he was commanded to take her for a wife. He put that commandment off for nearly eight years before fulfilling it in 1842.

In the case of Presendia Lathrop Huntington Jacobs, Joseph shared with her the commonality of an enlightened mind with great spiritual powers and awareness.³⁹ When Joseph was in jail, Presendia came to him as a friend and brought him dinner. This incident left a lasting impression with him. He was inspired to teach her the principle of plural marriage and offered her the chance at exaltation that she would not find with her husband at the time.⁴⁰

In the Ruth Vose Sayers marriage, we see Joseph sick and evading captors when he finds refuge in the Sayer home. He was kept safe there and comforted for his ill-

ness. It was during this time he came to know the Sayers best and ultimately received the inspiration to offer Ruth that which she would not find in Edward, a chance at exaltation.⁴¹

In all three cases, Joseph had an experience with each of these women that left a lasting impression with him which turned into spiritual inspiration. It was his association with them in a spirit of kindred awareness that served to form eternal bonds that could not be had in their spiritually mismatched marriages.

It should be remembered that all things in the Church are not revealed at once. Instruction is given line upon line, as the Church is ready and able to receive it. During this time, the reasoning behind these sealings may well have been that for a woman to wait until death and then be proxy sealed to one who would not accept the gospel in this life, put too great of a risk on the exaltation of that woman in the eternity to follow. At the time, Joseph seemed to be the best assurance towards meeting that ultimate eternal goal. This uncertainty about whether the dead would accept the gospel or not was later overcome through revelation and by the end of the nineteenth century, family links were being forged between those living who had accepted the gospel and those who had died without the gospel.⁴²

PERSPECTIVES ON MARITAL CO-EXISTENCE IN AN LDS SETTING

Joseph's sealings to women that were married for time-only to active LDS men make up the final component in gaining some understanding for these types of unions. It is perhaps the five marriages in this category that may seem most perplexing on the surface, yet each marriage provides some glimpse into the circumstances and possible reasoning behind the unions.

Zina Diantha Huntington Jacobs

Zina was married to LDS member Henry B. Jacobs. When Joseph told Henry that "the Lord had made it known to him that [Zina] was to be his Celestial wife," his response was that of obedience and faith, believing that "the wisdom of God's authorities" did not have to "bend to the reasoning of any man."⁴³ Zina wrote of her feelings in learning of celestial marriage:

When I heard that God had revealed the law of celestial marriage that we would have the privilege of associating in family relationships in the worlds to come. I searched the scripture and by humble prayer to my Heavenly Father I ob-

tained a testimony for myself that God had required that order to be established in this church. I made a greater sacrifice than to give my life for I never anticipated again to be looked upon as an honorable woman by those I dearly loved but could I compromise conscience lay aside the sure testimony of the spirit of God for the Glory of this world after having been baptized by one having authority and covenanting at the waters edge to live the life of a saint.⁴⁴

Zina came one step closer to realizing her divine potential when she, at the age of 20, became the eternal marital companion of Joseph on October 27, 1841. She was one of the first instances of this type of marriage. Henry stood as an official witness when Zina was later resealed to Joseph in 1846, with Brigham Young standing as proxy. Similar to Joseph's marriage to Zina's sister, Presendia, where Heber C. Kimball assumed matters of temporal welfare after Joseph's death, so it also was in this case with Brigham Young assuming the role of time-only caretaker as he was sealed to Zina for time only in this same ceremony. Henry, while undoubtedly heart broken, went on to faithfully serve in the Church despite what seems impossible circumstances from a detached modern-day perspective.⁴⁵

Zina went on to be an advocate of plural marriage and stated in an address at a women's conference that, "The principle of plural marriage is honorable. It is a principle of the Gods, it is heaven born. God revealed it to us as a saving principle; we have accepted it as such, and we know it is of him for the fruits of it are holy."⁴⁶ Henry's example, not to be lost among the heart-wrenching details, demonstrates lessons of obedience and tremendous faith in men he believed to be true prophets. Zina's testimony of the principles and practice behind plural marriage, amidst what are seemingly unbearable circumstances from a perspective far removed from the period, present a picture of sacrifice that ultimately resulted in an increase of faith and ultimate eternal blessings. She later wrote: "my mind is as ever the same and I change not my faith in the gospel is the same...Joseph is our Prophet still the great High Priest ordained of God and sent forth to give us light."⁴⁷

Sylvia Porter Sessions Lyon

Sylvia was married to LDS member Windsor Lyon in 1838. Windsor spent some time out of Church fellowship during his marriage to Sylvia. It was during the period leading up to this, on February 8, 1842, that Joseph again stepped in to ensure a marriage that would be valid in the eternities. Sylvia, at age 23, was offered by Joseph the potential for exaltation. With Windsor's permission, Sylvia was later re-sealed by proxy to Jo-

seph for eternity on January 26, 1846. She married Heber C. Kimball for time only during this same ceremony. A year later, she and Heber parted and she married Ezekiel Clark (non-LDS) in 1850, but later, it is believed, returned to Heber in 1854.⁴⁸

Windsor's wavering in the faith and Sylvia's mismatched marital instability likely could be that which was foreseen by Joseph when offering Sylvia a chance at exaltation with him in the eternities.

Joseph's marriage to Sylvia has been argued to be the sole marriage that included intimate relations⁴⁹ in these types of unions. Subsequently, some have concluded that all of these marriages (whether there were eight, eleven, or some other number) must then have an intimate dimension to them. While this may or may not be the case, with one possible exception, there is simply no evidence to support an intimate dimension in these eight marriages. Josephine Fisher, Sylvia's daughter, reportedly stated that her mother had told her that she was the daughter of Joseph Smith. Josephine states that when her mother was near death, "She then told me that I was the daughter of the Prophet Joseph Smith, she having been sealed to the Prophet at the time that her husband Mr. Lyon was out of fellowship with the Church."⁵⁰ This instance however, has been disputed by historians as to whether the reference was to a daughter in a biological respect or in an eternal spiritual sense.

The plausibility of this argument comes from the fact that women sealed to men, other than their earthly husbands, also had their children sealed to the new eternal husband. While the details are not known in these particular cases, they are known to have occurred over the period that immediately followed under Brigham Young, and as the doctrine was in place during Joseph's time, it is reasonable to conclude that similar practices may have taken place then as well.⁵¹

Josephine's belief, that she was linked biologically to Joseph, has been the basis for historical interpretation of the event. However, the fact the Sylvia's husband was not out of fellowship, until several more months after she was married to Joseph, introduces error into the conversation at the outset. Kathryn Daynes notes that the story is:

second-hand evidence based on what Fisher thought she heard from her mother. More problematic is whether there is a discrepancy between what Fisher understood and what her mother meant. That is, did Fisher interpret her mother's remarks to mean that she was the bio-

logical daughter of Joseph Smith and thus state that with more certitude than was warranted, when in fact her mother meant only that in the hereafter Fisher would belong to Joseph Smith's family through Session's sealing to him? Because Sessions was on her deathbed, when one's thoughts naturally turn to the hereafter, the latter is a reasonable explanation.⁵²

This argument highlights the many unknowns and speculations surrounding the plural marriages. Daynes correctly notes that, "even seemingly straightforward statements about Nauvoo plural marriages are often problematic and can reasonably support more than one interpretation."⁵³

Either way, if Sylvia meant with certainty that Joseph was the biological father, she obviously would have to have been restricting her relationship to Joseph and not her spiritually disadvantaged first husband. It is nonetheless clear that even in such a situation as this, there is a faulty application of the definition of polyandry (based on an interpretation founded in non-eternally based marriages), as Sylvia limited herself to the companionship of one mate.

Whichever interpretation plays out to be correct, the outcome is irrelevant. While it may seem more understandable, if not palatable, for some to comprehend these marriages without this dimension, the fact remains that such marriages did not prohibit its occurrence. Indeed, one important aspect of plural marriage was to bring forth and raise up those noble spirits, reserved for this dispensation, unto Christ. This was not simply a mechanical process of randomly replicating humans. It was to be done via select parentage that could place those spirits in an environment that would develop their divine potential. In this respect, barriers to marriage were removed for Joseph.

[Joseph] believed he had been given powers that transcended civil law. Claiming sole responsibility for binding and unbinding marriages on earth and in heaven, he did not consider it necessary to obtain civil marriage licenses or divorce decrees. Whenever he deemed it appropriate he could release a woman from her earthly marriage and seal her to himself or to another with no stigma of adultery.⁵⁴

If there was an intimate dimension in every one of these particular marriages, it is ultimately a matter of no consequence as he "could not commit adultery with wives who belonged to him."⁵⁵

Patty Bartlett Sessions

Patty had been a wife to David Sessions since 1812. She married Joseph Smith on March 9, 1842, at age 47, a month after he married her daughter, Sylvia, who was present at the sealing.⁵⁶ Patty found both happiness and sorrow in plural marriage. She related her feelings on David's time spent with another wife: "I feel very bad...he took [Harriet] to the farm with him [and] leaves me here alone."⁵⁷ Another plural marriage of David to Rosilla Cowans caused an estrangement in the marriage due to Rosilla's demands for David's attention. It was at this time that she reflected on the happier time of being sealed to Joseph Smith in the Nauvoo temple, which connected her to a "more agreeable set of sister wives."⁵⁸ After David's death, she was married for time only to John Parry.

It should be remembered that marriages often times involve partners that are not equal in their commitment, which creates an unequally yoked union. This may have been the case in this marriage, as well as many others, when Joseph stepped in to ensure that eternal hope.

Marinda Nancy Johnson Hyde

Marinda was a wife to Orson Hyde. Joseph stayed in Marinda's childhood home for some time when she was younger. When Marinda first met Joseph she thought him to be a "ridiculous fake"⁵⁹ but later came to believe him as a prophet and had no doubts thereafter. It was at the Johnson home that the infamous beating, tarring, and feathering of Joseph took place. Marinda wrote of Joseph at this time: "Here I feel like bearing my testimony that during the whole year that Joseph was an inmate of my father's house I never saw aught in his daily life or conversation to make me doubt his divine mission."⁶⁰

Marinda married Orson Hyde in 1834 and by 1835 he was disfellowshipped. He was excommunicated four years later for a period of six months, after which time he was reinstated to his previous position in the Church, although silenced for a season. In 1843 he was rebuked by Joseph Smith for aspiring and told that he would not be exalted.⁶¹

Due to Orson's checkered Church record and Joseph's rebuke of him, Joseph may have felt Marinda would have a better chance at exaltation without a connection to Orson in the next life. With that, Joseph Smith married Marinda, age 27, in April 1842. When it came time to reconfirm the ordinance in the Nauvoo temple in 1846, however, she was sealed to Orson instead of Joseph.⁶²

After 34 years of marriage she divorced Orson in 1870. She may have had enough of Orson devoting too much time to other wives and may have been satisfied that her first sealing to Joseph in 1842 was sufficient for her exaltation and no longer felt a need to stay with Orson.⁶³

Elvira Annie Cowles Holmes

Elvira lived in the Smith home as a maid and nanny. She was a trusted friend of Emma Smith, who later selected her as a treasurer in the Relief Society. It was here that she met and married Jonathan Holmes, an old friend of Joseph's who came to work for him.⁶⁴ She was married six months later, on June 1, 1843, to Joseph Smith. Jonathan was Joseph's bodyguard, carried his coffin after the martyrdom, and was much "beloved by the prophet."⁶⁵ Jonathan Holmes stood as proxy for Joseph Smith as his wife was later re-sealed to Joseph for eternity.⁶⁶ During this same ceremony, Jonathan was eternally sealed to his deceased first wife, with Elvira standing as proxy for her. Jonathan is an example of one who was loyal, true, and faithful.

DYNASTIC DIMENSIONS

In several of Joseph's marriages there existed a desire by those close to him to somehow be eternally connected to him. These dynastic desires were important to the families of the wives as it connected them to the most prominent earthly figure in the restoration. They also believed a linkage to Joseph rewarded them with eternal blessings. This is particularly evident in cases where marriages took place between women at opposite ends of the age spectrum wherein the ceremonies served no other purpose than that of connecting families.⁶⁷

A brief survey of these marriages finds Presendia's brother, Dimick, who married her to Joseph, being asked by the prophet what he wished for. In reply, Dimick's simple desire was for he and his family to be eternally together with Joseph and his family. Through this marriage, as well as Zina's (which was also performed by Dimick) an eternal bond was forged between the two families, thus creating a dynastic link.⁶⁸

In the case of Elvira Holmes, she was on her deathbed and her husband, Jonathan, asked what she would report to Joseph about him. She told him: "Only the best report. You have always been a kind and devoted husband and father."⁶⁹ Elvira's marriage served as a way to meet Jonathan's probable desire to be eternally connected to his good friend, the prophet, as was the case with another of Joseph's bodyguards, Cornelius Lott.

Finally, as Sylvia Sessions witnessed her mother, Patty, and Joseph's sealing ceremony, she saw before her an eternal connection that forged an additional link between families. Patty's sealing, similar to the marriages to several other older women, was merely forged in the interest of furthering the dynastic hopes of a spiritually growing generation. This marriage demonstrates a strengthening bond of unity within the church through a network that created dynastic links through Patty's family. Joseph's marriage to both Sylvia and Patty offered the eternal hope of a family reconnected in the life to come.

CONCLUSION

If one wonders how these women and men came to such an apparently impossible decision as to become sealed to Joseph or allow one's wife to be sealed, the answer is found in personal revelation. A consistent pattern in Joseph's plural marriages was that he extended invitations for those selected women (and their LDS husbands inasmuch as they apparently consented to the marriages) to inquire of the Lord and ascertain the truthfulness of the principle they were about to engage in for themselves. This encouragement to seek after their own spiritual witness extends from married women, to single women and their families, as well as to Church leaders who were commanded to engage in plural marriage.⁷⁰

Plural marriage built within the early Saints a tried sense of loyalty, dedication, obedience, and both developed and demonstrated deep faith.⁷¹ Ultimately, while attempts can be made to piece together some understanding of these types of marriages in early Nauvoo, the fact that plural marriage was initially a closely guarded sacred rite that few knew anything about

...led to many tales and rumors of seduction and adultery, which stirred up anti-Mormon sentiments, disturbed many faithful Mormons who had not been taught the doctrine, and embittered many in and out of the church against Joseph Smith. These tales, rumors, misrepresentations, charges, countercharges, denunciations, unauthorized acts by some Mormons, and denials became and have remained the stock-in-trade of many sensation-seeking writers.⁷²

Historian Glen M. Leonard presents an appropriate conclusion to this topic, stating that these instances of Joseph's sealings "ensured the woman a marriage that would be valid in the resurrection no matter what became of her temporary, civil agreement. For some, it may have seemed the only way to gain that sacred promise."⁷³

NOTES

1 The views expressed in this paper are solely mine. They do not represent the official teachings or views of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on this subject. I recognize Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring's remarks on this subject. Namely, that we do not have explanations from Joseph Smith on each of his plural marriages, and as such, we should withhold judgment until such a time that we do have that information. That said, this paper reflects a faithful and sensible attempt towards understanding and interpreting the subject based on available information. While I cite authors Todd Compton and Richard Van Wagoner for the historical data they have compiled, this paper does not necessarily reflect, consider, or agree with their speculative opinions on the subject. This article is subject to revision as more information becomes available.

2 Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring, "Compton: In Sacred Loneliness," *FARMS Review of Books* 10:2 (1998), 73–81.

3 Todd M. Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 15.

4 Marital dates and many portions of the biographies are compiled from Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*.

5 *Polyandry* is defined as having more than one husband or mate at a time. *Polygamy*, in comparison, is defined as a marriage in which a spouse of either sex may have more than one mate at the same time. There is also *polygyny*, which is defined as having more than one wife or female mate at one time.

6 Kathryn M. Daynes, *More Wives than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840–1910* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 81.

7 *Ibid.*, 79.

8 Stanley B. Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 93–94.

9 John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith—Seeker after Truth, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1951), 239.

10 Hyrum L. Andrus, *Doctrines of the Kingdom* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 471–472. When first hearing of the principle of plural marriage, several of Joseph's close associates echoed his statement on the difficulty of the trial. Brigham Young said that "it was the first time in my life that I had desired the grave, and I could hardly get over it for a long time. And when I saw a funeral, I felt to envy the corpse its situation, and to regret that I was not in the coffin, knowing the toil and labor that my body would have to undergo." John Taylor said, "it was one of the greatest crosses that ever was taken up by any set of men since the world stood." Heber C. Kimball said at the command to take another wife that "if it had been his death sentence he could not have felt worse."

11 Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball*, 93.

12 Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 41.

13 D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Signature Books, Salt Lake City 1994), 588.

14 Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 43–44.

15 Richard S. Van Wagoner, “Mormon Polyandry in Nauvoo,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18:3 (Fall 1985), 76; George D. Smith, “Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841–46: A Preliminary Demographic Report,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27:1 (Spring 1994), 25; Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 29–36, 98–100.

Even though Joseph Smith and 380 elders set out to disabuse the public mind from apostate John C. Bennett’s slanderous writings over 150 years ago, his legacy lives on as Van Wagoner dedicates a disproportionate amount of ink to his stories about Smith and Pratt. While Van Wagoner is quick to blame Joseph for Sarah’s lack of conversion to polygamy, even though she was in a polygamous marriage for some 25 years, the fact remains that she became jealous over her husband’s plans to equalize time spent with his wives. That coupled with the fact that his wives were younger and likely more attractive, put too much strain on Sarah and she exploded in a jealous fit and left him and the Church. It is unlikely she would have tolerated plural marriage for a quarter of a century if she did not have a testimony at one time of both Joseph Smith and the Church.

16 Glen M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2002), 349.

17 Jedediah M. Grant, “The Power of God and the Power of Satan,” *Journal of Discourses*, reported by G.D. Watt 19 February 1854, Vol. 2 (London: Latter-Day Saint’s Book Depot, 1855), 14.

18 Orson Pratt, *The Seer* 1:9 (1853), 140.

19 Doctrine and Covenants 132:17; Margaret McConkie Pope, “Exaltation,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 2:479.

20 Margaret McConkie Pope, “Exaltation,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 2:479.

21 Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, Second Edition (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 257; See Doctrine and Covenants 131:1–4.

22 Third Article of Faith.

23 Margaret McConkie Pope, “Exaltation,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 2:479.

24 “Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 17 (July 1926) 202–203; Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 213.

25 Jeffery Ogden Johnson, “Determining and Defining ‘Wife’: The Brigham Young Households,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20:3 (Fall 1987), 64.

26 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 212.

27 Ibid.

28 Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 43; Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 213.

29 Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 43; Van Wagoner, “Mormon Polyandry in Nauvoo,” 77.

30 Van Wagoner, “Mormon Polyandry in Nauvoo,” 78; Richard S. Van Wagoner, “Joseph and Marriage,” *Sunstone* 10:9 (January 86), 32.

31 Emmilene Wells was called as the Church’s fifth Relief Society president in 1910. She was the last such person called that experienced Nauvoo and Joseph Smith firsthand. For a biographical sketch of her, see Carol Cornwall Madsen, “Emmeline B. Wells: A Fine Soul Who Served,” *Ensign* 33:7 (July 2003), 16–23.

32 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 122.

33 Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball*, 310; Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 114, 130.

34 Smith, “Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy,” 21; Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 122.

35 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 383.

36 Ibid., 386.

37 Avoiding any doctrinal overtones, I speak of *kindred* in a strict sense of the definition. Compton’s exploration of a “kindred spirit doctrine” has been argued against by Danel Bachman in his review of Compton’s material on this subject. See Danel W. Bachman, “Prologue to the Study of Joseph Smith’s Marital Theology, ‘Compton: In Sacred Loneliness,’” *FARMS Review of Books* 10:2 (1998), 126–134.

38 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 207.

39 Ibid., 114–118.

40 Ibid., 119–120.

41 Ibid., 383.

42 Gordon Irving, “The Law of Adoption: One Phase of the Development of the Mormon Concept of Salvation, 1830–1900,” *BYU Studies* 14:3– (Spring 1974), 291–314. Irving notes that the Church, as established in 1830, “was hardly a finished product. Although the new faith possessed distinctive characteristics, many significant aspects of Mormon thought and practice were revealed and developed in the years that followed” (p. 291). He notes the concern at the time that women “risked their exaltation by being sealed to those who might not accept the gospel” (p. 306).

43 Van Wagoner, “Mormon Polyandry in Nauvoo,” 78–79; Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 44; Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 81.

44 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 81. Spelling and partial grammar standardized.

45 Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 44–45.

46 Richard S. Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, *A Book of Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1982), 417.

47 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 99. Spelling standardized.

48 Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball*, 313.

49 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 183.

50 Ibid.; See Daynes, *More Wives than One*, 29–30; Anderson and Faulring, “Compton: In Sacred Loneliness,” 83, 100.

51 Irving, “The Law of Adoption,” 306.

52 Daynes, *More Wives than One*, 30.

53 Ibid., 30–31; Compare Anderson and Faulring, “Compton: In Sacred Loneliness,” 81–84.

54 Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 42.

55 Daynes, *More Wives than One*, 33.

56 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 179.

57 Smith, “Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy,” 24.

58 Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 163.

59 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 228.

60 Ibid., 231.

61 Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, 554; Van Wagoner and Walker, *A Book of Mormons*, 127.

62 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 243.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 546.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid., 548.

67 For example, Heber C. Kimball wanted a connection with Joseph. His daughter, Helen Mar Kimball, wrote: “My father...taught me the principle of Celestial marriage, & having a great desire to be connected with the Prophet, Joseph, he offered me to him; this I afterwards learned from the Prophet’s own mouth...my father introduced to me this principle & asked me if I would be sealed to Joseph.” [Helen Mar Whitney, *A Woman’s View: Helen Mar Whitney’s Reminiscences of Early Church History* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1999), 482–487.]

See also marriages of older wives Fanny Young Murray (Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 609) and Rhoda Richards (Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 558), sisters of apostles Brigham Young and Willard Richards. The spiritual honor of Fanny Alger, Sarah Ann Whitney, and Flora Ann Woodward’s parents for having their daughters married to the prophet (Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 33, 342, 347–348, 388). The marriage of Melissa Lott, which connected another of Joseph’s bodyguards, Cornelius Lott, to him (Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 595–596).

Quinn also pastes together a chain of Joseph’s relations to other families at the time such as 1st through 6th cousins to a number of individuals as well as becoming the son-in-law and brother-in-law to many of those in the Church (Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, 588).

Daynes also refers to the loose dynastic links created during this period. See Daynes, *More Wives than One*, 28.

68 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 123.

69 Ibid., 556.

70 Hyrum L. Andrus, *Doctrines of the Kingdom*, 475–480. For example, when Joseph told Lucy Walker that he had been commanded to take her for a wife, he told her “If you pray sincerely for light and understanding you shall receive a testimony of the correctness of this principle.” Doing as Joseph directed, she inquired of God and then she states, “I received from Him a powerful and irresistible testimony of the truthfulness and divinity of plural marriage, which testimony has abided me ever since.”

Other examples include Hyrum Smith, who fought the principle of plural marriage “until the Lord showed him it was true.” Parley P. Pratt’s wife, who fought against plural marriage until “the Lord had shown her that it was all right.” Also, Bishop Newel K. Whitney, who questioned the prophet’s revealed doctrines very carefully, was told by Joseph “to go and inquire of the Lord concerning it, and he should receive a testimony for himself.” Newel, being skeptical of the doctrine, did as the prophet directed and the power and glory of God was revealed to him. He never doubted the principle thereafter. He then “willingly gave Joseph Smith their daughter, Sarah Ann, as a plural wife.”

71 B.H. Roberts, “The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology,” *BYU Studies* (1991), 557. Roberts provides a concise and basic understanding on what was involved and expected in the practice of plural marriage:

“The Saints did not accept into their faith and practice the plural-wife system with the idea that it increased the comfort, or added to the ease of anyone. From the first it was known to involve sacrifice, to make a large demand upon the faith, patience, hope and charity of all who should attempt to carry out its requirements. Its introduction was not a call to ease or pleasure, but to religious duty; it was not an invitation to self-indulgence, but to self-conquest; its purpose was not earth-happiness, but earth-life discipline, undertaken in the interest of special advantages for succeeding generations of men.” “It was indeed a principle of religion to them, a holy sacrament, and not at all designed to become a general practice under merely human laws. It is unfortunate that the world outside of the Church was not impressed with this phase of the subject; for then it would have been apparent that the things the world argued against and fought against—a general plural marriage system free for all to adopt, considered to be destructive of the monogamous system and the menace to the home itself—was not the thing upheld and contended for by the Latter-day Saints, who believed that the privilege of plural marriage is to be limited to persons of high character, approved lives, and living under the most sacred obligations to chastity, and granted this privilege of the marriage system only under the most carefully guarded permission amounting to divine sanction.”

72 Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball*, 94.

73 Leonard, *Nauvoo*, 349.

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