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# Joseph Smith's Polygamy

Brian C. Hales

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Brian C. Hales. *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*.

3 vols. Salt Lake City. Greg Kofford Books, 2013.

*Reviewed by M. Scott Bradshaw*

In this three-volume set, author Brian Hales presents an exhaustive study of plural marriage as practiced and introduced by Joseph Smith. This work is the product of five years of effort undertaken with the assistance of researcher Don Bradley. With nearly 1,500 pages of combined text, not counting the index, Hales's volumes are ambitious by any measure and are impressive for their sheer scope, attention to detail, and thorough consideration of all available sources. Hales has aspired to publish a work that includes as many accounts regarding Joseph's plural marriage as can be found, whether friendly, antagonistic, or otherwise. He explains: "If in ten years, researchers appraise these three volumes as containing perhaps 90 percent of available evidence, then, as the author, I will be pleased" (introduction, 1:xi).

Hales is no stranger to the topic of polygamy, having written several prior works on post-Manifesto polygamy found among fundamentalist groups. These include *Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations after the Manifesto*,<sup>1</sup> which he authored with the editorial assistance of Lavina Fielding Anderson. That 2006 book won the "Best Book of 2007 Award" from the John Whitmer Historical Association.

Hales has divided his work into two parts: History (vols. 1 and 2) and Theology (vol. 3). The History volumes are generally organized in chronological sequence, interspersed with thematic chapters dealing with controversial topics or detailed studies of particular events. For example, chapters 13–16 deal with Joseph's so-called polyandrous marriages or sealings. Chapters 19–21 discuss John C. Bennett and his

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1. Brian C. Hales, *Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations after the Manifesto* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2006).

impact on plural marriage in Nauvoo. In chapters 24–27, Hales traces Emma Smith's involvement in and knowledge of plural marriage, following in considerable detail the struggles she and Joseph experienced as a result of this doctrine.

Hales's work also includes extensive appendices and reference materials, among which are transcripts of documents, reproductions of early publications, chronological and bibliographic materials, and dozens of charts, tables, and photographs. In this sense, Hales's series is a reference work, with Hales often writing as "more of an editor than author" (introduction, p. xi). Hales discusses in detail the primary databases or source materials that document Joseph's polygamy in Nauvoo, creating an effective road map for others who may want to conduct their own research on the primary sources. These materials include affidavit books compiled by Joseph F. Smith (most c. 1869–70); Andrew Jenson's "Plural Marriage" article that appeared in the *Historical Record*, July 1887; Andrew Jenson's private notes of 1886–87; and affidavits taken from several of Joseph's plural wives as part of the Temple Lot litigation in 1892.

Many LDS readers will appreciate the approach Hales takes in discussing Joseph's plural marriages. Hales writes through a lens of faith, from the vantage point of a believing Latter-day Saint. He writes using familiar LDS terminology, refers to LDS canonical works and, overall, seeks to give Joseph fair treatment. Given the sensationalist approach taken by some writers who have discussed Joseph's polygamy, his approach is welcome.

In addressing these controversial topics, Hales pieces together the available evidence in insightful ways, telling "a new story about Joseph's polygamy" that tends to show Joseph as a man whose private life was honorable and consistent with the revealed theology he espoused. Hales points out, for example, that while a few of Joseph's brides ultimately left the LDS faith, none of them ever accused Joseph of abuse or deception and "none stepped forward to write an exposé denouncing him as a seducing impostor" (2:313).

Looking at the evidence for whether Joseph had conjugal relations with his youngest plural brides, fourteen-year-olds Helen Mar Kimball and Nancy Winchester, Hales provides helpful historical context, painting a plausible picture that Joseph's relations with these brides did not involve intimacy, pointing out in any case that "no historical data have been found supporting sexual relations with his two fourteen-year-old wives" (2:314).

Similarly, after a thorough analysis of historical accounts, Hales concludes that there is no convincing evidence to support sexual intimacy

in Joseph's apparent polyandrous marriages (sealings to women who already had legal husbands; see table 12.2 at 1:345–47). After reviewing the evidence for such sexuality, Hales concludes that there is a “dearth of credible supportive evidence” to document sexual polyandry involving Joseph Smith. In making this observation, Hales further comments that the confidence of other authors on this topic “seems to outdistance the historical record” (1:397, 408).

Hales uses LDS scripture to help fill the gaps of silence in the historical record, to help infer what Joseph may or may not have done. One illustration of this use is seen in Hales's efforts to reconstruct whether Joseph and his supposedly polyandrous brides engaged in conjugal acts. Hales references Doctrine and Covenants 132, concluding that under this revelation, sexual polyandry would be both “nondoctrinal” and “antidoctrinal,” reasoning essentially that Joseph could not have engaged in such relations, because this would have run contrary to principles the Lord revealed through him, which are embodied in Doctrine and Covenants 132. Such reasoning may resonate with some readers, particularly with practicing Latter-day Saints; however, it won't necessarily persuade other historians who have studied Joseph's polygamy, whose works range in tone from scholarly to skeptical and are almost invariably revisionist in their conclusions.

In approaching his subject, Hales has maintained an active dialog with a wide range of writers, historians, and archivists. The introduction to volume 1 contains a long list of people whose names he mentions with thanks, a recitation amounting almost to a “who's who” in the field of Mormon history. Among the more fascinating topics that Hales has discussed with other writers is emerging DNA evidence, which, thus far, has failed to show any paternity link between Joseph Smith and the descendants of male children he allegedly fathered with plural brides (see example at 1:66 n. 45).

An interesting example of Hales's collaboration with other writers is seen in the lively email exchanges between Hales and historian D. Michael Quinn. Hales reproduces several such emails in his footnotes, attesting to the sometimes sharp disagreements between the two authors over the meaning and interpretation of documents relating to Joseph's polygamy, particularly the apparently polyandrous sealings. Hales reproduces the emails with evident faithfulness, even down to the capitalized words of exasperation that Quinn uses on occasion in writing to Hales (example at 1:438–39 n. 96). Yet despite the occasional sharp exchanges, Hales refers to Quinn as a “reputable polygamy scholar” (1:99).

Although Hales writes from the perspective of a believing Latter-day Saint, he seemingly views no topic as too sensitive to discuss, taking head-on the most delicate matters. As justification for delving into every detail of Joseph Smith's polygamy, Hales cites published comments made by former LDS Church Historian, Elder Marlin K. Jensen, who stated in an interview that he knew of "no prohibitions" by the Brethren as to topics that LDS educators and teachers can write on. In the interview that Hales quotes from, Elder Jensen draws an analogy to published work on the Mountain Meadows Massacre, which provides an example of a "no holds barred" approach to LDS history that does not involve "sacred, private and confidential material."<sup>2</sup> Hales does not state whether he consulted with Elder Jensen in undertaking this project.

The picture of Joseph that emerges from Hales's work is one that stands in stark contrast to the sensationalistic versions of his life preached and retold since the nineteenth century by many pastors, journalists, and writers who attribute the establishment of plural marriage in Nauvoo to a lurid desire by Joseph Smith "to expand his sexual opportunities." Hales frequently targets Brodie, in particular, and debunks her characterizations of Joseph Smith with relish. A prime example of this is seen in Hales's discussion of Joseph's apparent polyandrous marriages. According to Hales, Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*,<sup>3</sup> "placed an elephant in the living room of LDS Church history" that was "comprised of her reports that Joseph Smith experienced polyandrous sexuality with some of his plural wives, reports that unbelievers readily accepted, but which believers evidently did not want to acknowledge or actively address." Hales asserts that it was Brodie's "cool assurance" that persuaded readers, more than her careful documentation (1:409–10). Hales may not be alone in his disagreements with Brodie. Compton's introduction to his 1997 book refers to scholars having "faulted [Brodie] for relying on antagonistic sources that have since proven unreliable."<sup>4</sup>

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2. Elder Marlin K. Jensen and David F. Boone, "A Historian by Yearning: A Conversation with Elder Marlin K. Jensen," *Religious Educator* 8, no. 3 (2007): 13, available online at <http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/volume-8-number-3-2007/historian-yearning-conversation-elder-marlin-k-jensen>.

3. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1945).

4. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), ix.

Hales's third volume, on the doctrinal and theological underpinnings for Joseph's polygamy, attempts to reconstruct Joseph's theology of plural marriage—a difficult task given that Joseph left no records setting forth or documenting his thoughts, views, feelings, or experiences with plural marriage. As mentioned above, in the absence of primary historical source materials originating from Joseph, Hales turns to the text of Doctrine and Covenants 132 for clues, and he also examines the statements and writings of contemporaries of Joseph Smith, including his wives, Apostles, and other close associates, to determine what Joseph might have said and taught on the topic of plural marriage. Hales discounts many of the explanations commonly given today as rationales for nineteenth-century polygamy, such as “women outnumbering men.” In exploring Joseph's theology, Hales faults earlier writers for ignoring “the ideological processes that Joseph introduced,” for failing “to take his teachings seriously,” and for reducing them “to libido” (introduction, 1:ix).

Hales's reconstruction of Joseph's theology of plural marriage leads him ultimately to focus on three rationales, the first being a “restitution of all things,” which, of necessity, included Old Testament polygamy (3:21). Citing later reminiscences of Joseph's teachings penned by Charles Lambert and Helen Mar Kimball, Hales sees the need for “additional devout families . . . to receive noble premortal spirits” as a second reason advanced by Joseph Smith. He sees a third rationale for plural marriage implied in Doctrine and Covenants 132: namely, the need for God to provide a way for all individuals to marry, which is required for exaltation, thus avoiding the problem of singleness in the hereafter (3:150). As Hales puts it, “in Joseph Smith's global theology, plural marriage allows for the exaltation of an excess of worthy women (when paired with worthy men) in the resurrection, should there be any” (3:162). Hales comments that the “actual totals of males and females that will be worthy of exaltation are independent of God's will” and that God “can predict but not control those numbers” (3:150–53). According to Hales, “it might be argued that plural marriage constitutes a necessary, but relatively minor, doctrinal precept within Joseph Smith's ideology” (3:162).

Hales's third volume might have benefited from a tighter focus. In this volume, he sets the ambitious objective of reconstructing Joseph's theology of plural marriage. However, in pursuing this goal, Hales wanders rather far afield. Readers are taken through an interesting—though at times marginally relevant—theological tour of other doctrines that Joseph taught, including child-to-parent sealings, adoptive sealings, and the premortal existence. Before leading the reader through these

topics, Hales provides fifty pages of material tracing the interpretations of Mormon polygamy commonly advanced by psychologists, historians, other Christians, and nineteenth-century writers. He also outlines the rationales commonly given by LDS leaders in the nineteenth century for polygamy.

The most obvious shortcoming of Hales's volume 3 is the paucity of contemporaneous materials on plural marriage. Hales himself notes this shortage, observing that there is a "lack of contemporary accounts recording Joseph Smith's specific teachings on these lofty topics." While the Prophet's "writings and recorded instructions on plural marriage are limited to the revelation on celestial and plural marriage, Doctrine and Covenants 132" (3:69; see 1:68), careful readers will note that even Doctrine and Covenants 132 was not all that Joseph knew or could have taught on the subject of plural marriage. This is evident from an 1874 statement made by William Clayton, quoted verbatim by Hales in his second volume. Clayton was one of Joseph's closest confidants and had served as scribe when Joseph dictated the revelation later known as Doctrine and Covenants 132 on July 12, 1843. As quoted by Hales, Clayton reports that Joseph dictated the revelation to him, which he carefully wrote, sentence by sentence. Joseph then reviewed Clayton's transcript of his words and "pronounced it correct," remarking that "there was much more that he could write, on the same subject, but what was written was sufficient for the present" (2:65). If Joseph could have said "much more" on the topic of polygamy, but did not, and apparently never did, then all are left with a mystery. What was it that Joseph did not tell us? We may never know.

Volumes 1 and 2, those dealing with the history of Joseph's polygamy, could also have benefitted from a tighter focus and some cleaner organization. The intermixing of thematic chapters with those telling a chronological story results in a certain amount of repetition.

Another weakness I would call to attention is Hales's review of the legality of plural marriage in Nauvoo (1:388, 399; 2:194, 237). His discussion of legal issues reflects a common assumption that Joseph's practice of plural marriage violated adultery and bigamy laws. As I have recently shown in a piece published in *Sustaining the Law: Joseph Smith's Legal Encounters*,<sup>5</sup> there actually is more substance to Joseph's legal position in this regard than has been previously recognized.

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5. M. Scott Bradshaw, "Defining Adultery under Illinois and Nauvoo Law," in *Sustaining the Law: Joseph Smith's Legal Encounters*, ed. Gordon A. Madsen, Jeffrey N. Walker, and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2014), 401–26.

Ultimately, Hales's work is a solid contribution to the historical and theological literature relating to Joseph Smith's life. These three impressive volumes will contain something of value for readers of many backgrounds. Historians, both friendly and antagonistic to Joseph Smith, will appreciate the detailed and comprehensive focus on primary source materials. Latter-day Saints with an interest in history will appreciate reading the words of a writer who shares a common foundation of faith.

However, at the end of the day, the story that Brian Hales reconstructs is one that does not include Joseph's version of the story—which is a side of the story that is not extant. Joseph's plural marriages were sacred and confidential, and he intentionally kept them that way. It appears that Joseph left no records describing his experiences with plural marriage. Despite this huge gap in the record, Brian Hales has done an impressive job at pulling together what remains of the story of Joseph's plural marriages. This important three-volume work will doubtless be referred to and read for years to come.

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