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# Mormon Women and Polygamy

## *Creating a Better Future with the Past*

*Note: Names have been changed to protect the identity of individuals mentioned.*

LET POLYGAMY, BIGAMY, FORNICATION, ADULTERY, AND prostitution be frowned out of the hearts of honest men to drop in the gulf of fallen nature,” exclaimed Relief Society President Emma Smith on March 9th, 1844, “where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched! And let all the Saints say, amen!” An affirming and perhaps boisterous “amen” could only be imagined from the crowd of Mormon women listening. They were wary of rumors going around about polygamy, a seemingly scandalous marriage practice. They would probably agree with their president, believing polygamy to be a “Seducer of Female Chastity,” and a “Slanderer of Female Character.” Emma Smith was obviously disgusted with such ideas, but, in fact, they were her reality.<sup>1</sup>

Unbeknownst to most of the Mormon women listening (those who weren’t already a part of it), polygamy was already being practiced in their faith. Joseph Smith Jr., prophet and founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (“the Church”) began the practice (approximately) as early as 1835, just five years after the Church was founded.<sup>2</sup> When the practice was finally publicly announced in 1852,<sup>3</sup> several Church leaders had been secretly practicing polygamy for over a decade.

It doesn’t take much study to understand that the practice of polygamy greatly affected the women of the early Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Sources such as Mormon women’s poetry, private journals, and public speeches show that many initially abhorred it, as

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<sup>1</sup> William W. Phelps, “The Voice of Innocence from Nauvoo.” Edited by Emma Smith. In *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society* (The Church Historian’s Press: 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Brian C. Hales and Laura Harris Hales, “Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger.” Joseph Smith’s Polygamy, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage.” August 29, 1852.

illustrated by Emma Smith's public response to it. These sources show that many practiced polygamy, believing it was instituted by God. They also show that many struggled with it. These sources show that many even loved polygamy and came to defend it. They also show that many greatly suffered because of it.

Still today, many faithful members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints wrestle deeply and personally with the history of polygamy and its lurking shadow. Author Carol Lynn Pearson wrote an entire book titled *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men*, providing evidence that polygamy is not just a practice of the past for members of the Church. Women and men are still greatly troubled by it.<sup>4</sup>

The stories of early Mormon plural wives aren't well known by modern members of the Church. More often than not, Sunday school classes teach only about men involved in the early Church, like founder Joseph Smith Jr. or Brigham Young. Talks at General Conference (the large gathering of Latter-day Saints to listen to Church leaders), even when centered around the history of the Church, hardly mention these women. As *Year of Polygamy* podcast host Lindsay Hansen Park put it, "A lot of the critical things [members of the Church] have today, including doctrines, policies, laws, movements—the fact that [Mormons are] in the West—they were all influenced by these women who were largely forgotten. They sacrificed so many things to be erased in history because they were part of a controversial practice."<sup>5</sup>

One of the many reasons contemporary members of the Church struggle with polygamy so greatly is that it is not talked about. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a whole needs to talk more about polygamous Mormon women who contributed so much to the Church. These conversations would make greater room for members to share their personal experiences surrounding polygamy. The learning and sharing of such experiences could cause much needed healing amongst Latter-day Saint women and men in the face of polygamy. In an effort to start such conversation, this paper outlines the following: the stories of plural wives, the stories of modern Latter-day Saint women concerning polygamy, and how both narratives could contribute to a better future for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Lynn Pearson, *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men*. (Walnut Creek, CA: Pivot Point Books, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Lindsay Hansen Park, "Episode or: Fanny Alger." *Year of Polygamy* (podcast).

## Stories of Plural Wives

The first known plural wife in Mormonism was Emma Smith. While scholars aren't completely sure of when Emma found out about Joseph's new practice, there are some accounts of her discovering Joseph's first plural marriage with Fanny Alger, and subsequently kicking Fanny out.<sup>6</sup> To say that polygamy took a huge toll on Emma would be an understatement. While she often "vacillated in her support for plural marriage,"<sup>7</sup> Emma frequently and openly opposed it. Along with her previously mentioned speech, "The Voice of Innocence from Nauvoo," there are multiple accounts of her feeling deep pain, sorrow, and anger about the practice.

One such account of her anger is when Joseph sent his brother Hyrum to read Emma the recorded revelation on the practice of polygamy, now known as Doctrine and Covenants section 132. In the revelation, Emma was told to "believe and administer" unto Joseph in this practice or else she would be destroyed.<sup>8</sup> Upon hearing this, Emma "said she did not believe a word of it."<sup>9</sup> As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich points out, "How could she (believe it)? For sixteen years, she had been Joseph's partner in triumph and poverty. . . . She had endured rumors of his infidelity, had petitioned public officials and her own relatives for help. Was she now to be cast out if she could not accept a revelation that . . . consigned her to darkness if she did not acquiesce in his obsessive acquisition of wives?"<sup>10</sup> Emma suffered greatly because of her great faith in the church that her husband started. She suffered greatly at the hand of plural marriage. She was the first Mormon woman to be affected by it, and affected she was. A year after this experience with Hyrum, Emma publicly denounced polygamy in her reading of "The Voice of Innocence from Nauvoo." While her "innocent" voice was strong and defiant, it was full of pain and denial. Emma's story illustrates the intimate pain often felt by Mormon women due to polygamy.

Another poignant example of polygamous pain is recorded in the autobiography of Annie Clark Tanner. Annie and her husband Joseph Marion Tanner were married on December 27th, 1883, when she was 19 years old. By this time, polygamy was back to being secretive, although for

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6 Brian C. Hales and Laura Harris Hales, "Emma Discovers the Relationship." Joseph Smith's Polygamy, 2020.

7 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Vintage Books, 2018), 89.

8 Doctrine and Covenants 132: 64

9 Ulrich, 92.

10 Ulrich, 92.

very different reasons. This time it was the United States that was growing more and more worried about polygamy, rather than unknowing church members. All church members were privy to the practice of plural marriage by 1852, when it was publicly announced by Orson Pratt.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Annie's marriage was hidden from the United States but commonplace amongst Mormons. Her pain was under different circumstances than Emma's, but still centered on what polygamy meant for Mormon women.

In her autobiography published in 1991, Annie recalls feeling as though her husband considered her “just a coincidence in *his* life,” while for her, “the fervor of [her] love *was* [her] life.” She felt he treated her as though he valued her very little, and, shortly after they were married, she considered herself “heartbroken.”<sup>12</sup> She was often left alone, and just six months after she and Joseph were married, he had found himself a third wife.<sup>13</sup> Although Annie eventually grew to fervently love her husband,<sup>14</sup> her story of early heartbreak is one of many among plural wives. Sharing their husband with multiple women often felt like betrayal. Romance was put on the backburner. However, such painful accounts like Emma's and Annie's only tell part of the story.

In fact, for several Mormon women, polygamy was a relief. For some, the relief came through “a religiously sanctioned way of leaving a troubled marriage.”<sup>15</sup> Women were able to escape abusive marriages and still have a place in society through marriage to another man. For others, polygamy was a relief because it secured them a place in the celestial kingdom, the coveted “highest degree of glory” promised to only the most faithful members.<sup>16</sup> It made it possible for them to be connected to their families forever through being sealed, a practice that Joseph began when he began plural marriage.<sup>17</sup> They benefited in the eternities.

Augusta Cobb, after being sealed to Brigham Young and then forced back to Boston with her first husband, said to a friend about entering a polygamous marriage, “if you take [meaning marry] either of these [meaning church leaders] you will be highly exalted, and all your friends, both dead and living will be benefitted thereby.”<sup>18</sup> Augusta Cobb's story

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11 Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage.” August 29, 1852.

12 Annie Clark Tanner, *A Mormon Mother: An Autobiography* by Annie Clark Tanner. (Salt Lake City, UT: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1991), 68.

13 Tanner, 73.

14 Tanner, 73.

15 Ulrich, 85.

16 Doctrine and Covenants 131:2

17 Doctrine and Covenants 132

18 Ulrich, 106.

conveys a belief that became common amongst polygamous women, that they would gain many heavenly benefits through plural marriage. Her story is the story of many who found polygamy to be a relief, as it secured them heavenly blessings. This narrative eventually morphed into an explanation as to why polygamous marriage could be difficult. Mormon women were being asked to do something extremely hard for something very worth it in heaven. They were sacrificing earthly pleasures, such as love and romance, for eternal exaltation.

Augusta Joyce Crocheron voiced this idea eloquently in her poem published in the February 1884 publication of *Woman's Exponent* titled "Nothing on the Books." With distinctive imagery, she illustrated both a monogamous couple and a polygamous family getting to the gates of heaven. The monogamous couple reported having a "happy time" on earth, with their "fortunes blest." In contrast, the polygamous family had "brown, weary, and old" faces due to their earthly "joy . . . pain . . . hopes and fears." Their way was "hard," but they had "kept the faith," because they understood that "every test a jewel bright / In the crown that waits [God's] head."<sup>19</sup> Augusta Crocheron's story illustrates the narrative of sacrifice around polygamy. Yes, it was difficult and sometimes painful, but women's sacrifices would some day pay off in their heavenly home. Perhaps what they had lost would be incomparable to what they would gain. Understanding polygamy in this light could have made it less of a burden. Perhaps it made up for the heartbreak.

As exemplified in these few examples, polygamy developed greatly from the time Emma Smith experienced it in 1835 to 1890, when it was ended (although not extremely successfully) through a Manifesto written by Wilford Woodruff.<sup>20</sup> Even though it started out secretly, it eventually became a way of life for Mormon women and men. They believed it to be the eternal law of marriage. Pain, relief, and sacrifice outline the experiences of many plural wives as they sought to live this law faithfully and righteously.

As polygamy became more and more solidified as a tenet of the Mormon faith, it etched itself into the very identity of Mormon women. They believed they were part of something much bigger than themselves. If outsiders didn't understand the practice of plural marriage, they took it upon themselves to clarify. One of the most profound illustrations of Mormon women's defense of polygamy was held twenty years before the Manifesto on January 13, 1870. It became known as the Great Indignation Meeting.

<sup>19</sup> Augusta Joyce Crocheron, "Nothing on the Books." *Woman's Exponent*, March 1, 1884.

<sup>20</sup> "The Manifesto and the End of Plural Marriage." The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The government of the United States of America was well aware of polygamy. In fact, President Abraham Lincoln preached it to be one of the “twin relics of barbarism” alongside slavery, and swore to be rid of it.<sup>21</sup> The media and others around the nation followed suit, believing polygamy to be incredibly oppressive and harmful to Mormon women. After the United States’ several attempts to take down polygamy following the Civil War, the Cullom Bill was introduced. It would exclude polygamists from enfranchisement and citizenship in the United States.<sup>22</sup> The gauntlet was thrown. In a frustrated response to the proposition and the growing misunderstanding amongst onlookers, thousands of Mormon women gathered to protest the legislation and prove the nation wrong.<sup>23</sup> In her depiction of the Great Indignation meeting, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich writes, “Light snow obscured the view of the mountains . . . as masses of Mormon women crowded into the old peaked-roof Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. The pine benches were hard, the pot bellied stoves inadequate against the cold. No matter. They would warm themselves with indignation.”<sup>24</sup>

Twelve women, including Relief Society president Sarah Kimball, addressed the masses at the meeting. Only women were invited. The speakers vehemently defended their religion, arguing that the government’s attempts to eradicate polygamy revoked their religious freedoms. In defending their religion, they defended polygamy, a practice they considered to be “counsel of God as contained in the Gospel of Heaven.”<sup>25</sup> The meeting closed out with Eliza R. Snow, one of Emma Smith’s friends that was sealed to Joseph, and then later to Brigham Young. Although she was obviously a faithful participant in plural marriage, Snow spoke little about it. Rather, she spoke about the women in the Church. She, like her sisters in the Gospel, was sick of the nation seeing them as slaves. In fact, “the women in the Church [had] performed and suffered what could never have been borne and accomplished by slaves.” They had traveled across the plains, given up their homes and their livelihoods, suffered so many pains and afflictions for their church. No, they were not women oppressed by their husbands in a practice resembling slavery. They were faithful, independent women who enjoyed “high and glorious privileges,”

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21 Mary Jane Woodger, “Abraham Lincoln and the Mormons,” in *Civil War Saints*, ed. Kenneth L. Alford (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 61–81.

22 A Bill in Aid of the Execution of the Laws in the Territory of Utah, and for Other Purposes, H.R. 696, 41st Cong., 2nd Sess. 1870.

23 Minutes of “Great Indignation Meeting,” Jan 13, 1870.

24 Ulrich, xi.

25 Sarah N. Kimball, Minutes of “Great Indignation Meeting, Jan 13, 1870.

because of their sacrifices. Because they were women. Their womanly faith “accomplish[ed] wonders.”<sup>26</sup> The Great Indignation Meeting wasn’t about polygamy as much as it was about Mormon women. They had voices, they had important things to say. They weren’t going to allow themselves to be thrown aside because of one-sided observations concerning their marriages. They loved their faith, they fought for their faith, and they were proud of where their faith had brought them. This story is one of sacrifice, similar to Emma Smith’s. But it’s also one of triumph.

The stories of Emma, Annie, the Augustas, and Eliza all add flecks of insight into the complex painting of Mormon plural marriage. There is no denying that deep anguish was felt by many women at the hands of polygamy. Some believed that pain was part of a sacrifice for the greater good, while others just grew accustomed to it. Others didn’t feel that pain, rather polygamy was “glorious” to them.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, as totally contradictory as it may seem, some Mormon women even felt empowered in their sphere, although it was greatly defined by polygamy.

## The Narrative Today

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints no longer practices plural marriage. Anyone who marries multiple spouses is not considered a part of the faith, and the Church teaches that “marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God.”<sup>28</sup> Because of this, many people, scholars included, agree that polygamy is a part of the Church’s past and should no longer have an effect on its members.<sup>29</sup> However, contrary to this belief, stand a few sealing practices that stem from Joseph Smith’s institution of polygamy and haunt many members today.

In Latter-day Saint belief, marriage is a serious covenant made between spouses and God. In order to gain the fullness of God’s glory and to live with Him in the eternities,<sup>30</sup> members are married in Latter-day Saint temples and sealed for time and all eternity. As previously mentioned, Joseph Smith instituted being sealed for eternity when he instituted plural marriage, implying that polygamy was the law of marriage in the heavens. This practice of one man being sealed to multiple women, although not as visible as it was in the early days of the Church, is still in

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26 Eliza R. Snow, Minutes of “Great Indignation Meeting,” Jan 13, 1870.

27 Ulrich, 26.

28 “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, September 23, 1995.

29 Brian C. Hales and Laura Harris Hales, “Introduction.” Joseph Smith’s Polygamy, 2020.

30 D&C 132



effect today. When a man's wife dies, he is allowed to be sealed to another woman while staying sealed to his first wife.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, when a woman's husband dies, she cannot be sealed to another man unless she cancels her sealing to her first husband. To make matters worse, the cancellation process is often painful and sometimes humiliating.<sup>32</sup> This painful process often deters women from canceling their first sealing at all, not allowing them to be with their second husband for eternity. If a woman were to not cancel her first sealing and have children with her second husband, their children are automatically sealed to her first husband, not to their own biological father.<sup>33</sup>

For Latter-day Saint women and men who have lost spouses, these sealing practices cause deep pain. Some widowed women have concerns that "getting a sealing cancellation . . . would strip [their] deceased husband of his eternal exaltation." Others who choose to cancel such a sealing have had to go through the process of "getting letters of permission from [their] former husband's parents."<sup>34</sup> These worries and pains have led to many spending sleepless nights worrying about the eternities. Some question whether the Church has any idea what effect polygamy is having on their members. Some have even left the Church.<sup>35</sup>

Eternal polygamy can even take deep psychological tolls on members who haven't lost spouses. One woman quoted in *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men* states that because of polygamy, she felt her "importance and significance was reduced to what [she] gave to a man, and nothing more." Another said she has "held back a part of [her] heart and soul because of the terrible thought that [her husband] is not fully [hers]." And yet another said she came to believe because of polygamy that if men and women "were money, you could exchange multiple women for one man."<sup>36</sup> These are just a few examples from the thousands of survey responses that Carol Lynn Pearson received in order to write her book.<sup>37</sup>

The polygamy story of modern female and male members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is one marked with fear. They fear that polygamy forces them into a heaven that they don't want.

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31 "Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo." The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

32 Pearson, 99.

33 Pearson, 8.

34 Pearson, 99.

35 Pearson, 102, 104.

36 Pearson, 145, 159, 166.

37 Pearson, 24.

They fear that it will cause a divide in their family in the eternities. Women fear that they won't have their husbands to themselves. The sealings as they are practiced today creep into the Latter-day Saint psyche, leaving them with doubts, concerns, and fears. The narrative behind polygamy today is not a positive one.

## How Can Knowing the Past Aid the Present?

In conclusion, the stories of early Mormon women tell us of the suffering they experienced from polygamy. They tell us of the sacrifice that polygamy demanded of them. They tell us of their great faith that made the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints possible. They tell us many different things, but, perhaps most importantly, they tell us that Mormon women had voices. Emma Smith stood up against male leaders, sticking to her truth and to her knowledge of God. Annie Clark Tanner wrote her story down, understanding it to be massively important to the generations after her. Augusta Cobb shared her story with friends. Augusta Joyce Crocheron voiced her story through beautiful poetry. Eliza R. Snow declared her story with faith in her fellow women. Mormon women of the early Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints told their stories, and they did it with purpose.

If female members of the Church today read, empathize with, and understand these stories, they could be more willing to share their own. They could begin to bring up polygamy in Sunday School or Relief Society, sparking healthy conversations in which conclusions could be come to and hearts could be mended. They could seek their own, more educated personal revelation on the subject, and, perhaps, find answers which could allow them to faithfully move forward. They could be inspired by these early women and use their own voices to fight for further discussion from Church leaders about polygamy and the pain it causes. They could advocate for each other and the women of the past, believing that their stories should be heard, and their collective pain should be acknowledged. They could be healed.

Women like Emma Smith, Eliza R. Snow, and hundreds of others call to us from the other side of the veil. They plead with us to understand their stories, just as they did at the Great Indignation Meeting in 1870. They ask us to understand, or at least try to understand, the pain, sacrifice, and faith they put into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They tell us of their value and our value as female members of the Church. They beg that we never forget it, that we keep pushing forward

despite the challenges we may face. They ask us to consider the many wonders that come from women's faith.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Eliza R. Snow, Minutes of "Great Indignation Meeting," Jan 13, 1870.

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