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Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants: The Plural Marriage Revelation

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*Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants:
The Plural Marriage Revelation*
By William Victor Smith

Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018

Reviewed by Brian C. Hales

With the 2013 publication of the Gospel Topics essay addressing the introduction of polygamy in Nauvoo, Illinois, it was only a matter of time before commentaries would be written for mainstream Church members explicating the Joseph Smith revelation on celestial and plural marriage.¹ William Victor Smith is the first to make the attempt in *Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants: The Plural Marriage Revelation* (hereafter *TPMR*). The book is the latest addition to Greg Kofford Books' series Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants and is a scholarly examination of Doctrine and Covenants 132, which contains the most controversial of all Joseph Smith's revelations.

TPMR begins by scrutinizing the provenance of the revelation, including its publication history (6–20). A second, shorter chapter outlines the different introductory headings applied to the revelation in each published version (23–26). This comparison shows that though Orson Pratt (who wrote the headings) equated the “Patriarchal order of matrimony” with a “plurality of wives” in 1853, by 1876 he considered section 132 to be a “Revelation on the Eternity of the Marriage Covenant, Including Plurality of Wives,” apparently indicating the revelation's content was not limited strictly to plural marriage (24). Remaining chapters explore the text of section 132, usually by quoting a few verses at the beginning and then using excerpts from verses as subheadings throughout the remainder of the chapter.

Coming in at 273 pages, *TPMR* is a relatively long commentary, considering that the revelation contains 66 verses and 3,271 words. Readers

1. See “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo,” Gospel Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 2016, accessed 14 November 2018, <https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>.

might therefore expect an in-depth examination of nearly every nook and cranny of the revelation and its history. Such an examination is indeed applied to some of section 132's background issues and topics, which the author follows chronologically, exploring the history of each topic at the time the revelation was recorded and then tracing its interpretation over time, into the twentieth century (see 47, 53, 67, 75, and 79, for examples).

One such topic that the author addresses is priesthood keys. At several points, section 132 discusses the importance of priesthood power in relation to the "new and everlasting covenant" of marriage (D&C 132: 6–7, 18–19). And among the book's strengths is its discussion of Brigham Young's challenges to establish himself as the "one" man holding the priesthood keys after Joseph Smith's death (43–45). This discussion is helpful given that even today, rival fundamentalist factions dismiss the mainstream Church's line of authority, making claims and counter-claims concerning the identity of Smith's successor and inheritor of the highest priesthood keys.

Another relative strength of the book is its discussion of an "offer," mentioned in verse 51, that had been extended to Emma Smith and that was later rescinded. What this offer refers to is not clear, but theories have included polyandry, a husband "swap," and a divorce with property settlement.² In relation to the last theory, *TPMR* helps its readers understand the problems Joseph Smith would have confronted in deeding building lots to Emma on the day after the revelation was written down (148).

Although the research and analysis within *TPMR* shines at times, the book fails to cover some essential—and difficult—issues present in the text. Indeed, among the book's chief limitations is its tendency to ignore or diminish important or alternative interpretations of topics that are mentioned in section 132. A few of the book's most obvious oversights relate to the topics of polyandry, the sealing authority, and damnation for not obeying "the law."

Polyandry (Verse 41)

Perhaps the most controversial accusation leveled at Joseph Smith during his lifetime and after was that he practiced polyandry—that is, that he married several women who were already legally married to other men, thereby making him a second husband. Verse 41 could allude to such a

2. See Brian C. Hales, "‘He Had No Other Wife but Me’: Emma Hale Smith and Mormon Polygamy," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 37 (Spring/Summer 2017): 19–23.

practice: “And as ye have asked concerning adultery, verily, verily, I say unto you, if a man receiveth a wife in the new and everlasting covenant, and if she be with another man, and I have not appointed unto her by the holy anointing, she hath committed adultery and shall be destroyed.” Concerning this verse, *TPMR* explains: “Although a husband and wife might be sealed, the revelation leaves open the possibility of the wife being ‘appointed’ to someone else. Thus, sexual relations with another man would only be adultery if she were not appointed to him. Though the language here is somewhat confusing, it may be interpreted (together with verses 42 and 61) in terms of polyandry or ‘dual wives’” (117–18).

After its brief introduction of the topic of polyandry, *TPMR* dismisses further discussion by referring readers in a footnote to Samuel Morris Brown’s book *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death*,³ volume 2 of the Journals series of the Joseph Smith Papers Project;⁴ and to the book’s own chapter 6. None of these references discuss polyandry in any detail. Understandably, *TPMR* may not have wanted to dive into the polyandry controversy, but there are several other sources that the book could have engaged.⁵ Though

3. *TPMR* refers specifically to pages 241–47 of Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

4. *TPMR* cites specifically *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, *The Joseph Smith Papers* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), xxiv–xxx.

5. Prior to the 2013 printing of my three-volume *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, other authors addressed Joseph Smith’s plural marriages to legally married women, largely assuming that these relationships functioned like traditional marriage relationships. See Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 308; George D. Smith, “Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841–46: A Preliminary Demographic Report,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Spring 1994): 10; Todd Compton, “Fawn Brodie on Joseph Smith’s Plural Wives and Polygamy: A Critical View,” in *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst (Logan: University of Utah Press, 1996), 165; D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 184–85; and Martha Sonntag Bradley and Mary Brown Firmage Woodward, *4 Zinas: A Story of Mothers and Daughters on the Mormon Frontier* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 132–33; see also Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 105–6.

Since my 2013 work, which casts doubt on Smith’s practice of polyandry (Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 3 vols. [Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013], 1:303–74), Church historians have written, “Polyandry, the marriage

wading through these sometimes sensational sources and determining their accuracy can be complicated, it seems that verse 41 makes such a discussion about polyandry unavoidable for any detailed commentary of section 132.

Key to any discussion of this verse is the possible meaning of “holy anointing.” Though the author is somewhat tentative in proposing polyandry as an interpretation to verse 41, the book limits its discussion of this topic by assuming that the holy anointing creates a second husband-wife relationship. No other interpretations are discussed, including the possibility that the anointing would simply supersede the previous sealing (leaving the woman still with only one husband).⁶ *TPMR* does not ask what the “holy anointing” might be. The answer is not obvious, which may have contributed to the author’s decision to essentially avoid the topic.⁷ Hopefully a more definitive study of this verse will be published in the future.

of one woman to more than one man, typically involves shared financial, residential, and sexual resources, and children are often raised communally. There is no evidence that Joseph Smith’s sealings functioned in this way, and much evidence works against that view.” “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo,” n. 30.

6. In regard to the “holy anointing,” dubious interpretations have already been published. For example, antagonistic writer Wilhelm Wyl declared in 1886: “You remember that passage in the Revelations about celestial marriage, where ‘the Lord’ says to Joseph: ‘and if she be with another man, and I have not appointed unto her *by the holy* anointing, she has committed adultery.’ Well, an old Mormon, who had been very intimate with Joseph in Nauvoo, assured me that the prophet always carried a small bottle with holy oil about his person, so that he might ‘anoint’ at a moment’s notice any woman to be a queen in Heaven.” William Wyl, *Joseph Smith, the Prophet, His Family and His Friends: A Study Based on Facts and Documents, with Fourteen Illustrations* (Salt Lake City: Tribune, 1886), 55, italics in original. It is certainly reasonable to ignore Wyl’s propaganda, but William Smith does not venture to explore what “holy anointing” might refer to.

7. The word “holy” can refer to a temple activity or rite. “Anointing” too is an ordinance that commonly occurs in a temple setting. One explanation posits that “holy anointing” refers to the ordinance that, according to the Joseph Smith Papers, Wilford Woodruff “often referred to as a ‘second anointing’ in his journal.” The ordinance was administered to Joseph and Emma Smith and other couples and was described in Joseph Smith’s journal as being “anointed & ord^d. [ordained] to the highest and holiest order of the priesthood.” “Nauvoo Journals, May 1843–June 1844,” introduction to *Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, *The Joseph Smith Papers* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2015), xxi.

The Importance of Sealing Authority (Verses 7–20)

TPMR analyzes the text as if the entire revelation is about plural marriage, which is not wholly unreasonable (40). It is true that the first verse of section 132 mentions a plurality of wives and early Latter-day Saint pluralists generally accepted this interpretation between the 1840s and 1890. However, a strict reading of the text reveals that polygamy is not specifically mentioned again until verse 34. The intervening verses introduce the new and everlasting covenant of marriage using monogamous language: “if a man marry a wife” (verses 15, 18, 19, and 26).

TPMR fails to consider the possibility that Joseph’s question that precipitated this revelation elicited a broader response from God—an answer that far surpassed the original question. This situation occurred in 1833 when Joseph Smith prayed about the use of tobacco.⁸ The Lord responded by giving him a general dietary code we now call the “Word of Wisdom” (D&C 89). God’s answer to Joseph’s question included a single verse discussing tobacco tucked within a much broader instruction on dietary issues.

Several observations support that Joseph’s question about *plural* marriage brought forth a discussion about *eternal* marriage, which incorporated the principle of polygamy but also introduced a much grander doctrine of *sealing authority*—the doctrine that through proper priesthood authority individuals can be sealed together in eternal familial relationships. It might be argued that the greatest significance of Joseph Smith’s plurality was not in multiple wives, but in the authority that sealed those wives.⁹ In Joseph Smith’s cosmological calculus, sealing ordinances reach much further than polygamy alone ever could.

Instead, *TPMR* treats sealing as a subtext to polygamy, stating there is “seeming inseparability of polygamy and eternal sealing” (2; see also 4, 132). This creates a sort of polygamy tunnel vision throughout the remaining text, which contrasts with how current Church members usually refer to section 132. Twenty-first-century Latter-day Saints usually refer to the revelation to discuss the importance of the sealing ordinance and its use in creating eternal marriages and families, not to

8. See Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 12:157–58 (February 8, 1868).

9. See Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 331; John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:222–23 (April 7, 1866).

study plural marriage. Although one could argue that this is because the Church itself has downplayed the doctrine of plural marriage, the fact that Church members commonly see this revelation as relating to sealing and eternal marriage may be justification enough to consider that interpretation of the text. *TPMR*, however, does not address the topic of sealing authority on its own terms.

“Damnation” for Not Obeying the “Law” (Verse 6)

TPMR’s scope is significantly narrow in its interpretation of the “law” in verse 6: “And as pertaining to the new and everlasting covenant, it was instituted for the fulness of my glory; and he that receiveth a fulness thereof must and shall abide the law, or he shall be damned, saith the Lord God.” *TPMR* tells its audience: “The revelation [makes] clear that after receiving knowledge of the law of plural marriage, a failure to participate resulted in damnation (verse 4 [*sic* verse 6])” (86). This view is consistently put forth within the pages of *TPMR* (35, 37, 76–77, 82–83).

TPMR’s interpretation is certainly not foreign. Plural marriage was taught as a commandment to Latter-day Saints living between the 1840s and 1890, similar to other customized commandments, like animal sacrifice and circumcision, which had been divinely issued at specific times and places in the past. Today, some Latter-day Saints, particularly women, have expressed their concerns that *TPMR*’s interpretation is indeed correct and that plural marriage will be required in heaven.¹⁰ Mormon fundamentalists, who continue to marry polygamously, would happily agree,¹¹ while critics likely enjoy an interpretation that alleges that all Church members today are going to be damned because they are monogamists.¹²

10. See Carol Lynn Pearson, *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Pivot Point Books, 2016). See also my response: Brian C. Hales, “Opportunity Lost,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 23 (2017): 91–109. The Church’s Gospel Topics essay “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo,” published in 2016, states that “Latter-day Saints believe that monogamy—the marriage of one man and one woman—is the Lord’s standing law of marriage” and that “the precise nature of these relationships [marriages to more than one person] in the next life is not known, and many family relationships will be sorted out in the life to come.”

11. Anne Wilde, “Section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Fundamentalist Mormon Perspective,” in *The Persistence of Polygamy: Fundamentalist Mormon Polygamy from 1890 to the Present*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2015), 502–37.

12. See discussion under the subheading “They Receive Me Not” (82–84).

An alternate explanation observes that sealing authority is introduced in the very next verse (verse 7), suggesting that the “law” refers not to plural marriage but to being sealed according to that “law.” Further, *damnation* does not necessarily refer to a lack of salvation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “to damn” as “to condemn to a particular penalty or fate.”¹³ Verses 16–17 describe the eternal destiny of those who have not been sealed by this newly revealed authority to a spouse (in life or by proxy) at the final judgment. They are saved but not exalted and live singly, not with a family, for all eternity. This fate is a form of damnation. Thus, one can read this text as meaning that not receiving the sealing ordinance (introduced in verse 7) brings about this form of condemnation. *TPMR* does not mention this possibility but instead asserts polygamy is the “law” referred to.

Summary

TPMR contains numerous useful discussions of topics that are connected to section 132. Though the history and theological underpinnings of the revelation are presented somewhat unevenly, readers will undoubtedly come away with a greater understanding of the revelation’s provenance and its importance to early Church members and ecclesiastical leaders. Though space in any book project is necessarily limited, the analyses in this book would have benefited from discussions of alternate interpretations regarding pertinent historical and doctrinal subjects currently overlooked. Such discussions would have given readers a more complete contextual understanding of section 132.

Brian C. Hales is the author of seven books dealing with the restoration of plural marriage among the Latter-day Saints—most notably *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013). His *Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations after the Manifesto* received the 2007 Best Book Award from the John Whitmer Historical Association. Brian works as an anesthesiologist and has served as the president of both the Utah Medical Association and the John Whitmer Historical Association.

13. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1:642.