Prologue to the Study of Joseph Smith's Marital Theology

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Reviewed by Danel W. Bachman

**Prologue to the Study of Joseph Smith’s Marital Theology**

“There is never a proper ending to reasoning which proceeds on a false foundation.”

—Cicero

**Introduction**

The seemingly ever-fascinating subject of Joseph Smith and plural marriage has found its most recent book-length treatment in Todd Compton’s *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, published by Signature Books. Over 600 pages of this book include an introduction, a prologue, and thirty short biographical chapters dealing with the thirty-three women whom Compton accepts as legitimate plural wives of Joseph Smith. A list of abbreviations and bibliographies is followed by 143 pages

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1 I am grateful for the helpful suggestions of my friends Ken Godfrey and Alma Allred, who read drafts of this review and offered valuable suggestions. However, I alone am responsible for the views expressed herein.


3 He disagrees with some longer lists of alleged wives of the Prophet, notably that of Fawn Brodie. He bases his evaluation for accepting these women on primary and secondary source materials. This type of evaluation is not new; I examined this question in 1975 with very similar results. See Danel W. Bachman, “A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage before the Death of Joseph Smith” (master’s thesis, Purdue University, 1975), 104–43.
of reference notes (pp. 628–771). Although the notes are extensive and demonstrate that the author has mined a remarkable amount of material for the book, they are very difficult for the reader to use because they are not given in standard scholarly format with numbers in the text that refer to footnotes or endnotes. Rather, the endnotes, not identified with numbers in the text, are grouped by chapter and refer to topics as they sequentially arise in the text. This system works, but in a very cumbersome and arduous way. Nevertheless, most issues of import for which one would like to examine the sources have been documented.4

The tone of the book is mild and scholarly. Though it comes to uncomplimentary conclusions about plural marriage, it does not have, in respect to Joseph Smith, the skeptical edge of Brodie or Newell and Avery, or the harsh and strident tone of an anti-Mormon.5 Nevertheless, Compton’s adverse evaluation of plural marriage may explain the negative tone of the title, the general direction of the book, and perhaps his choice of Signature Books as a publisher. While a general air of fairness permeates the book and its tone is not shrill, its overall impact is nevertheless critical.6

4 Compton is well aware of good footnote formatting. He was critical of FARMS for moving the footnotes to endnotes in their reproduction of several of Hugh Nibley’s works; see his review of Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites; An Approach to the Book of Mormon; and Since Cumorah, by Hugh W. Nibley, Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1 (1989): 117–18. So one wonders why he made an even worse mistake with Signature’s publication of his volume.


6 Unfortunately, as might have been expected, critics of the church have already begun to latch on to Compton’s book in support of their opposition to Mormonism. For example, Jerald and Sandra Tanner praised it in the August 1998 issue of their Salt Lake City Messenger and are now selling it in their bookstore along with many anti-Mormon books, several of which come from Signature Press. Also, the Institute for Religious Research in Michigan is highly critical of Mormonism. Joel B. Groat has reviewed the book for IRR’s web site. In praise of this “balanced,” “calmly crafted,” and “thorough, well-documented work,” Groat notes that in the past this segment of Latter-day Saint history “too often has been characterized by either deliberate obfuscation or shameless sensationalism.” However, with Compton’s book, Groat thinks, “The result is that
It is evident from material cited below that for Compton plural marriage is an experiment rather than a divinely revealed principle. If one wonders what Compton really believes about Mormonism and its doctrine of revelation, this single self-characterization provided in a footnote may or may not be helpful:

now those who would either vilify or glorify Smith’s actions based on incomplete evidence are without excuse.” While this comment may be interpreted as praise for Compton’s thoroughness, one also wonders if it is not also implying that now critics may vilify Joseph Smith with more complete “evidence.” This suspicion is not lessened by the analysis in the remainder of Groat’s review. For example, of the thirty-three biographies in the book, Groat reviews only the most sensational stories that cast Joseph’s character in a negative light. Thus the true value of the book for Groat is that “It also, and perhaps most importantly, provides the historical evidence whereby a religious leader’s actions and his claims to be a prophet of God can be evaluated based on historical truth.”

Joseph’s motivations in engaging in plural marriage are at the heart of this for Groat. It is not surprising that he sees sexual desire leading the list. “If there is any aspect of Compton’s work that may be less than satisfying,” he writes, “it is the ease with which he attributes a chiefly sociological motivation to Joseph Smith’s plural marriages and avoids raising the issue of sexual impropriety.” What does Groat mean by “sociological motivation”? He is referring to Compton’s notion of dynasticism. That is, in several instances Compton argues that Joseph selected plural wives from the families of church leaders or those to whom he was close in hopes of linking the families together dynastically in the leadership of the church and perhaps in future worlds. To read Groat, this is the primary motivation Compton attributes to Joseph, but here he has either greatly oversimplified Compton’s analysis or simply misunderstands him. Moreover, Groat is also in error when he speaks of the concept of dynasticism as a “sociological” rather than a theological motivation. Compton clearly sees dynasticism as part of Joseph’s theology.

But to continue with Groat’s stress on Joseph’s improper libidinous motivations, Groat observes, “Since it would be naive to ignore the nature of the human heart, the tendency of power to corrupt, and the all too common use of a position of authority for sexual advantage, can one be judged too severely for considering an alternate motivation?” And later, with almost a note of satisfaction, he comments, “While Compton never even suggests sexual impropriety on Joseph’s part, perhaps it is enough that he provides sufficient documentation to enable the reader to draw his own conclusions.” Clearly, although Groat would like to have stressed Joseph’s alleged sexual improprieties more, the reader is left with little doubt about the conclusions he has drawn from Compton’s book. See Joel B. Groat, “Sacrificing Time for Eternity,” at www.irr.org/mit/sacredlIon.html.
I am a practicing Mormon who considers himself believing but who rejects absolutist elements of the fundamentalist world view, e.g., the view of Joseph Smith as omniscient or morally perfect or receiving revelation unmixed with human and cultural limitations. However, I do accept non-absolutist incursions of the supernatural into human experience. (p. 629)

Some Observations on Methodology

Because of the numerous sources found in the notes, this tome appears to be thoroughly researched, and, indeed, the reader will be exposed to a great deal of interesting church history. Nonetheless, a number of knotty methodological issues beset the work and cast doubt on its thoroughness. Any historian has to deal with gaps in the records pertaining to his subject matter. In using incomplete and conflicting evidence, the historian is frequently forced to guess. A reasonable amount of responsible speculation is tolerated, indeed expected, because it often spawns additional dialogue and research. On the other hand, Compton engages in far too much guesswork far too frequently. He uses literally hundreds of speculative terms such as probably, perhaps, may have, might have, must have, undoubtedly, apparent and apparently, seems likely, or unlikely. The pervasive nature of this language and its effect is evident in the following excerpt about Agnes Moulton Coolbrith Smith, widow of Joseph’s brother Don Carlos, who is thought to have married Joseph early in 1842:

Perhaps Emma did not yet believe the rumor, since her husband had only married approximately nine women

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7 This comment is puzzling. What “fundamentalists”? I do not know any well-informed Latter-day Saint who thinks that Joseph Smith was either omniscient or morally perfect. However, on several occasions in the book, Compton speaks of the early Saints as looking upon Joseph as “nearly, practically infallible” (see, for example, the quotation from page 455, cited on page 107 below. But that too is baffling in light of statements by Joseph and his contemporaries to the contrary.

8 One colleague at BYU said that if all this language were left out, the book would be a pamphlet. An exaggeration, to be sure, but it does demonstrate the very noticeable degree of historical guesswork in the book.
in Nauvoo by this time, and she might have known about only a few of them. The fact that the rumor was connected with her beloved, bereaved sister-in-law may have given her particular reason to be incensed. (p. 155, emphasis added)

Another example provides some humor about the way historians sometimes see and express things. The following excerpt from chapter 5 about Presendia Huntington, with the unique oxymoron in fact he probably, may be more an indication of a historian caught up in modern colloquialisms than of a malicious one.

Her marriage to Joseph Smith obviously had great religious meaning to her, yet she never lived with him as man and wife, and in fact he probably instructed her to continue living with her first husband after their marriage, as was the case with all of Smith’s polyandrous wives. (p. 143, emphasis added)

While most speculations of this sort are harmless, on occasion Compton draws conclusions based on his speculations. The result is dubious history. If the premises are in doubt to begin with, then conclusions based on them are extremely tenuous and may be misleading. While this may not be intentional, in matters of faith it can nonetheless be lethal to trusting but ill-informed readers or those not sophisticated in dealing with matters of historical evidence and rhetoric. In a number of instances Compton’s historical guesswork is crucial to the reliability of his analysis and conclusions.

For example, chapter 2 discusses George Harris’s role in the destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor. Compton explains that Harris presided over the 10 June city council meeting that decided the tabloid’s fate. He notes that Harris expressed his feelings that the press ought to be demolished and then concludes, “The council quickly agreed, passing a resolution that brought about the press’s destruction. Harris undoubtedly acted under Smith’s direction, so once again we find the phenomenon of a ‘first husband’ acting as an unmistakable Smith loyalist” (p. 51, emphasis added).
The discussion gives the impression that the council arrived at a rash decision, railroaded by Joseph Smith with Harris as his point man. However, the History of the Church indicates that Joseph Smith met with the city council for seven hours and thirty minutes discussing the issue. Minutes published both in the Nauvoo Neighbor newspaper and the History of the Church speak of the council checking the constitutions of both the United States and the state of Illinois as well as the Nauvoo Charter regarding freedom of the press. They also consulted Blackstone for legal precedents to determine the extent of their authority in such matters. Thus, while Joseph argued for abatement, the assertion that George Harris "undoubtedly" acted under Joseph’s direction expresses an opinion, not a fact. It is one more example of Compton’s frequently expressed view of the power which Joseph exerted over early Mormons. As for Harris—a first husband—acting as a firm loyalist, the point is muted and perhaps even moot when we learn that the decision to declare the Nauvoo Expositor a public nuisance and abate it was one vote shy of being unanimous. Following the day-long inquiry, only one of the city council that evening offered even mild resistance to the proposed action—and he was a non-Mormon.

Another example from the same chapter concerns Compton’s speculations about possible tension between Lucinda Harris and Emma Smith. Compton explains:

In 1842 Harris continued to fill high ecclesiastical and civic callings, and on September 9 he was referred to as “President City Council at Nauvoo.” In the same

9 See History of the Church, 6:432.
10 A synopsis of the minutes was initially published in the Nauvoo Neighbor, 19 June 1844, and an edited form is found in History of the Church, 6:434–48; see especially 443 and 445 for references to the items cited in the text. For an assessment of the legal issues involved in the abatement of the Nauvoo Expositor, see Dallin H. Oaks, “The Suppression of the Nauvoo Expositor,” Utah Law Review 9/4 (1965): 862–903.
11 See, for example, comments on pages 347, 349, 407, 408, 456, 463–64, and 496.
12 Councilor Warrington was a non-Mormon and argued for assessing fines before declaring the press a public nuisance. Later, when Joseph expressed sorrow at having a dissenting vote, Warrington said he was not against the proposition, but that he preferred not to act in haste.
year the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo received its genesis, but it is a striking fact that Lucinda's name never shows up in the society's minutes. Perhaps the explanation for this anomaly lies in the fact that Emma Smith was president of the society, and there may have been tension between Lucinda and Emma at this time. (p. 51, emphasis added)

No reason is given for the assertion that this is a "striking fact" nor for the conclusion that it is an "anomaly" that Lucinda did not attend Relief Society. Nonetheless, the statement is consistent with Compton's thesis that conflict was inherent in plural marriage. But this supposition is a little too easy and convenient. In a more balanced approach the historian might ask if there may have been other reasons for Lucinda's noninvolvement in the Relief Society, such as illness, disinterest, or preoccupation with other matters. After all, were all the women of Nauvoo involved in the Relief Society? If not, why is Lucinda's absence any more of an "anomaly" than the absence of any other sister in the community? The choice of language gives this paragraph a subtle, suspicious tone, but Compton has read and written too much not to understand this. Certainly the perceptions of the reader may be colored by speculations and subtleties of this type. What is the reason for such language? It suggests to me that Compton myopically views his evidence through the lens of his thesis and fails to consider other possibilities. This is only one of many examples of this phenomenon that might be cited.

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13 The Relief Society, organized 17 March 1842, grew rapidly. In July 1842, 1,179 women were on the rolls, and the group was divided into fourths according to wards; however, society historians attribute a dwindling attendance in the summer of 1843 to premature organizational changes. By the society's last meeting on 16 March 1844, 1,341 women were enrolled. Women were initially admitted by simple vote, but in June 1842, Joseph recommended the admittance process be by petition signed by two or three members in good standing. While the growth was rapid and the number large, it is questionable what percentage of the women of Nauvoo this enrollment represents. Moreover, the society met weekly on Thursdays at 10:00 A.M. This could not have been convenient for some women, especially those home with children. See Jill M. Derr et al., Women of the Covenant: The Story of the Relief Society (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 35, 37.
Speculative conclusions are not limited to historical issues alone. In the prologue and elsewhere they are an important element of his reconstruction and analysis of Joseph’s theology of marriage as well. For example, in the chapter on Mary Elizabeth Rollins, she is quoted as saying that Joseph told her she was his before she came here, that she was created for him in the pre-mortal life. Compton then concludes:

So we have the doctrine of spirits matched in the pre-existence, a concept that gives important insight into Smith’s practice of polyandry. It fits him into the context of the broader “spiritual wife” doctrine of the Burned-over District, in which spiritual affinities between a man and a woman took precedence over legal but nonsacral marriage. Perhaps the Mormon doctrine of the pre-existence derived in part from this influence. (p. 212, emphasis added)

The above illustrates Compton’s naturalistic conception of Mormon theology. Although Compton maintains he believes in divine revelation, his unique characterization of revelation mixed “with human and cultural limitations” apparently refers to the rather popular scholarly view that Mormonism’s fundamental doctrines were derived from prevalent influences in Joseph’s environment—thus hinting that the Latter-day Saint doctrine of the premortal life may have been adopted from the theology of the Burned-Over District to permit the practice of polyandry.

A final example of how conclusions are frequently based on guesswork comes from the chapter on Melissa Lott. Following the martyrdom, James Monroe, a Nauvoo school teacher, apparently sought to date Melissa, one of Joseph’s widows, but her father, Cornelius Lott, who ran Joseph’s farm, interfered. Compton concludes, consistent with his view of LDS practice, that “Melissa, as a Smith widow, was probably being reserved for marriage to an older, more prestigious church leader.” Two paragraphs later the speculative conclusion becomes fact as he writes, “The marriage to the older, prestigious church leader now took place. On February 8 Melissa was sealed to Joseph Smith ‘for eternity,’ with John Milton Bernhisel standing proxy, then was sealed to Bernhisel ‘for
time”" (p. 599). This seems to be a rather obvious case of a situation in which Compton’s knowing the outcome ahead of time allows him to lead up to it with his own speculation as to why it turned out the way it did. However, a less narrow approach might be to ask, in the spirit of his own speculative methods, were there other possibilities?

Compton also relies heavily on generalization. He is fond of such words as typical or typically, usual, and often.14 While generalization is useful in historical writing, it is also fraught with potential pitfalls, such as the observation that, “Relatives of Smith’s plural wives were often awarded increased salvation after helping arrange the marriage” (pp. 123, emphasis added). Not only is the generalization debatable, but it is based on a questionable conception of Joseph’s theology, as will be discussed below.

Speculation and generalization are sometimes combined to give a particularly loose view of history, but one which conforms to his thesis, as illustrated in the following quotation about Patty Sessions.

On July 31 Patty wrote, “I have seen many a lonesome hours this week Mr Sessions has found some fault with me.” Conflicts with her husband, probably ignited by friction with the second wife, would cloud her trip west. As was typical of many “first wives,” she probably felt abandoned and betrayed when David spent time away from her with a younger, more attractive wife. (p. 187, emphasis added)

The Thesis

Todd Compton maintains that the purpose of his book is to provide biographies of the thirty-three women he accepts as plural wives of Joseph Smith, and that the Prophet himself is only a secondary figure in the work.15 In one sense this is true. The biographies cover an extensive amount of church history from the New York period on into the twentieth century, and it is fair to say that

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14 See, e.g., pages 113 and 123 for examples.
15 Compton expressed this to me in a conversation the day following his appearance at autograph copies of his book at a Logan, Utah, bookstore.
Joseph Smith is not the focus of these chapters. Of course his plural marriages to each of these women are discussed, but in most instances little is provided about Joseph’s relationships with them beyond what has been known for the last twenty years or more. What is new here are the histories of the women themselves. In another sense, however, Joseph Smith is at the core of this book—theologically—and this is examined in greater detail below.

The thesis of the book articulated in the introduction concerns plural marriage generally. Compton first dismisses anti-Mormon polemicists who have consistently characterized plural marriage as pure evil. He also acknowledges that most Mormon polygamists “were generally sincere, intensely religious, often intelligent and able, and men and women of good will” (p. xiii.). “Nevertheless,” he writes,

my central thesis is that Mormon polygamy was characterized by a tragic ambiguity. On the one hand, it was more than secular, monogamous marriage—it was the new and everlasting covenant, having eternal significance, a restoration from the prophetic, patriarchal milieu of Abraham which gave the participant infinite dominion in the next life. On the other hand, day-to-day practical polygamous living, for many women, was less than monogamous marriage—it was a social system that simply did not work in nineteenth-century America. Polygamous wives often experienced what

was essentially acute neglect. Despite the husband's sincere efforts, he could only give a specific wife a fraction of his time and means. (p. xiii.)

Polygamous marriage, by modern monogamous standards, often does not seem like marriage at all.\(^1\) Sometimes polygamous wives consciously steeled themselves to limit affection for their husbands, as a strategy for emotional survival during absences...

Thus the title of the book, *In Sacred Loneliness*. Often plural wives who experienced loneliness also reported feelings of depression, despair, anxiety, helplessness, abandonment, anger, psychosomatic symptoms, and low self-esteem. Certainly polygamous marriage was accepted by nineteenth-century Mormons as thoroughly sacred—it almost defined what was most holy to them—but its practical result, for the woman, was solitude. (pp. xiv–xv)

Thus for Compton "sacred loneliness" expands into a term with a much wider message than the simple denotative meaning of the words. It is used to describe the problems, pain, and trials that the widows of Joseph Smith experienced as a result of their involvement in the new marital system of Mormonism. Indeed, *In Sacred Loneliness* chronicles an amazing array of hardships and trauma these women endured—most of it having little to do directly with the Prophet—especially coping with death, which was well-nigh ubiquitous among them during the last sixty years of the nineteenth century. Most dealt with the death of loved ones—parents, siblings, spouses and children—repeatedly. The pity and

\(^1\) One wonders if it is fair to evaluate Mormon polygamy in view of modern monogamous standards, such as they are. Though polygamy was considered aberrant by nineteenth-century American society, its defenders consistently argued that Latter-day Saints were acting more morally than their secular counterparts. Recent high public approval for Mr. Clinton despite his dalliances, and gloomy statements from President Hinckley about the state of modern marriage in his remarks in the April 1998 General Conference and to the women of the church in September 1998, reinforce the doubt about the appropriateness of the analogy. Indeed, the opposite comparison might be more accurate. Modern monogamous marriage, by early Mormon standards, often does not seem like marriage at all.
sorrow this arouses in the reader is almost overwhelming at times. Was the practical result solitude? The frequency with which Compton refers to the widows of Joseph getting together during the exodus and early Utah period, in what are called “blessing meetings,” to bless and prophesy over each other, in part at least seems to suggest this generalization is too sweeping.

Compton also exhibits a slightly feminist bias in this book. Not only is his thesis of sacred loneliness not new or novel, but it too is borrowed from feminist approaches to sociology and history (see references on p. 630). It also surfaces in the frequency with which he refers to women acting as if they had the priesthood, particularly in giving blessings to the sick. Indeed, a close tabulation of the times he mentions this leads me to think that he included it in his text almost every time it showed up in his sources whether it was relevant to his story line or not. Clearly, he does not want his readers to miss the point.

It is noteworthy, however, that Compton otherwise devotes very little time or space to the upbeat side of these women’s lives. Given the extensive resources surveyed in order to write these sketches, one wonders if there were so few times of happiness, peace, contentment, or prosperity that could have been written about at length. Although I am not in a position to contradict the thesis because I have not researched the lives of these women, I nonetheless have the impression that the harsh and painful side of their lives was intentionally emphasized. Frequently Compton helps intensify his thesis with speculative opinion, as in the previous quotation about Patty Sessions in which he observes, “she probably felt abandoned and betrayed when David spent time away from her with a younger, more attractive wife” (p. 187). After I read the book, I wondered if a study of a random sample of thirty-three pioneer women, monogamous or polygamous, which covered approximately the same time period as for the wives of Joseph, would reveal similar stories of hardship, suffering, and trial, simply because of the difficult nature of carving out a civilization in a harsh wilderness. I also wondered if many monogamous wives were equally “neglected” in pioneer Utah.

But something here is as important as selectively editing the biographies of these women, and that is the conclusion articulated late in the volume—consistent with the view expressed in the
introduction—to the effect that plural marriage “was a social system that simply did not work.” Plural marriage is judged to be a mistake because it produced these horrific trials, as an excerpt from the chapter on Eliza Maria Partridge shows. In Utah she became a plural wife of Amasa Lyman—though as Compton points out, Lyman was unable to provide for the wives he already had. He attributes this to pressure from the First Presidency to “marry many wives as an example for others.” In this, he asserts, “Brigham Young was merely following Joseph Smith’s theology of degreed exaltation by quantity of family” (p.455). As a result Eliza suffered greatly, and Compton opines:

It is one of the great ironies of Mormon history that Smith, who set the polygamous movement in motion, never experienced it in practical terms. He was content to marry the teenaged women who lived in his home and then let them depart when Emma objected. [He is referring here to the Partridge sisters themselves.] And he was content to let his polyandrous wives live with their first husbands, so he never bore the responsibility of providing for them, financially or emotionally, on a day-to-day basis. He never witnessed the toll that practical polygamy would take on an Eliza Partridge, married to an apostle in the patriarchal order. (p. 455)

So Joseph Smith merely provided the theological rationale for the practice of plural marriage, but was not around to see its adverse practical consequences. Compton continues his conclusions with revealing insights into his own perceptions of the failure of plural marriage. Again he finds it “striking” that Eliza’s daughters experienced similar hardships, which for him “shows that the problems with plural marriage were systemic [and] not merely the result of a few extraordinarily [sic] insensitive men.” Moreover, looking at plural marriage from a contemporary “monogamous and feminist perspective,” he

wonders why Latter-day Saint leaders did not see more clearly the problematic nature of such relationships

18 For comments on this doctrine, see pages 124-25 below.
and retreat from them. In fact, the opposite happened. . . . If they accepted him as an infallible prophet, and if they wanted full exaltation, they had no recourse but to marry many plural wives. Their devotion to Joseph the seer outweighed their experience of polygamy’s impracticality and tragic consequences for women, which many men probably did not even recognize. . . . If nineteenth-century Mormons had concluded that Smith had been wrong in what he taught was the crowning revelation of his life, they would have been left with a very different Mormonism than the faith they followed. Neither Mormon men nor women were willing to jettison that much of their religion.

It is useless to judge nineteenth-century Mormons by late twentieth-century standards. Both men and women were given an impossible task and failed at it. (pp. 455–56, emphasis added)

Though these observations are couched in a historical analysis of the nineteenth-century mindset, they nonetheless show that for Compton plural marriage was a mistake—a failed practice that should have been jettisoned. Questions naturally arise as to whether his conclusions were derived from his research or were the result of a priori assumptions. Did his presuppositions shape the study as he sought evidence to validate them? The latter would explain what appears to be the selective nature of his work.

Problems with the Prologue?

However, for me the most problematic portion of the book does not reside in the biographical chapters on the wives of Joseph Smith. Rather, it lies in the introduction and prologue. Without a doubt, that which will disturb Latter-day Saints the most is the statement on pages 15 and 16 that eleven of the thirty-three wives of Joseph Smith (or 33 percent) were polyandrous, that is, married to two men, and that none of them divorced their first husbands. While all continued to live with their first husbands subsequent to
their marriage to Joseph Smith, a number of these women apparently cohabited with him. 19

In searching for possible explanations of this unusual situation, Compton sets aside most of the standard reasons heretofore given by informed Mormons. Last to be shelved is the notion that most, if not all, of these women were married to nonmembers or inactive Mormons, or in some way had unhappy marriages. Of the eleven husbands, Compton tells us, only three were nonmembers. Most of the other first husbands were faithful and some were even prominent church members; of these only Norman Buell was disaffected. For Compton, this suggests that these men, including the nonmembers, knew of and consented to their wives’ plural marriages to Joseph Smith.

Compton’s explanation for Joseph’s involvement in polyandry is theological. I also think that this is ultimately where we will find the answers to this issue; however, his approach is riddled with difficulties and creates more problems than it solves. His analysis of Joseph’s theology to account for polyandry is neither thorough nor sophisticated and leaves the reader unsatisfied. Two concerns are paramount. The first relates to the sources of his theological reconstructions that are attributed to Joseph Smith. Second, considerable evidence can be mounted to show that Compton has over- or misinterpreted many of these sources.

19 I suspect Joel Groat’s brief statement about the prologue may not be entirely typical of Mormonism’s critics because he overlooks the issue of polyandry. He calls the prologue “excellent” and says that it contains,

an overview summary of Joseph’s polygamy which briefly covers the timing of Joseph’s marriages, the issue of how many women he married, their ages and Joseph’s sexual involvement with them. Compton also addresses the marital status of these women and possible motives behind Joseph’s plural relationships. The highlight of the prologue, however, is a six-page chart listing Joseph’s plural wives. It contains the date of each marriage, their marital status prior to marrying Smith (if already married to other men), the age at which they married Smith, and a short summary of their later lives.

So it puzzles me that Groat misses the fact that nearly 40 percent of the prologue (nine of twenty-three pages) is devoted to a discussion of polyandry and the theology that justified its practice. Moreover, what Groat characterizes as “possible motives behind Joseph’s plural wives,” Compton sees as theology. It permeates much of the prologue. Groat gives no notice of this in his review; see Groat, “Sacrificing Time for Eternity.”
In considering Compton’s re-creation of Joseph Smith’s theology of marriage, it is important to note at the outset that we presently have much more historical data about the practice than we do about the theology of plural marriage—even with sections 131 and 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Over the past two and a half decades we have accrued a considerable, though still inadequate, amount of historical information about Joseph Smith and the origins of plural marriage, his involvement in it, and its practice up to 1890 and beyond. We have a good idea of whom Joseph married, their ages, the dates of their marriages, some of the details of those relationships, and a growing understanding of the historical environment in which these things transpired. By contrast, Compton is left to construct a theological rationale for the practice of polyandry from a handful of statements made by men and women who often gave secondhand accounts of what Joseph Smith or others taught.

Let us consider the sources Compton uses to define the theology of plural marriage and that he believes explain why Joseph Smith would allow some plural wives to engage in polyandry. Compton produces a hodgepodge theology from quotations and memoirs of church leaders, secondary and tertiary figures in church history, disaffected Mormons, and even an anti-Mormon. The primary contributors are John D. Lee, Brigham Young, Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, William Hall, William Smith, Orson Pratt, Benjamin F. Johnson, Helen Fisher, and Jedediah M. Grant (see pp. 17–23 and associated notes). It is important to note that the statements of these people are scavenged from the five decades following the martyrdom; some are very late memoirs. Unfortunately, Compton fails to provide an adequate evaluation of these reminiscences as a thorough historian should. Therefore, when these oral traditions are added to the canonical statements, reconstructing the theology of plural marriage—and especially polyandry—is not greatly facilitated; rather, in Compton’s hands it is hindered.

Compton is not ignorant of these problems; however, he is not inhibited by such concerns. He writes, “Whatever the uncertainties in documenting this aspect of Latter-day Saint practice, there is a clearly discernible outline of ideology in the historical record that explains the development and rationale for the practice of Smith’s
polyandry” (p. 22). The following is his brief reconstruction of that theology.

Gentile (i.e., non-Mormon) marriages were “il-legal,” of no eternal value or even earthly validity; marriages authorized by the Mormon priesthood and prophets took precedence. Sometimes these sacred marriages were felt to fulfill pre-mortal linkings and so justified a sacred marriage superimposed over a secular one. Mormonism’s intensely hierarchical nature allowed a man with the highest earthly authority—a Joseph Smith or Brigham Young—to request the wives of men holding lesser Mormon priesthood, or no priesthood. The authority of the prophet would allow him to promise higher exaltation to those involved in the triangle, both the wife and her first husband. (pp. 22–23)

Compton too easily dismisses the “uncertainties in documenting” this theology and gets too quickly to the “clearly discernible outline of ideology” he finds in the historical record. By ignoring the uncertainties, he has reconstructed the doctrines incorrectly. Unfortunately, conclusions based on dubious premises lead to Compton’s misunderstanding of the doctrine and the practice, which in turn also misleads his readers. These are not insignificant concerns, as will be shown below. Even if Compton’s sources accurately report things as they were taught or understood, the reminiscences may be incomplete in content as well as context. Moreover, how can we be sure that his outline, taken together, represents a theological whole as Joseph Smith understood it? We may simply have a patchwork that seems like a “discernible outline of ideology” to Compton, but which may not really be so. To demonstrate the point, in the following section I will reproduce the quotations from which Compton derives his outline, with his analysis and conclusions, followed by some observations of my own.

Compton’s first point is that

Smith regarded marriages performed without Mormon priesthood authority as invalid (see D&C
132:7), just as he regarded baptisms performed without Mormon priesthood authority as invalid. Thus all couples in Nauvoo who accepted Mormonism were suddenly unmarried, granted Joseph’s absolutist, exclusivist claims to divine authority. (p. 17)

Subsequently Compton will say, “Here we have the doctrine that previous marriages are of no effect, ‘illegal,’ in Orson Pratt’s words” (p. 18). He cites three sources for this doctrine. The first comes from John D. Lee:

About the same time the doctrine of “sealing” for an eternal state was introduced, and the Saints were given to understand that their marriage relations with each other were not valid. That those who had solemnized the rites of matrimony had no authority of God to do so. That the true priesthood was taken from the earth with the death of the Apostles . . . They were married to each other only by their own covenants, and that if their marriage relations had not been productive of blessings and peace, and they felt it oppressive to remain together, they were at liberty to make their own choice, as much as if they had not been married. That it was a sin for people to live together, and raise or beget children in alienation from each other. There should be an affinity between each other, not a lustful one, as that can never cement that love and affection that should exist between a man and his wife. (p. 17, quoting John D. Lee, Mormonism Unveiled, 146)

Compton then observes, “This is a radical, almost utopian rejection of civil, secular, sectarian, non-Mormon marriage. Civil marriage was even a ‘sin,’ unless a higher ‘affinity’ ‘cemented’ spouses together” (p. 17).

The second quotation comes from Brigham Young, who in an 1861 speech postulates two circumstances in which a man may be released from his marriage without a formal divorce.

If a woman can find a man holding the keys of the priesthood with higher power and authority than her husband, and he is disposed to take her he can do so,
otherwise she has got to remain where she is. . . . there is no need for a bill of divorcement.

. . . To recapitulate. First if a man forfiets [sic] his covenants with a wife, or wives, becoming unfaithful to his God, and his priesthood, that wife or wives are free from him without a bill of divorcement. (p. 17, quoting Brigham Young, speech at the tabernacle 8 October 1861)

Finally, in a footnote he cites the following from Orson Pratt:

As all the ordinances of the gospel Administered by the world since the Aposticy of the Church was illegal, in like manner was the marriage Cerimony illegal. (pp. 639–640, quoting a statement by Orson Pratt in the journal of Wilford Woodruff, 15 August 1846)

Joseph Smith understood and taught that marriage is a religious ordinance that must be performed by the proper priesthood authority in order to be recognized and accepted in heaven. The knowledge that civil marriages were not valid in the eyes of God in eternity did not mean, however, that Joseph considered every civil marriage meaningless, or a sin, or illegal in some religious sense. The issue that Compton raises here goes beyond what Joseph taught and practiced. It is true that, in an instance which I documented in 1975, Lydia Bailey, who left an abusive husband, was permitted to remarry in Kirtland without having a divorce from him.20 And in Nauvoo one can find several cases where people with bad marriages, such as women who joined the church in England and immigrated to the United States without their husbands, were later permitted to remarry without securing a divorce from the husband who remained in England.21

This limited practice is understandable in view of Joseph’s belief that he was God’s prophet and his position allowed him to perform marriages as a religious ordinance or to set aside previous civil marriages. It appears that in the few instances where the

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original marriages were performed prior to one's acceptance of the gospel but subsequently went bad, Joseph felt they could be abrogated for practical reasons if the candidates wanted to marry someone else.

But Compton goes way too far in saying, “Thus all couples in Nauvoo who accepted Mormonism were suddenly unmarried, granted Joseph’s absolutist, exclusivist claims to divine authority.” There is no evidence, to my knowledge, of a wholesale rejection of civil marriage on the part of Joseph, either theologically or practically. The practice of remarriage without a prior divorce seems to have been implemented on a case-by-case basis. The majority of the civil marriages of faithful Saints were left intact. At the same time Joseph taught the Saints that they must be married again by the proper authority in the proper manner in order for that marriage to be eternal (see D&C 132:7). This was to be done in special temple sealing ordinances. In a discourse of 8 April 1844, Hyrum Smith explained his understanding of this principle.

I read, that what God joins together let no man put asunder[.] I see magistrates and priests in the world, but not one who is empowered to join together by the authority of God. Nor yet have I seen any priest that dare say that he has the authority of God, there is not a sectarian Priest in Christendom that dare say he has the authority by direct revelation from God. When I look at the seal of the new Covenant, & reflect that all the old covenants made by the authority of man are only made to be in force during the natural life and end there I rejoice that what is done by the Lord has an endless duration. No marriage is valid in the morn of the resurrection unless the marriage covenant be sealed on earth by one having the keys and power from the

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22 Evidence showing that the Saints did not reject civil marriage in any wholesale way is in Lyndon W. Cook's compilation of just over four hundred civil marriages performed in Nauvoo between the years 1839 and 1845. See his *Nauvoo Deaths and Marriages, 1839–1845* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1994), 89-114.
Almighty God to seal on earth as it shall be bound in heaven.\textsuperscript{23}

Compton has created a false impression of the views of Joseph Smith about civil marriages, and his analysis is only marginally helpful in understanding the polyandrous nature of eleven of his marriages.

Now on to several questions about Compton’s use and interpretation of the John D. Lee citation. First, Lee is making a distinction, which Compton overlooks, between marriages of the Saints and gentiles. Did not Joseph distinguish between the knowledge and therefore the responsibility of the Saints regarding proper marriage and that of uninformed and therefore less responsible gentiles? Second, Lee’s statement seems to permit Saints who understand these things to divorce or make other choices as if they weren’t married. Does this necessarily apply to all civil marriages outside the church? Third, the context of this quotation is considerably different than Compton’s interpretation allows. Lee said,

They were married to each other only by their own covenants, and that if their marriage relations had not been productive of blessings and peace, and they felt it oppressive to remain together, they were at liberty to make their own choice, as much as if they had not been married. That it was a sin for people to live together, and raise or beget children in alienation from each other. There should be an affinity between each other, not a lustful one, as that can never cement that love and affection that should exist between a man and his wife. (p. 17)

This seems consistent with the position explained above that when Joseph granted someone the privilege to marry a second spouse without a divorce from the first, the marriage was not only

\textsuperscript{23} Hyrum Smith, discourse of 8 April 1844, original manuscripts in the Minutes Collection in the LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City. Two manuscript copies are extant. The one followed here is in the handwriting of Jonathan Grimshaw, which appears to be the earliest of the two as evidenced by its obvious rough-draft nature.
a bad one but usually involved a separation because the member lived in a church center while the nonmember did not. For all we know, this may have been considered sufficient evidence that the marriage was not highly valued by either partner.

These ideas also seem consistent with the first of Brigham’s statements. That is, if a man “forfeits his covenants with a wife,” she then is free from him without a divorce. The second citation from Brigham seems to place the responsibility for the initial decision about remaining with her first husband on the woman. Nothing is said by Brigham or discussed by Compton about such questions as, What if the first husband doesn’t consent? Is the second marriage then not permitted? If not, doesn’t that implicitly recognize in some degree the validity of the civil marriage? Or, can the husband seek a divorce? If so, under what circumstances? Clearly, here is an excellent example of having more historical data than we have theological understanding.

Another question Compton does not raise about the Brigham Young quotations relates to the 1861 date of this statement, because he implies that what Joseph did in the 1840s is reflected in what Brigham said in 1861. This may or may not be true, but it is not sufficient to pass it off as certain simply because Brigham once said that all his doctrine came from Joseph Smith. Although that may also be true, a greater degree of certainty of the relationship between the two is demanded if Brigham’s statement is to be considered an authoritative explanation of Joseph’s conduct. Further, even if we assume that Brigham’s doctrine originated with the Prophet Joseph, must we not also raise again the question about the completeness of his exposition of that theology in 1861? The statement leaves me with the sense that Brigham knew and understood more than this citation reveals. It has an air of incompleteness about it, as suggested by the questions mentioned above. It is easy to present the Young, Lee, and Pratt statements together, because they seem related, and to think we have an adequate, if not complete, story, sufficient to explain what Joseph Smith was thinking and doing. I am less confident that we can do that than Compton is.

“Another doctrine that apparently served as underpinning for Smith’s polyandry,” he writes, “was his doctrine of a pre-existence” (p. 19). He begins with Mary Lightner, who said,
“Joseph said I was his, before I came here, he said all the Devils in Hell should never get me from him” (p. 19, quoting Mary Elizabeth Lightner, “Statement,” 8 Feb. 1902). Elsewhere she wrote that Smith told her he had been commanded to marry her, “or suffer condemnation—for I [Mary] was created for him before the foundation of the Earth was laid” (p. 19, quoting Mary Elizabeth Lightner, Autobiography). Compton now elaborates with a further interpretation of John D. Lee’s statement: “John D. Lee wrote that a spiritual ‘affinity’ took precedence over secular ceremonies. Perhaps Joseph Smith also felt, as the Brigham Young statement suggests, that men with higher priesthood had a greater aptitude for spiritual affinity” (p. 19). The “discernible outline” of Joseph’s theology is further expanded when Compton writes, “According to an early, though antagonistic, eyewitness source, William Hall, the doctrine of ‘kindred spirits’ was found in Nauvoo polyandry. According to this report, Smith taught that ‘all real marriages were made in heaven before the birth of the parties,’ which coincides neatly with Lightner” (p. 19, quoting Hall, The Abominations of Mormonism, 12–13). And finally, Compton garners “at least one early ‘friendly’” reference for the doctrine of kindred spirits in the person of Joseph’s brother William, who said in 1845, “But the fullness of her salvation cannot be made perfect until her companion is with her and those who are of his Kingdom, for the kindred spirits are gathered up and are united in the Celestial Kingdom of one” (p. 19, quoting patriarchal blessing by William Smith, 16 July 1845 at Nauvoo, on Mary Ann Peterson, “sitting as proxy for Ann B. Peterson, deceased”).

Compton doesn’t explain why the doctrine of premortal life “apparently served as an underpinning for Smith’s polyandry.” Apparently he believes that the four sources cited establish the relationship. But do they? Has he interpreted them correctly? To

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24 This statement was made sixty years after the event. Yet Compton makes no allowance for, nor evaluation of, this fact as it may relate to the reliability of the memoir. However, he does make the case that in Utah she had been alone and felt slighted by church leaders. One must, therefore, at least entertain the possibility that at this point in her life perhaps Mary was trying to recover a modicum of status and importance as she spoke to students at the Brigham Young Academy.
begin with, I disagree with Compton's interpretation of the Lightner statement. He wrote,

Apparently, if Smith had a spiritual intuition that he was linked to a woman, he asserted that she had been sealed to him in the pre-existence, even though she was legally married to another man. But, as we have seen, he taught that civil marriages performed without the priesthood sealing power were not valid, even at times sinful. Therefore, the link in the pre-existence would take immediate priority over a marriage performed by invalid, secular or 'sectarian,' authority in this life. (p. 19.)

He softens her “I was his, before I came here” to “spiritual intuition,” which is considerably less definite, but more in harmony with the hypothesis he is formulating. Elsewhere we learn, and Compton cites the fact, that Joseph claimed it had been revealed to him who his plural wives should be. Could that be what Joseph means here? Is it possible that revelation enlightened him about premortal covenants between God, himself, and these women? But Compton doesn’t entertain these or other possibilities. Instead, his substitution of “intuition” will serve him well when he gets to the “affinity” and “kindred spirit” doctrines later in the analysis. Thus Compton’s slippery theology allows him to slide Joseph easily into the ideological camp of others in and around the Burned-Over District of New York, with their doctrine of spiritual wifery (see pp. 20–21). His analysis also implies that such statements made by Joseph Smith are really used to manipulate subordinates.

At the same time we must ask if Lightner’s statement justifies Compton’s remark that “he asserted that she had been sealed to him in the pre-existence.” Lightner does not use the word sealed in the statements he quotes, and his remark is therefore unwarranted and quite misleading. Does Mormonism have a doctrine of premortal sealing in the normal understanding of that term in the church? No, it does not. Thus we see that, when it suits his theological purposes, Compton softens some statements and makes others more explicit—neither practice being justifiable on the basis of the texts he is interpreting.
Similar objections may be raised about the use of John D. Lee's statement. He says that Lee "wrote that a spiritual 'affinity' took precedence over secular ceremonies" (p. 19). Actually Lee said no such thing. Lee's use of the word *affinity* is nothing like what we find in the doctrines of Immanuel Swedenborg or the Reverend Erasmus Stone, to which Compton leads us in this discussion. A careful consideration of the quotation shows that, in context, Lee's "affinity" refers to people already married and to the pure affection that should exist between them. Their affections were not to be based on lust because that could "never cement that love and affection that should exist between a man and his wife." Lee was not referring to some mystical affinity, intuition, or attraction between unmarried but "kindred spirits," which justified entering into a romantic relationship. Compton has misread his source here and, in so doing, has misapplied it as well.

The William Hall reference fares no better. Compton asserts that Hall said the doctrine of kindred spirits was part of Nauvoo polyandry and that Joseph taught "all real marriages were made in heaven" (p. 19). From this quotation it appears that the doctrine of "kindred spirits" is Hall's, although one senses he wants his audience to believe it is an accurate representation of Joseph's teaching. Compton might have assisted his readers better by inquiring whether Hall might have had some ulterior motive in so doing, since even Compton acknowledges that Hall is an antagonistic source. Might it not have served Hall's purposes to link Mormon plural marriage, especially polyandry, to the ill thought-of doctrines of spiritual wifery and free love?

The connection between Mormon plural marriage, "kindred spirits," and "spiritual wives" was not original with William Hall. The term *spiritual wives* or *spiritual wifery* may have originated from practices in Europe where, in part at least, it referred to marriages that were "to be for all time and eternity." Later in

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25 E. Royston Pike, *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Religions* (New York: Meridian, 1958), 360. Pike says the term referred to "Women married or unmarried, who enter into a 'spiritual marriage' with 'soul-mates' of the opposite sex, sometimes when they have a lawful spouse already. Such spiritual marriages are supposed to be for all time and eternity—not merely, as are legal unions, until death does part. In the history of Christianity there have been many attempts to establish this form of extra-marital relationship, e.g. amongst the
America, the term was applied to the unique marital practices of nineteenth-century perfectionist groups in New England and New York. Some nonconformists taught that if unmarried men and women felt a spontaneous spiritual affinity toward each other they were justified in considering themselves spiritual husbands and wives. Such a relationship was allegedly purged of its sinfulness as the participants perfected their character and affections through repentance and regeneration. It is unclear if this idea initially allowed conjugal relationships, but the complex marriage system of John Humphrey Noyes’s Oneida Community did.26 The term spiritual wifery eventually widened to refer to several types of marital experiments in nineteenth-century America.27

As far as the Latter-day Saints are concerned, the term began to be applied to them following the spring 1842 excommunication of pro-tem member of the First Presidency John C. Bennett for sexual immorality. He claimed special authorization from Joseph Smith for his extramarital relations. In letters written to the Sangamo Journal newspaper in Springfield, Illinois, in June and July 1842, Bennett charged the church with corruption. In his first letter, dated 27 June, he refers to “clandestine” and “secret” wives, but his second missive, published on 15 July, accuses Joseph Smith of attempting to persuade Sarah M. Pratt to become his spiritual wife. Bennett also said that in May 1842 Joseph threatened to make catfish bait of him if he did not sign an affidavit exonerating Joseph “from all participation whatever . . . in the spiritual wife doctrine.”28

Another apostate from the Nauvoo years, Joseph Jackson, was more detailed in his description of Mormon “spiritual wives.” He said the doctrine was called the “spirit of Elijah” among the Mormons and “is kept a profound secret from the people at

Muckers in Germany, the Agapemones in England, and the Perfectionists in U.S.A.” My thanks to John Tvedtne, who guided me to this reference.


large,” except from those privileged to “know the ‘fullness of the kingdom.’” He claimed the doctrine came from Hosea 3 (passages relating to Solomon and David) and Matthew 18:18. From these sources he said,

The doctrine is derived that there is no harm in a man having more wives than one, provided his extra wives are married to him spiritually. A spiritual wife is a woman who, by revelation, is bound up to a man, in body, parts, and passions, both for this life and for all eternity; whereas the union of a carnal wife and her husband ceases at death. When the Scripture forbids a man from taking to himself more wives than one, Joe made it refer to carnal, and not spiritual wives.29

Obviously Bennett and Jackson want their readers to believe that plural marriages and associated doctrines were little more than rationalizations for sexual immorality. It appears that Compton has taken the bait.

Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, say that Bennett was the author of the doctrine and that it was nothing more than a rationalization for his adultery and prostitution.30 However, the term’s association with plural marriage spawned considerable confusion among some in the church and the Brethren took some pains to clarify the issue. One John Taylor (not the third president of the church) left a late memoir in which he recalled hearing Hyrum Smith speak to a meeting of the high priests and seventy in the Seventy’s Hall. Taylor said “he referred to spiritual wifery, and in strong and emphatic language denounced it and declared that there was no such doctrine believed in or taught by Joseph,

29 Joseph H. Jackson, A Narrative of the Adventures and Experiences of Joseph H. Jackson: Disclosing the Depths of Mormon Villainy Practiced in Nauvoo (Warsaw, Ill.: Printed for the publisher, 1846), 13–14. This pamphlet was originally published in 1844, but I have not been able to examine an original.

30 In October 1842, twelve men and nineteen women signed a denial of “John C. Bennett’s ‘secret wife system’ . . . a disclosure of his own make.” Eliza R. Snow, who signed this document, later remarked that it was aimed specifically at Bennett’s system of prostitution. Eliza R. Snow to Joseph F. Smith, undated; original in the Joseph F. Smith Collection, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City.
himself, or any of the heads of the church; and authorized those present to so state; and to report to him if they heard any one so teaching such doctrine."31 Taylor may have been referring to the 8 April 1844 speech by Hyrum cited above. At the time the unauthorized sexual and marital practices of John C. Bennett and one Hiram Brown in Michigan,32 and perhaps others, apparently put Hyrum in a bellicose mood. That day he responded to “the 10,000 reports” daily coming in about the existence of the spiritual wife doctrine. “Almost every foolish man runs to me to inquire if such things are true, & how many spiritual wives a man may have,” he said. “I know nothing about it; what he might call a spiritual wife, I should not know anything about. In about half an hour after he has gone another begins to say: the Elders tell such & such things all over the country. I am authorized to tell you from henceforth,” he asserted, “that any man who comes in and tells you such damn fool doctrine to tell him to give up his license. None but a fool teaches such stuff,” he continued. “The devil himself is not such a fool, and every Elder who teaches such stuff ought to have his nose wrung.” In Hyrum’s view Mormon doctrines were “made to have an evil effect through the foolishness of some.”33 Also contemporary with these events, Parley P. Pratt wrote in the newspaper The Prophet, which he was then editing, that “‘The Spiritual Wife Doctrine,’ of J. C. Bennett, and numerous other apostates, is as foreign from the real principles of

33 Hyrum Smith, discourse of 8 April 1844. Hyrum continued by explaining the church doctrine of eternal marriage, which was apparently being confused with the idea of “spiritual wifery.” He said:

I married me a wife, and I am the only man who has any right to her. We had five children, the covenant was made four [sic] our lives. She fell into the grave before God showed us his order. God has shewn me that the covenant is dead, and had no more force, neither could I have her in the resurrection, but we should be as the angels—it troubled me. Prp. Joseph said you can have her sealed to you upon the same principles as you can be baptized for the dead. I enquired [sic] what can I do for any second wife? You can also make a covenant with her for eternity and have her sealed to you by the authority of the priesthood.
the church as the devil is from God.”\textsuperscript{34} Orson F. Whitney also said Bennett imposed the “jargon” of spiritual wives on the church. “The phrase was his, but it was never the accepted title of the principle it pretended to describe. This and his other jargons . . . were invented to cover up his own iniquity, and to wreak revenge upon the Prophet.”\textsuperscript{35}

Later on, some outsiders and apostates accused the Mormons of having a “community of wives” or of “swapping wives” and used the term spiritual wifery to deprecate Mormonism. John C. Bennett made those same connections in 1842, and his purposes were as inimical to the church as were those of William Hall. It would appear that Hall conveniently appropriated Bennett’s ideas for the same purpose—that is, to cast negative reflections on Joseph Smith and Mormonism. Compton has been too easily persuaded over to the side of Hall and Bennett by these loose linguistic links, and he would have us see it his way too. We must ask, is there any other compelling evidence that Joseph taught the doctrine of spiritual affinity that could be construed as spiritual wifery? If not, are we obligated to accept and believe it as Todd Compton has recounted it?

Last, some concerns about the William Smith citation remain. Most knowledgeable Mormon historians would not classify William Smith as friendly to Mormonism in 1845. He had his own problems, a number of them stemming from the doctrine of plural marriage. Therefore I question whether his statements really reflect Joseph’s teachings. He too may have been persuaded by doctrines such as those of kindred spirits, free love, and spiritual wifery. In 1845 William was probably theologically closer to John C. Bennett than Joseph Smith in his thinking and acting in relationship to plural marriage.

The above analysis illustrates why Latter-day Saints should be especially uncomfortable with Compton’s conclusion about how this doctrine played out in Mormonism: “But when the kindred spirits recognized each other, the ‘illegal’ marriages became of no effect from a religious, eternal perspective and the ‘kindred’ partners were free to marry each other” (p. 19). This is pure fantasy

\textsuperscript{34} Parley P Pratt, \textit{The Prophet} [New York], 24 May 1845.
\textsuperscript{35} Orson F. Whitney, \textit{“The Mormon Prophet’s Tragedy”} (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1905), 43–44.
with little or no relationship to what really happened in the early church.

A third point of doctrine that Compton emphasizes is the proposal that the "extent" or number of wives a man has is related directly to his degree of salvation. Here are two statements from him:

> However, the church president apparently believed that complete salvation (in Mormon terminology, exaltation, including the concept of deification) depended on the extent of a man’s family *sealed to him in this life.*
> (p. 10, emphasis in original)

> Thus in Smith’s Nauvoo ideology, a fullness of salvation depended on the *quantity* of family members sealed to a person in this life. This puts the number of women Joseph married into an understandable context.
> (p. 11, emphasis in original)

He cites Benjamin F. Johnson, Joseph Fielding, and Helen Fisher Smith, respectively, as authority for the following ideas.

The First Command was to “Multiply” and the Prophet taught us that Dominion & powr in the great Future would be Comensurate with the no [number] of “Wives Childin & Friends” that we inheret here and that our great mission to earth was to Organize a Neculi [nucleus] of Heaven to take with us. To the increase of which there would be no end—(p. 10, quoting Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs)

> I understand that a Man,s Dominion will be as God,s is, over his own Creatures and the more numerous they greater his dominion.
> (p. 636, quoting Andrew F. Ehat, “They Might Have Known That He Was Not a Fallen Prophet”—The Nauvoo Journal of Joseph Fielding” *BYU Studies* 19/2 [1979]: 154)

I care not how many he gets now, the ice is broke as the old saing is, the more the greater glory. (p. 636,
quoting Helen Smith to Joseph F. Smith, 4 April 1857, as cited in Bates and Smith, *Lost Legacy*, 127)

Compton further suggests that the importance of numbers is reinforced by the frequent mention by Mormons of the promises of eternal posterity given to Abraham (see p. 10). Collectively these statements do not justify his assertion that the “extent” or “quantity” of wives and family determined whether one received a fulness of salvation. Nor is it obvious from them that this was the view of Joseph Smith. Compton does not clearly distinguish between being exalted in the celestial kingdom, which is commonly understood by Latter-day Saints to be the fulness of salvation, and the “extent” of one’s kingdom once it is reached. Numbers do not seem to be a relevant factor in the former, but may be in the latter.

Moreover, where does Johnson say “complete salvation” is dependent on the size of one’s family? Compton has misread his sources and made assumptions about their meaning, apparently based on later “sayings” of those who may also have misunderstood the differences pointed out here. Johnson’s point is not about salvation, but about “dominion and power,” and Joseph Fielding is helpful here when he says that his understanding was that “dominion” had reference to a man’s own “creatures” or family. The greater the number, the greater the dominion, but neither man equates dominion with salvation as does Compton.

The above analysis reveals Compton’s weakness as both historian and theologian. He is imprecise in analyzing texts. His historical analysis is elementary, as evidenced by his too quickly and easily linking ideas and statements from disparate authorities scattered over decades as if they all reflect the thinking and practice of Joseph Smith. All this produces a Swiss cheese exegesis of Mormon doctrine. To change metaphors, his use of flimsy theological timber results in the construction of a toothpick theological superstructure that is unable to bear the weight of explaining polyandry or in understanding the practice of plural marriage generally.

Compton’s discussion of polyandry in the prologue, though only obliquely characterized there as an experiment, nevertheless fits with his view of the experimental nature of plural marriage. He
says as much at least three times in the book. My emphasis is added to each of the following statements:

As we trace the trajectory of Smith’s marriages, we see that he apparently experimented with plural marriage in the 1830s in Ohio and Missouri. (p. 2)

The secret, experimental polygamy of Nauvoo would be replaced by the practical, open polygamy of a larger frontier family—by the time [Brigham] Young left Nauvoo he had married some forty-one women. (p. 61)

Because of the complexity of Mormon marriage practice and experimentation, there is a great deal of ambiguity concerning what constituted marriage in early Mormonism.36 (p. 632)

Thus for Compton the doctrines were not revealed, but are a creative conglomerate of the ideas prevalent in Joseph’s social and religious environment. He writes,

Stone’s story, like Joseph Smith’s, was the product of the Burned-over District in New York, where a Protestant revival atmosphere served as a seeding ground for a great deal of religious and marital experimentation. The “Spiritual Wives” polyandrous doctrine, so foreign to twentieth-century Mormons, was part of Joseph Smith’s Zeitgeist. (p. 21)

Conclusion

The above analysis is an attempt to show that the Compton book exhibits critical signs of weakness both as to its methodology and thesis. Methodologically, Compton is inadequate in several areas, including relying extensively on speculation and generalization, both of which are often based on opinion or on a natu-

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36 The ambiguity lies more within the mind of Compton than of church members in either Nauvoo or Utah, as shown in Cook, *Nauvoo Deaths and Marriages*, previously mentioned.
realistic view of the growth and development of Mormonism. At critical points conclusions and generalizations rest on dubious historical or theological premises and reasoning. In addition, I have examined numerous examples from the prologue, showing that Compton’s analysis of historical texts relating to the theology of plural marriage is in error. Suspicion from this carries over into his analysis of the lives of the women about whom he writes. Has he made similar mistakes in analysis there?

Compton’s biases also seem to be at the core of his thesis that plural marriage was harmful to the women involved. He conceives of plural marriage as an experiment, born in the speculative theological environment of upstate New York. His collective biographical approach seeks to show that it was a fundamentally flawed marital institution. His nearly exclusive emphasis on the harsh and difficult lives he portrays raises the question as to whether he has allowed his bias to filter out contrary positive evidence.

The second element of Compton’s thesis is that early Mormon marital ideology explains why Joseph Smith had so many wives, some of whom were quite young, and a third of whom were already married and thus living in polyandry once they married him. Most certainly it is necessary to understand Joseph’s theology to understand his conduct, but my analysis of the prologue clearly demonstrates that much more research into this area is required to give us an adequate picture of both Joseph’s doctrinal understanding and his actions as plural marriage was introduced into the church. Thus Todd Compton’s analysis turns out to be an inadequate prologue to a study of the marital theology of Joseph Smith.