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Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding

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Brian C. Hales and Laura H. Hales. *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding.*

Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2015.

Reviewed by M. Scott Bradshaw

In their book *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding*, authors Brian and Laura Hales provide readers with a concise history of Joseph Smith's practice of plural matrimony. At only 175 pages in length, excluding endnotes and the index, the Hales' work will be both easy to read and informative for the general public. Despite the book's brevity, it is detailed enough to address, or touch on, the full range of controversies associated with this topic. This book is a welcomed condensation of Brian Hales's massive 2013 *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, which is a three-volume set on the same topic.

As in that earlier three-volume set, the authors continue to write from a perspective of faith, as believers in the divine mission given to the Prophet Joseph Smith. The authors, who have exhaustively studied this subject, acknowledge that they are not absolutely "bias-free," and they openly affirm their unequivocal witness that Joseph Smith was "a virtuous man and a true prophet of the living God" (xvii).

In *Toward a Better Understanding*, the Hales tell the story of Joseph Smith's plural matrimony with far fewer quotations from source materials than Brian used in his 2013 work. In his earlier work, he wrote more as an editor and backed his assertions with extensive documentation. In this work, Brian and Laura allow themselves to simply tell the story. They write confidently, with a sound grasp of the sources from which their narrative is drawn.

Given the manageable size of this volume, *Toward a Better Understanding* will likely find a broader audience than the prior work, particularly among practicing Latter-day Saints. Through the dissemination of their views, the Hales' interpretation of Joseph's practice of plural matrimony will, over time, have a broad impact on how this chapter in Joseph's life is understood by Latter-day Saints. Brian Hales's influence

in Church history circles is already seen in at least one official LDS Church publication, a thoughtful article entitled “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo” that is posted on the Church’s website, *lds.org*. Brian Hales is cited more times than any other single author in the footnotes for that piece.

While there certainly is a positive side to the wider availability of information regarding Joseph’s instituting of plural marriage, there are potential risks as well. The concise nature of the narrative in this book could leave readers unprepared for some of the authors’ assertions. As two illustrations of this, Brian and Laura make a brief and conclusory statement that plural marriage was a commandment—as opposed to merely being permitted—among the Saints from the 1840s to 1890 (20). The authors also assert, with regard to post-Manifesto plural marriages (post-1890), that “a few secret plural marriages were authorized each year by the Church President” until 1904 (21). Even if some historians might readily accept these points, a general LDS readership may be puzzled by these statements. Some added explanation or endnote references would be appreciated in such cases.

In telling a balanced and faithful story, the authors might also have been more vigilant to alert readers in a few instances to the possible biases of their sources, particularly where these paint an unflattering picture. Readers may lack the background in LDS history to make their own assessments regarding the inherent bias of some statements. As an example, the authors explain that Emma “turned Fanny [Alger] out of the house” (39) after allegedly learning of Fanny’s relationship with Joseph; Fanny Alger is believed by many to have been Joseph Smith’s first plural bride. While the story may have a ring of truth, the source for this quotation is Ann Eliza Webb, an author whose reliability on the details of this point is questionable. Ann Eliza was the writer of an exposé on life as a plural wife of Brigham Young. She was born in September 1844, almost a decade after the episode involving Fanny Alger, so her knowledge of the events in question is, at best, secondhand. The authors also cite Oliver Cowdery and William McLellin (and others) in telling the Fanny Alger story; yet, these two men penned their comments at times when they were disaffected with, or had left, the LDS Church.

The Hales provide an interesting analogy to help readers understand Joseph Smith’s involvement in plural matrimony. They refer to the story of the brother of Jared in the Book of Mormon, who was commanded by the Lord to build barges to take his people across the ocean. In this familiar account (Ether 2–3), the Lord did not initially provide guidance

on how the occupants of the barges would have light for inside the vessels. The authors see an analogy to Joseph Smith—"the Lord commanded the practice [of plural marriage], but he didn't micromanage its execution" (ix). If the brother of Jared received detailed guidance on how to waterproof his barges, Joseph Smith was not so fortunate; the authors add that Joseph Smith "did not receive such detailed guidelines on how to introduce and live plural marriage" (x). Under this view, it was up to Joseph Smith to decide whom he should propose to and how many wives he would marry, and to instruct and allow others to marry.

While the brother of Jared analogy seems persuasive, one can wonder just how far it should be taken. The authors cite accounts that, collectively taken, would lead readers to conclude that Joseph Smith may actually have been acting under specific divine mandate for each and every proposal of plural marriage. Emily Partridge recounts that when Joseph Smith taught her the doctrine of plural marriage, he "told her that she had been given to him by the Lord" (124). Lucy Walker reports that Joseph told her that marriage to him was "a command of God to [her]" (139). According to Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Joseph explained that she was "created for him before the foundation of the earth was laid" (150). Rhoda Richards comments that she was sealed to Joseph "by his own request, under the inspiration of divine revelation" (164–65). More than a few of Joseph's wives later testified of having experienced sacred dreams, visions, and the appearance of angels as they considered privately whether to accept his proposals. These facts seem to suggest a very personal and direct involvement of God in the details of the early practice of plural marriage among Latter-day Saints.

As well researched as is the work of Brian and Laura Hales, there are still areas that the Hales, and other writers, may want to clarify or explore in future writing. The picture of the legal situation surrounding plural marriage that the book gives is deficient (37, 73). As I have written elsewhere,¹ Joseph actually took surprising steps to legitimize plural marriage in Nauvoo. Quite simply, good arguments can be made for the legality of Nauvoo plural marriage under Nauvoo and Illinois law. Similarly, Joseph's frequently cited performance of the Ohio civil marriage of Newell and Lydia Knight in 1835 was actually performed with full

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

legal authority. Joseph seems to have understood this. The legal status of Ohio civil marriages and Nauvoo plural marriages performed by Joseph Smith should no longer be used by historians to support assertions that Joseph Smith's actions were based solely on priesthood authority, disregarding the marital laws or conventions of his day.

Another area for future study would be the text of D&C 132. A more thorough analysis of this scripture may yield clues that can help us unravel the story surrounding Joseph's practice of plural marriage. An example is seen in the phrase "by me or by my word" which is repeated exactly, or in similar form, in five verses (12, 13, 15, 18, and 19) as part of the conditions under which marriages are, or are not, valid for eternity. The authors conclude that Joseph's marriage to Fanny Alger could only have been "for time" (37) since it likely took place before Elijah restored the sealing power to Joseph in April 1836. However, since God sent an angel in 1834 (18–19) commanding Joseph to practice plural marriage, Joseph's relationship with Fanny Alger certainly could have been approved by God or according to God's word, thus we should not automatically conclude it was for "time" only, even if it likely occurred before the restoration of the sealing keys by Elijah. Perhaps one should not hastily conclude much, one way or the other, about the relationship between Joseph and Fanny. As Joseph earlier learned with the repeated appearances of Moroni in the space of less than twenty-four hours (JS–H 1:30–49), and as Peter learned when he experienced the same vision three times (Acts 10:9–16), words repeated multiple times by Deity should be remembered, recorded, and carefully pondered. In this instance, a study of the pattern of repetition in verses 12, 13, 15, 18, and 19 may reveal fresh insight on the topic.

Another avenue for future research could be in matching the known, day-by-day whereabouts of Joseph Smith to that of his presumed plural brides. Brian and Laura Hales no doubt correctly conclude that conjugal visits between Joseph and his plural wives must have been a rarity (69). Further in-depth research might establish this case with greater certainty.

Overall, the Hales have left readers, once again, with a solid contribution toward the understanding of Joseph's practice of plural marriage; however, no book on this subject can ever be complete or 100 percent reliable. Neither Joseph nor Emma left any account of their involvement in this difficult, very personal, and sensitive aspect of their lives and their relationship. Without Joseph and Emma's versions of events, historians are left to sift through fragments of evidence, piecing together

the most reliable narrative possible. The Hales deserve credit for undertaking this challenging and controversial task. In time, perhaps some of their conclusions will be revisited and refined. Despite limitations, the Hales have left us with an interpretation of Joseph's practice of plural marriage that is basically sound, one that tends to show Joseph as a principled man who acted in obedience to divine command.

M. Scott Bradshaw received his JD in 1989 from Brigham Young University and is a lawyer and researcher specializing in the laws surrounding the early history of the Church. He is in private practice and has been employed by the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Articles by Bradshaw include "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; and "Joseph Smith's Performance of Marriages in Ohio," *BYU Studies* 39, no. 4 (2000): 23–69.