

Lucy's Courtship & Kimball's Wager

POLYGAMY AND THE ECONOMICS OF SALVATION

By Carrie A. Miles

IN 1842, JOSEPH SMITH PROPOSED MARRIAGE TO Lucy Walker, a sixteen-year-old girl who had come to live with him and Emma after Lucy's mother had died. Lucy was disturbed by the Prophet's proposal, and Joseph tried to reassure her. Ultimately, however, he confessed, "I have no flattering words to offer."¹

Scholars have offered many explanations for why a group of Christians in nineteenth-century America should suddenly start practicing a form of marriage decried as a "relic of barbarism." But it's not clear whether any of them explains why a middle-aged, married man would propose an illegal marriage to an astonished sixteen year old without any "flattering words," professions of affection, or even a lustful leer. Indeed, Lucy herself wrote that his statement "aroused every drop of Scotch in my veins."² Yet she accepted his proposal.

If Joseph's wooing of Lucy paid little heed to the normal rituals of love, another method of courtship he employed closely rivaled it for lack of romance. In several cases, Joseph was reported to have simply asked close friends to give him their wives. The only instance of this for which we know the details involved Heber C. Kimball, one of Joseph's closest followers, and Kimball's wife, Vilate.³ After much agonizing, Heber agreed to let Vilate go to Joseph, only to be told that the request was only a test. If Kimball was let off the hook, however, at least three men did, in fact, give their wives to Joseph, standing as proxy or as witness as their wives were celestially sealed to him.⁴ Joseph also took as wives several other already-married women who continued to live with their legal husbands, who may or may not have known about their wives' new relationship.

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These and other aspects of LDS plural marriage, especially as Joseph practiced it, seem scandalous and inexplicable to us today. Like Lucy Walker, we expect marriage to be motivated by love or at least by sexual attraction. Like Heber C. Kimball, we would be taken aback if asked to share our beloved life companion with a good friend. Critics in both the nineteenth and twentieth century have called Mormon polygamy unnatural, depraved, immoral, and degrading to women. Some scholars have suggested that Joseph Smith must have been insane in order to have begun the practice.⁵ In this paper, I suggest that Joseph and LDS plural marriage were none of these things. But in order for us in the late twentieth century to understand nineteenth-century LDS polygamy, we must do as Lucy, Heber, Vilate, and Joseph did—give up our notions of marriage based on sex and companionship. For although sex and romance were undoubtedly part of plural marriage, they were not what polygamy was about. Celestial marriage was about something else entirely different.

THE ECONOMICS OF POLYGAMY

Why do more men take additional wives than women do husbands?

For most of human history, marriage, as the merging of resources from the bride and groom's families, was considered too important to trust to romantic love. Historically, when property was involved, marriages were arranged by parents without much concern for the feelings of their children. Indeed, in the Middle Ages, it was not unusual to have one or both of the participants married against their will.⁶

When marriage is based on economic considerations, the partners must be "well matched." For example, in pre-industrial society, a wealthy landowner was considered best

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matched with a woman who had the managerial and social skills and family background to run his substantial household and to help advance his interests. It would have been foolish for him to marry the stableman's daughter. It would have been similarly unwise for an accomplished woman of a few centuries ago to marry a peasant. She would be wasted on a peasant, i.e., she wouldn't be able to be as productive with the peasant as she would be with a wealthy man. Although such mismatches were often the subject of Romantic novels, poor matches are dangerous, as the partner with greater resources is liable to be "bid away" by someone who has more to offer than the original spouse. This danger is clear at the extremes, where even today we see the husbands of beautiful women and the wives of wealthy or powerful men always on their guard against interlopers.

It is this need for economic balance—a good match—between husband and wife that makes polygamy possible. Polygamy occurs when, rather than accepting a poor monogamous match, individuals decide they would rather have part of a superior spouse than all of an inferior one. Polygyny (one man married to two or more women) is the most common form of polygamy, economist Gary Becker says, because in the traditional, pre-industrial world, men varied more in the resources they brought to marriage than women did. After all, if all men were the same, what woman would choose to share her husband and thus give up half of the resources that would be available to her otherwise? All men, however, are not the same. A man may be a captain of industry or a beggar—a difference of millions. Thus, a woman may find that she can be more productive (better matched) with part of a rich man, who can support her and her children, than with all of a poor one, who cannot. (Even today, there are no doubt plenty of women who would be happy to be Bill Gates's third, fourth, or twentieth wife, if such a thing were legal and Gates interested.) In contrast, except for heiresses, the most important resource women brought to marriage was the ability to bear children. In this aspect, women don't vary as much as men do: a woman may bear one child or twelve, but she doesn't bear thousands. If marriage is based on this kind of economy, there is no motive for polyandry (one woman married to two or more men), as a woman does not have more children with two husbands

than with one, and wife-sharing means that men have to compete with the other husbands for the services of the wife and her children. Hence, we find that 85 percent of human societies have practiced polygyny, while polyandry is very rare (0.1 percent).⁷

Although not presented in a formal model, this economic rationale for polygamy is often recognized by those practicing it. Mormon schismatic James J. Strang, for example, argued that polygamy gave women a wider selection of men, more bargaining power, and a better opportunity to be "matched" rather than "mated."⁸ Polygamy is most attractive to men who desire numerous children or the other things women produce. In some parts of Africa, for instance, polygyny is practiced by the larger landholders because women do most of the farm work, and more wives mean more laborers.⁹ Indeed, economic arguments such as these were presented by late nineteenth-century Church spokesmen in their struggle against federal attempts to stop the practice.

THE PROBLEMS WITH THE NATURAL STATE

The reasons why polygamy is "natural" also make it antithetical to the Christian ideal of marriage.

POLYGAMY, then, is a natural state when the basis of marriage is material economic concerns.¹⁰ Polygamy exists formally wherever there is the absence of laws or prevailing moral positions against it. Even when formally forbidden, it occurs informally; rich men take and support mistresses, some openly. Informal polygamy is not limited to men, either. Women who are wealthy in their own right may take lovers (Catherine the Great, Madonna) or go through a string of husbands (Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor.) Hence, while we may believe that some forms of marriage are more moral than others, no one form is more "natural" than another. They are all natural, depending on the circumstances.¹¹

If polygamy is a natural state, then, there is no reason to view the LDS practice of polygamy as *unnatural*, insane, depraved, based on excessive lust, or the enslavement of women. It is perhaps not even immoral. We need neither a psychologist, a sociologist, or a theologian to explain why people would accept something for which natural forces argue. The problem

nineteenth-century Mormon polygamists faced was not that polygamy was unnatural, but that Christian marriage was not supposed to be natural or based on material consideration. The Christian tradition consistently urged that marriage be entered into only with the willing consent of both parties and that this marriage, once entered, be exclusive and companionate. The medieval Christian church fought hard to limit arranged or coerced marriage. By the nineteenth century, *companionate* marriage—"the union of two approximate equals, based on mutual respect, affection and the close companionship of husband and wife"—was firmly established as the ideal in the Christian world.¹² Polygyny, which is usually based on "considerations of male sexual desire, financial arrangements, and heirship,"¹³ was the antithesis of companionate marriage. Although Christian "experiments" with polygamy occurred among deviate groups, they were the exception, not the norm, and they were soundly decried by the rest of Christianity.

In this context, polygamy was not by definition crazy or unnatural, nor was it particularly degrading to women, since it was probably the best alternative available to them under the circumstances. A more productive question about the origins of Mormon polygamy is what was it about Mormonism that allowed it to reject Christianity's traditional teachings about the practice? For, like Lucy Walker, most early converts came into this new religion holding the same ideals of romantic love, "flattering words," and companionate marriage treasured by the rest of nineteenth-century American society. Indeed, Joseph Smith's marriage to his first and legal wife, Emma Hale, was obviously based on mutual affection and attraction; she eloped with him contrary to the wishes of her father.

THE EXCEPTION THAT PROVES THE RULE

Women will marry polygamously when it is economically advantageous. But Joseph Smith was poor.

AN ECONOMIC understanding of polygamy raises interesting questions in an LDS context. For one, if polygamy comes about because some people can afford it better than others, why was Joseph Smith, who did not and probably could not have supported all his wives, the man Mormon women were willing to marry? If not material wealth, what was it that Joseph Smith had to offer women that made them more "productive" with him than with any other man, including their own husbands?

The answer to this question is obvious with a cursory knowledge of LDS doctrine. A central teaching of the Church is its expansion of the traditional Christian concept of heaven and hell. In Mormon thought, the eternal state of those human beings who would go to heaven differs depending on their degree of righteousness and participation in the various rituals of the Church. The highest reward was "exaltation" or "eternal salvation" in the "Celestial kingdom" of God. Joseph Smith, as prophet, held the "keys" to the religious rituals necessary to attain exaltation—baptism, temple endowments, eternal sealings, and second anointings. This meant, essentially, that the eternal salvation of anyone living during this period would

have to come directly or indirectly through Joseph Smith. Smith made these rituals available to both men and women, but the power to save was delegated only to men. A woman would be exalted only in connection with her husband.

This masculine power to save was unequally distributed, however. As the focal point of Mormon salvation in this period of time, Joseph had a unique assurance that he would be exalted. As he told one of his wives, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, "I know that I shall be saved in the Kingdom of God. I have the oath of God upon it and God cannot lie."¹⁴ Moreover, "It has been revealed to him," that he had the power to save anyone who was sealed to him: "All that he gives me I shall take with me for I have that authority and that power conferred upon me."¹⁵

What Joseph had in greater abundance than other men, what other Mormon men had in varying amounts, what some men didn't have at all, and what women could get only in conjunction with a husband, was not material wealth but the ability to "save . . . in the Celestial kingdom."¹⁶ Women who were "sealed" to appropriately saved husbands were assured of the level of exaltation that their husband would enjoy. Clearly then, under these circumstances, it would be more to women's advantage to have part of Joseph's exaltation than to have all of a man's with less ability to save.

SALVATION AND PLURAL MARRIAGE

Women entered into polygamy for salvation, not romance.

IT was no coincidence that the code name for plural marriage was celestial marriage. The basis for Mormon marriage was neither material wealth nor companionate love, but the Prophet's unique ability to save. Although those women who left written records of their celestial marriages to Joseph recount their initial resistance to accepting an illegal and seemingly immoral form of marriage, they were, for the most part, won over by assurances that this would guarantee their salvation. For example, Helen Mar Kimball wrote of her marriage to Joseph Smith:

I heard him [Smith] teach . . . 'If you will take this step, it will ensure your eternal salvation & exaltation' . . . This promise was so great that I willingly gave myself to purchase so glorious a reward.¹⁷

Moreover, it seems that Joseph would have been held accountable should he refuse to use his power to save others, just as it would have been sinful to refuse to be saved. Mary Elizabeth Rollins recounted that Joseph told her that their union was commanded by God, and that when he hesitated to take her as his wife, an angel with a drawn sword appeared to enforce the commandment. And if it was not admiration that drove Joseph Smith to propose to Lucy Walker, the rest of his statement to her makes clear just what it was: "I have no flattering words to offer. It is a command of God to you. I will give you until tomorrow to decide this matter. If you reject this message the gate will be closed forever against you."¹⁸

As plural marriage became institutionalized in Utah, its basis in salvation, not romantic love, became even more ob-



President Joseph F. Smith with his wives and children.

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vious. Brigham Young once said:

Elders, never love your wives one hair's breath further than they adorn the Gospel, never love them so but that you can leave them at a moment's warning without shedding a tear. Should you love a child any more than this? No." . . . "Wives should put aside all desire for the exclusive and romantic company of their husbands. Rather, they should simply "receive, conceive, bear, and bring forth" in the name of Israel's God. They should not be concerned with whether they were loved "a particle" by their companions. That was not what the principle was about.¹⁹

Similarly, Lucy Walker, who married Brigham Young's second-in-command, Heber C. Kimball, after Joseph died, told an interrogator:

There was not any love in the union between myself and Kimball, and it is my business entirely whether there was any courtship or not. It was the principle of plural marriage that we were trying to establish . . . and if we had established it, it would have been for the benefit of the whole human race, and the race will say so yet.²⁰

Other data say nothing about romantic love but go straight to exaltation as women's motives for entering plural marriage: "In 1844 when William Clayton asked various women to be sealed to him as wives, he recorded in his journal that 'Mary Aspen is ready to united to me as her savior, and sister Booth says that she shall not risk her salvation in Roberts hands & wants me to interfere. . . . Jane Hardman . . . prefers me for a Savior to any one else, so she says.'²¹ "Sister Booth's" unwill-

ingness to trust her salvation to her husband Robert's worthiness reflects the perception that this ability to save was in fact unequally distributed.

Finally, men who were not considered to be spiritually worthy were not allowed to keep their wives. When John Hyde was excommunicated in 1857, Heber C. Kimball said:

He has taken a course by which he has lost his family and forfeited his Priesthood. . . . His wife is not cut from this Church, but she is . . . just as free from him as though she never had belonged to him. The limb she was connected to is cut off, and she must again be grafted into the tree, if she wishes to be saved.²²

Brigham Young further taught that "if a man forfeits 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."²³

JOSEPH SMITH & DIMINISHING MARGINAL RETURNS

Can you reach a point where you have too many wives?

JOSEPH SMITH occupied an enviable position relative to men whose polygamy was based on material considerations. In polygyny based on economic exchange, the husband experiences diminishing marginal returns at some point. That is, there are only so many wives a man can support, or only so much time and attention he can devote to them, and so, at some point, he stops marrying more wives. In contrast, there was no limit to Joseph Smith's power to save. On the contrary, in early Mormon doctrine the more women a man had sealed to him, the greater his power to save them, since a man's exaltation increased with the size of his family "kingdom." Benjamin F. Johnson said Joseph taught that

The First Command was to "Multiply" and the

Organize a Neculi of Heaven to take with us. To the increase of which there would be no end²⁴

Joseph Fielding also wrote in his journal, "I understand that a Man's Dominion will be as God's is, over his own Creatures and the more numerous the greater his Dominion."²⁵

Indeed, Joseph Smith's ability to save was so strong that even death did not diminish it. After Joseph died, 335 women, many of whom he had never met, were sealed to him.²⁶

SALVATION AND POLYANDRY

Why a polygamous marriage principle encourages divorce.

CURIOSLY, the unequal distribution of charisma that formed the basis of Mormon polygyny (husband with multiple wives) also made possible polyandry (wife with multiple husbands). Some men would achieve a greater exaltation than others, and some men would not achieve exaltation at all, and since wives would enjoy whatever level of exaltation their husbands achieved, it was only fair that they be free to choose the man who could best ensure their salvation. As Joseph Smith assured Lucy Walker, "A woman would have her choice, this was a privilege that could not be denied her."²⁷ And of course, Joseph's own tremendous ability to save must have been a powerful factor encouraging women to choose him, regardless of prior obligations. Thus, at least eleven of the women Joseph married plurally were already the wives of other men. Although most of Joseph's polyandrous wives left no record of their relationships with him, one of these women, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, left several accounts of her marriage. Her story reveals that, like the single women who married Joseph, her motivation for a polyandrous marriage was the exaltation Smith offered her. Mary's husband would not join the Church and so could not save her. She said, "I begged and pled with him to join but he would not. He said he did not believe

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Prophet taught us that Dominion and powr in the great Future would be Commensurate with the no [number] or "Wives Childin & Friends" that we inherit here and that our great mission to earth was to

in it though he thought a great deal of Joseph. . . . After he said this I went forward and was sealed to Joseph for Eternity."²⁸

An 1861 sermon by Brigham Young also demonstrates the power of unequal distribution of charisma in motivating

Emmetine Free Young

Mary Ann Angell Young

Mary Van Gott Young

Augusta Adams Young

Martha Bowker Young

Miriam Works Young

Eliza Burgess Young

Naamah Kendall Jenkins Carter Young

Clark Chase Ross Young

Lucy Decker Young

Zina Diantha Huntington Young

Margaret Pierce Young

Clara Decker Young

Harriett Gook Campbell Young

Lucy Bigelow Young

Harriet Barney Young

Emily Dow Partridge Young

Susan Snively Young

Ann Eliza Webb Young

Harriet Amelia Folsom Young

Eliza Roxey Snow Young

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BRIGHAM YOUNG AND HIS WIVES.

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polyandrous marriage. Young said that the doctrine on which he preached was

received . . . from Joseph the prophet. 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 . . . If a woman claimes protection at the hands of a man, possessing more power in the priesthood and higher keys, if he is disposed to rescue her and has obtained the consent of her husband to make her his wife he can do so without a bill of divorcement.²⁹

Such a marriage, he said, "is right in the sight of God."³⁰ The divorce rate in nineteenth-century Utah was in fact quite high, especially among polygamists, and it was not difficult for divorced women to remarry. Lawrence Foster observes, "Thus, in Utah, while men could practice polygamy, easy divorce gave women the opportunity for what amounted to serial polygamy."³¹ A high level of divorce and remarriage due to women being "bid away" by higher-ranked men is something that would be predicted by the economic model.

PURCHASING A GLORIOUS REWARD
*How plural wives became mediators of salvation,
like Catholic saints.*

ALTHOUGH perhaps not all of the husbands of Joseph Smith's plural wives knew about their relationships with Joseph, as mentioned earlier, Joseph apparently asked some of his closest followers to give up their wives to him, and a few of them did. From a celestial perspective, it is puzzling why husbands would give up their wives if doing so would diminish their own kingdom. Brigham Young's 1861 sermon on "moving up" contains the caveat that the woman must have her husband's permission. Why should he give it?

Rex Cooper's account of the role of Joseph's wives suggests an answer to this question. During Joseph's lifetime, only husbands and wives could be formally sealed. Adoptive sealings, in which individuals could be sealed as children to other couples, were not yet practiced. Through his plural wives, however, Joseph's ability to save apparently could be extended to their civilly married husbands, families of origin, and friends. For examples, as to husbands, Cooper writes that

some women who were first matrimonially sealed to Joseph Smith and subsequently sealed for time to other men were seen as mediators between the two. After Joseph's death, Lucy Walker was sealed as one of several plural wives to Heber C. Kimball. Shortly before his own death in 1868, Kimball asked her, "What can you tell Joseph when you meet him? Cannot you say that I have been kind to you as it was possible to be under the circumstances? I know you can and am confident you will be as a mediator between me and Joseph and never enjoy any blessing you would not wish Heber to share."³²

Even Mary Elizabeth Rollins's disbelieving husband, Adam Lightner, was saved despite himself. After he died in 1885, he was sealed by proxy as a son to Joseph Smith and Mary Elizabeth as a "representative of the female line."³³

That marriage to Joseph would extend his exaltation to the families of his plural wives is seen in the marriages of some of Joseph's younger wives. For example, Heber Kimball offered Joseph his fourteen-year-old daughter, Helen Mar. She later wrote: "he [her father] taught me the principle of Celestial marriage, & having a great desire to be connected with the Prophet, Joseph, he offered me to him . . . I heard him [Smith] teach . . . 'If you will take this step, it will ensure your eternal salvation & exaltation and that of your father's household & all your kindred.' This promise was so great that I willingly gave myself to purchase so glorious a reward."³⁴ Another couple close to Joseph, the Whitneys, married their daughter, Sarah Ann, to Joseph in return for his promise of eternal life for the entire family.³⁵ This promise was also part of the offer Joseph made to Lucy Walker: Lucy's celestial marriage to Joseph would "prove an everlasting blessing to my father's house, and form a chain that could never be broken."³⁶

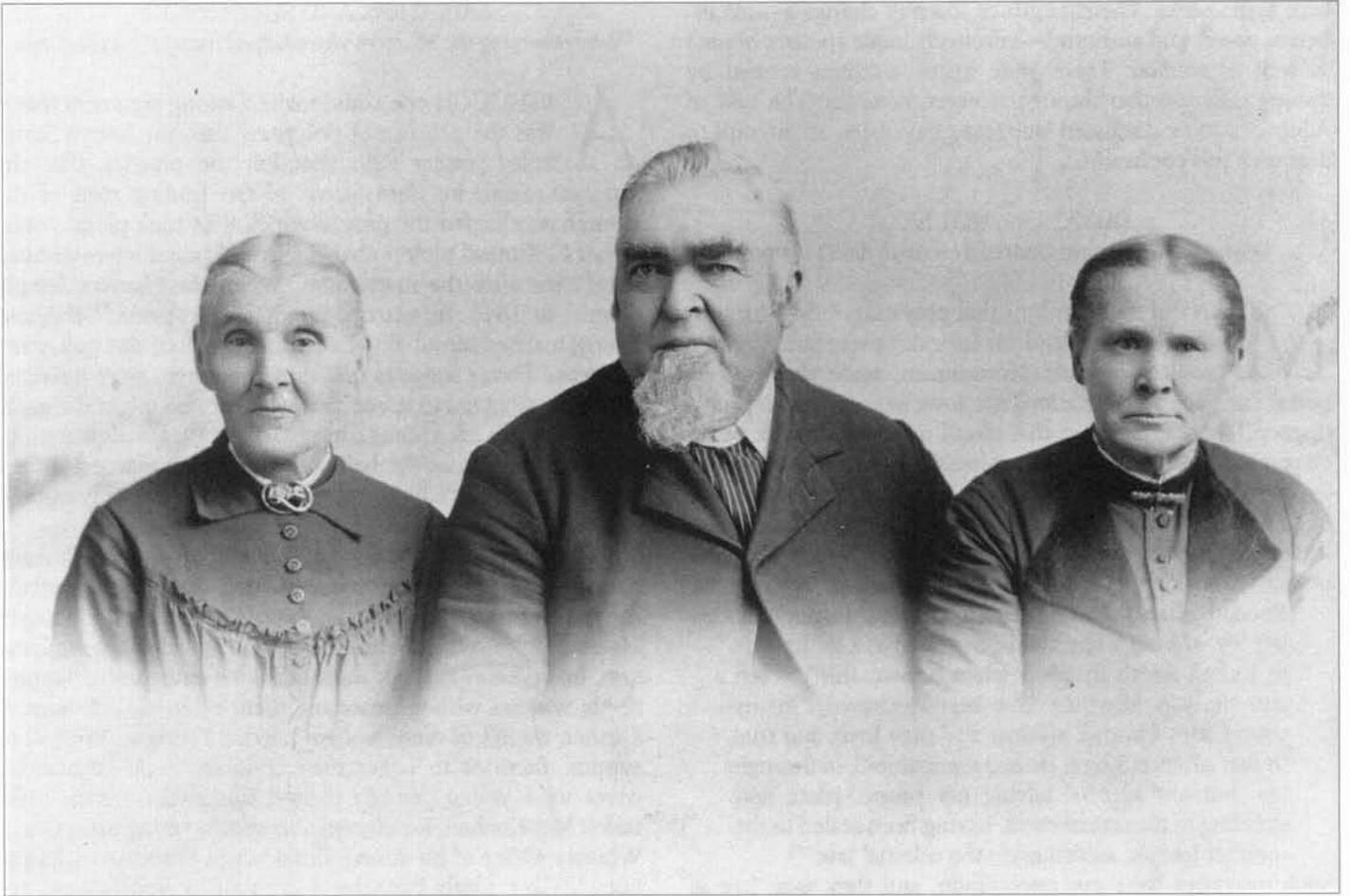
Cooper also cites a case in which it appears that some women who were matrimonially sealed to Joseph Smith regarded themselves as mediators between him and individuals who were not their blood relatives. Joseph Hovey (4 Mar. 1849) records that after he helped Prescinda Huntington Buell through a period of depression and discouragement, she declared: "Inasmuch as you have comforted me when I was weighted down in the days that are past and now, I also say in the name of Jesus Christ that you shall be blessed. . . . Yea, you shall have your exaltation, for I will see to it for your goodness towards me. Yea, I will tell Joseph Smith of your good works and you shall come on Mount Zion with the hundred and forty four thousand."³⁷

Finally, Cooper notes that "both Brigham Young and Wilford Woodruff, two of [Joseph Smith's] closest followers, would later suggest that one day the entire membership of the church might be linked through sealing ties to Joseph Smith."³⁸

These cases suggest that Joseph Smith's power to save was viewed as so strong that anyone sealed to him (and during his life, only husbands and wives were sealed, not children) could bring others along as well. In these cases, these wives were literally "saints," in the Catholic as well as Mormon sense of the term, intermediaries between individuals who were not sure of attaining salvation on their own merits and a powerful figure, Joseph Smith, who could work for their salvation before God.³⁹

KIMBALL'S WAGER
Weberian charisma will cover a multitude of whims.

WHEN Joseph Smith asked Heber Kimball for Vilate, then, for what was he asking? Did he expect her as his wife to come keep house for him?



Joel Parrish and two unidentified wives.

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Was he asking to sleep with her, as modern readers inevitably assume? Or was he asking that she, and through her Heber, become part of Joseph's heavenly kingdom? If the latter, then the husband's decision becomes a bet about how best to achieve salvation: On the one hand, giving Joseph his wife would give a man a connection to almost sure salvation, as the man was then linked to Joseph through her. On the other, if a man believed he would achieve exaltation on his own, he would want to keep his wife as part of his own kingdom. It ap-

pears, however, that in early doctrine, no one except Joseph was viewed as having independent authority.⁴⁰ All authority was derived through him. And since a husband had the option of taking other wives as celestial replacements for the one sealed to Joseph, a man's potential gain outweighed his loss.

If the currency of marriage is romantic love or economic production, asking for or giving one's wife to another man is immoral and the doctrine illogical. If the basis of celestial marriage is salvation, however, the behaviors and motives involved

here make sense. The strength of Joseph's charisma—his inherent power and authority—effectively made spouses of men as well as women. There were logical oddities created by linking men together through women, however. The Law of Adoption, to be discussed later, may have been an attempt to deal with this confusion.

SALVATION, NOT SEX

To whom a woman was married on earth didn't matter.

MANY of the questions that polyandry raised for outside observers, and for us today, were simply not a problem in early Mormonism, since the basis of plural marriage was salvation, not love, sex, or material production. There is evidence that plural marriage was not based on sexual attraction, although undoubtedly it was a strong motive in many cases. In the first place, sexuality was not a feature of all plural marriages. Joseph Smith and many other Church leaders felt it their duty to provide eternal salvation for older unmarried women and widows. For instance, Cooper writes, Rhoda Richards . . . remained a "maiden" throughout her life, although she had been sealed as a living wife to Joseph Smith in 1843 when he was thirty-seven and she was fifty-nine. She later explained, "In my young days I buried my first and only love, and true to that affiance, I have passed companionless through life: but am sure of having my proper place and standing in the resurrection, having been sealed to the prophet Joseph, according to the celestial law."⁴¹

Such marriages were not uncommon, and they were free of sexual interest. Indeed, Brigham Young once said that he would no more make some of his elderly wives a "real wife" (i.e., sleep with her) than he would his grandmother. Another indicator that sexual exclusivity was not a driving issue is that there is no evidence that Joseph Smith ever felt possessive or threatened by his plural wives' continuing to live with their legal husbands. Indeed, Mary Elizabeth Rollins said she stayed with her husband Adam Lightner after being married to Joseph because Joseph told her to do so.⁴² Brigham Young's "courtship" of Martha Brotherton is illustrative of this same point. When Brigham's persuasive powers failed to win the girl, he called in Joseph, who reportedly told her, "if you do not like it in a month or two, come to me, and I will make you free again; and if he turns you off, I will take you on."⁴³ This case implies that either Young did not mean this marriage to involve sex (unlikely, as there is no doubt that although Brigham Young avoided his grandmotherly wives, he did sleep with his more nubile brides), or that the exchange of marital sexual partners was irrelevant in the celestial scheme of things. Apparently, what mattered was that a woman was celestially sealed to a man who could save her. To whom a woman was married on earth wasn't important, because it was clear to whom she belonged in heaven. Similarly, it didn't matter with which husband a woman slept or fathered her children, since, once sealed to Joseph, any children were also accounted to Joseph's celestial reckoning.

SALVATION AND SUCCESSION

Why marrying the Martyr's wives helped transfer his charisma.

ALTHOUGH one could make a strong argument that it was the practice of polygamy that got Joseph Smith killed, rather than abandon the practice after the Prophet's death in 1844, some of the leading men of the Church accelerated the pace at which they took plural wives. Heber C. Kimball took probably fourteen plural wives within a short time after the martyrdom. When the Nauvoo Temple opened in 1846, he married another twenty-one.⁴⁴ Brigham Young married about fifty-five women before the trek west. Lawrence Foster suggests that these marriages were intended to ensure salvation to unmarried women who might die unredeemed on the hazardous trip west. This explanation is problematic, however, as Kimball and Young each married at least seven of Joseph Smith's plural wives, who were already assured of exaltation.

The explanation usually given for Young's and Kimball's marriages to Joseph's widows was that this was to provide them with material support, or to raise up children to Joseph. Material support for Joseph's wives is not an adequate explanation, however, as it is not unheard of for churches to support needy widows without marrying them off to church leaders. Further, not all of these women needed Young or Kimball to support them or to father their children. Some of Joseph's wives were young enough to find husbands of their own. Helen Mar Kimball, for example, married a young man, Orson Whitney. Other of his young plural wives, however, including Lucy Walker, Emily Partridge and Sarah Lawrence, went immediately back into loveless marriages with either Kimball or Young. The material support explanation also fails to account for why Brigham Young or Heber C. Kimball should marry women like Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Zina Huntington, Prescinda Huntington, and Sylvia Sessions, each who had been married to Joseph but who each had another husband with whom she continued to live. These women were the eternally sealed wife of one man and the earthly wife of two others.

The pattern of polygamy as it was practiced immediately after the martyrdom can perhaps be understood as a result of the succession crisis that also followed it. If plural marriage was based on the unequal distribution of a power uniquely vested in Joseph Smith, so was the priesthood or authority to govern the Church. With the key-holder dead, how was the Church to access the power he had once controlled? Michael Quinn argues that during his life Joseph Smith had suggested up to eight different ways succession might occur, so his direction on this matter was not decisive.⁴⁵ If the basis for succession were to be hierarchy, Sidney Rigdon, as the sole remaining member of the First Presidency, was the logical candidate. If it were to be lineal blood lines, then it should be Joseph Smith's son, Joseph Smith III. If revelation was to determine succession, then whose revelation? LDS doctrine required the person receiving revelation for others to already have the authority to do so. Some people did have revelations at this point and went off with whoever would follow them.

What was it that Joseph Smith had to offer
 women that made them more “productive”
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 including their own husbands?

Although the Twelve Apostles were sustained as head of the Church after Brigham Young gave a speech during which some believed they saw his appearance transformed into that of Joseph Smith's, apparently even after this, there was still not widespread agreement in Nauvoo that the Twelve should lead the Church.⁴⁶

Although Joseph's authoritative charisma went beyond plural marriage, Joseph had spent much of the last few years of his life establishing that plural marriage was the primary way to tap into it. Brigham Young and the Twelve, as the only group among the various contenders who “wholeheartedly accepted plural marriage” and who “had participated in all of the rituals Joseph Smith had secretly introduced,”⁴⁷ were really the only ones who could claim this authority. Both Sidney Rigdon and William Marks (a leading contender and the favorite of Joseph's widow, Emma) vehemently denied plural marriage, and so were left out in cold as far as their claim to this manifestation of Joseph's power.⁴⁸ One of the reasons Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball married Joseph's widows may have been to solidify their claims to his power.⁴⁹ Brigham Young married four of Joseph's plural wives within three months of the meeting in which the “mantle of the Prophet” fell upon him. Kimball also married three of Smith's widows in this time frame. Eventually, Young would marry eight women who had been sealed to Joseph while Smith was still alive. Kimball married five or six of the wives Joseph took while he lived and another four who were posthumously sealed to Joseph. Although obviously not enough to establish Young's succession, these marriages signaled that Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball shared the founder's most important power. They were both now sealed (indirectly) to Joseph himself, and they were qualified to serve as proxies to Joseph's widows if not to his church.⁵⁰

The need to claim Joseph's authoritative charisma perhaps also motivated meetings held throughout Nauvoo in the winter of 1846 in which the general membership was taught the Principle of plural marriage. Although this seems foolhardy in the face of the increasing mob hostility, the Twelve couldn't claim an authority that no one knew about. Claiming Joseph's authority meant that they must establish the full meaning of that charisma with the members as a whole by teaching them about the manifestation of that power, plural marriage.

WORKING OUT THE KINKS

Enlarging family kingdoms while eliminating wives as mediators.

JOSEPH SMITH's plural wives were essentially the only LDS women who practiced simultaneous polyandry. Perhaps no one other than Joseph had enough salvific authority to pass that power on through those affiliated with them. A related reason for the cessation of polyandry, however, may have been a recognition that establishing linkages between men through the polyandrous marriages of women was inefficient and problematic. Joseph may not have cared about the sexual exclusivity of his polyandrous wives, but other men surely would. Possibly to avoid these problems, the Church expanded the use of the second anointing and introduced the Law of Adoption shortly after Joseph's death. The last ritual introduced by Joseph, second anointing, made those anointed *sure* of their salvation. The men so anointed became, in Rex Cooper's term, “centers of salvation,” able, like Joseph, to extend their exaltation to those sealed to them. Adoptive sealings were also introduced that allowed other men to be directly sealed to these saved men as their sons. Adoptive sealings reached its “full fruition” during the trek west.⁵¹ Although these pseudo-family structures functioned as the organizing principle for the move from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Great Basin wilderness, the primary motive for them was openly spiritual. John D. Lee, for example, who was sealed as a son to Brigham Young, said that he was to look after Young's temporal interests and Young was to seek Lee's spiritual salvation, “I being an heir of his family, and was to share his blessings in common with his other heirs.”⁵² The Law of Adoption was a way in which those sure of exaltation could save others who could not save themselves, without going through wives as intermediaries.⁵³

Successors to Joseph Smith, however, had to work the kinks out of living celestial principles in the real world. For instance, Joseph didn't have to support his plural wives. The nature of polygamy changed when husbands had to provide for their wives materially as well as spiritually. Second anointing also proved to be troublesome in real life. Imagine the administrative difficulties that would arise from having a large number of citizens who are guaranteed of salvation and so cannot sin. Within a year or two of the introduction of the Law of Adoption and second anointings, Kimball was telling his

adopted sons that they must still follow the commandments.⁵⁴ Another problem arose from the fact that adoptive sealings among men presupposed that, like marriage, the partners were working for the same goals. But the concept of “the bigger your kingdom, the greater your exaltation” resulted in competition among men. If a man desired greater exaltation, he must have a bigger kingdom than other men. Why then would he “feed” another man’s kingdom by becoming part of it? The Law of Adoption didn’t work and was eventually dropped.⁵⁵

AFTER JOSEPH—A SPECULATION

Why polygamy won't make a comeback in Mormonism.

MORMON polygamy, both the multiple-wife and the multiple-husband versions, and the later Law of Adoption, were made possible by the unequal distribution of a resource, in this case, Joseph’s ability to save. Brigham Young and the next four presidents of the Church—John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Lorenzo Snow and Joseph F. Smith—all knew Joseph personally, and they appear to have preserved his charisma with the utmost devotion. John Taylor’s statement that Joseph Smith had “done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it” was even canonized in LDS scripture (D&C 135:3). In many ways, these men were the followers who accepted Joseph’s authority most fully, and perhaps not coincidentally, were the ones who stood as proxy for him in its continuing exercise on earth. And accepting that charisma, these men preserved the practices built upon its authority—second anointing and polygamy. Significantly, although Church presidents after Wilford Woodruff had to accept the U.S. government’s ban on polygamy, they more or less did so with their fingers crossed, tolerating if not actively encouraging the continuation of the practice.⁵⁶

It must have been a difficult task, however, for the original generation of Mormons to pass on their almost idolatrous regard for Joseph to those who had never known him. When Heber J. Grant became the president of the Church in 1918, the LDS people were led for the first time by a “pharaoh who knew not Joseph.”⁵⁷ Although supportive of polygamy before the Manifesto, as president, Grant would not tolerate it on any level.⁵⁸ He repudiated polygamy as being necessary for salvation, he repudiated earlier Church presidents’ clandestine continuation of polygamy, he taught that celestial marriage and plural marriage were not the same, and he actively supported the prosecution of polygamists by the government. Under President Grant’s administration, supporters of polygamy were excommunicated, and children of polygamy could not be baptized until they were old enough to repudiate plural marriage.⁵⁹ Performance of the second anointing also dwindled to a trickle under Grant, and its existence was removed from public view entirely by 1941, when a new policy forbade any couple receiving it from disclosing the fact. “As a result,” Cooper suggests, “a visible elite within the patriarchal order has disappeared; all endowed and sealed individuals are, for all practical purposes, on an equal ritual footing.”⁶⁰

The unequal distribution of power to save then, if it still exists, has become invisible. Although the reverence of LDS members for high-ranking Church leaders suggests that traces of that inequality persist, the charisma of the modern Church is tied to office, not to individuals. Gone also are the teachings about a man’s exaltation growing with the number of his wives, children, and friends, and the self-perpetuating cycle this created. The economic model thus predicts that even if polygamy were legalized, the LDS church would have no reason ever to practice it again. For the ultimate demise of Mormon polygamy was the result not of federal law, but of the inability of contemporary members to personally participate in the thing that made polygamy possible in the first place, Joseph Smith’s unrivaled ability to save “anyone who was sealed to him.”⁶¹

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

IMMERSED as we are in the idea of marriage based on romantic love, the whole notion of polygamy makes little sense to modern Americans. The economic model of marriage, however, suggests that polygamy is a natural state when marriage is based on material considerations rather than love. Thus, there is no need to attribute excessive lust, insanity, depravity, or misogyny to those who slip into its practice. Joseph Smith’s practice of polygamy, particularly polyandry, however, defies understanding on the basis of material concerns as well. It is only when we consider celestial marriage as based on the unequally distributed ability to save that we can begin to understand LDS polygamy. And the desire for salvation—not admiration, flattering words, or sexual attraction—was what early Mormons said all along was their motive for plural marriage. As both Lucy Walker and Brigham Young, as well as innumerable other latter-day polygamists, tell us, flattering words were “not what the principle was about.”

NOTES

1. Lyman O. Littlefield, *Reminiscences of the Latter-Day Saints* (Logan, Utah: 1888).
2. Littlefield.
3. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 495.
4. Todd Compton, “A Trajectory of Plurality: An Overview of Joseph Smith’s Thirty-Three Plural Wives,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (summer 1996).
5. Lawrence Foster, “The Psychology of Religious Genius: Joseph Smith and the Origins of New Religious Movements,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (winter 1993), 1–22.
6. Richard Posner, *Sex and Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).
7. Gary S. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 102.
8. Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 194.
9. Becker, 17–15.
10. My thanks to economist Larry Iannaccone for this insight.
11. Posner points out that informal polyandry—prostitution, where many men contribute to the support of one woman—is very common. Polyandry is

probably mostly informal because, as Becker points out, the purpose of the marriage contract is to protect women in their role as child bearer. Plural husbands don't need this protection, hence no marriage contract.

12. Posner, 45. Also Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1992), chapter 10.

13. Posner, 45.

14. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, "Remarks by Sister Mary E. Rollins Lightner, Who Was Sealed to Joseph Smith in 1842. BYU, 14 April 1905, She is 87 Years old." Historical Archives, 3.

15. Lightner, 3.

16. Although the early LDS church often spoke of attaining the highest degree of heaven as "salvation," it later made a distinction between the salvation offered by Christ's atonement and "eternal salvation" or "exaltation" in the Celestial kingdom. Although I continue to use the term "salvation" here, what is being discussed is this latter concept.

17. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, *Autobiography 1881* (Historical Archives). In Compton, 1997, 499.

18. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 455.

19. Journal of Discourses, 9:37, 1856. In Hardy, 91.

20. In Hardy, 104.

21. Rex Eugene Cooper, *Promises Made to the Fathers: Mormon Covenant Organizations* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 139.

22. Cooper, 192.

23. "A Few Words on Doctrine," speech at Tabernacle by Brigham Young, 8 Oct. 1861, *Brigham Young Addresses*, recorded by George Watts, LDS archives. In Todd Compton, "A Trajectory of Plurality: An Overview of Joseph Smith's Thirty-three Plural Wives," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (summer 1996): 24.

24. Dean R. Zimmerman, *I Knew the Prophets: An Analysis of the Letter of Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, Reporting Doctrinal Views of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young*. (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon). Letter written 1903. In Cooper, 138.

25. Joseph Fielding, "They Might Have Known That He Was Not a Fallen Prophet: The Nauvoo Journal of Joseph Fielding." (Transcribed and edited by Andrew F. Ehat.) *Brigham Young University Studies* 19:394-402. In Cooper, 139.

26. Thomas M. Tinney, *The Royal Family of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr.* (n.p.: Thomas Milton Tinney). This spiritual-economy model of polygamy no doubt explains marriage patterns in groups besides the Mormons. David Koresh apparently won plural wives by promising that the children they bore him would be holy. One wonders how much of the often remarked tendency of "religious geniuses" to succumb to sexual temptation can be accounted for by this model. Thanks to the audience member at the 1997 Sunstone West for pointing out the connection with Koresh.

27. Lucy Walker Kimball. 1858. "Statement of Mrs. L. W. Kimball." Historical Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

28. Lightner, 1905, 7.

29. Brigham Young, "A Few Words on Doctrine."

30. James Beck Notebooks, 1859-65, vol.1, 8 Oct. 1861, LDS archives. In Compton, 24.

31. Foster, 218. If the women were not formally divorced from their first husbands, subsequent marriages were in fact polyandrous.

32. Tinney, 10. (L. Kimball, "Statement.")

33. Lightner, 35. In Cooper, around the last quote.

34. Whitney. In Cooper, 141.

35. Cooper, 140.

36. Littlefield.

37. Cooper, 145.

38. Cooper, 149.

39. Mary Rollin's patriarchal blessing (Patriarchal blessing dated 5 July 1874. Photocopy. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Collection. Historical Archives) stated, "Great is thy glory and exaltation with thy husband the prophet who is working for thee in the presence of our Father. . . . Thou shalt be a Queen to reign in the kingdom and dominion that are appointed unto him."

40. *History of the Church*, 6:476. In Cooper, 131.

41. Cooper, 123.

42. Richard Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1986).

43. Brody, 307.

44. BAS, S. Kimball 1981:122.

45. D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844." *Brigham Young University Studies* 16:187-233.

46. D. Michael Quinn, *Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1994).

47. Cooper, 151.

48. Quinn, *Origins*, 173.

49. Quinn, 173.

50. As Quinn notes, the use of marriage to a king's widow to claim the king's authority has scriptural precedent. In his rebellion against David, Absalom sets up a tent on the roof of the palace and publicly sleeps with David's concubines (2 Sam. 16:21-22). After David's death, Solomon regards his half-brother Adonijah's request to marry David's concubine Abishag the Shunammite as a declaration of his desire to rule in Solomon's stead (1 Kings 1 and 2). As students of Old Testament polygamy, the early Mormon leaders were probably familiar with these stories.

51. Foster, 197.

52. Lee. In Foster, 197.

53. "To constitute a man responsible he must have the power and ability not only to save himself but to save others; but there are those who are not capable of saving themselves and will have to be saved by others." *History of the Church* 7:54. In Cooper, 160.

54. Cooper, 184.

55. Cooper, 195; Foster, 197.

56. Hardy, chapter 5.

57. Although in celestial terms Heber J. Grant was Joseph Smith's son, his mother having been eternally sealed to Joseph, Grant was the earthly son of Jedediah M. Grant and was born twelve years after Smith's death.

58. Hardy, 342-343.

59. Hardy, 343.

60. Cooper, 203.

61. Journal of Discourses, 9:37, 1856. In Hardy, 91.



REMISSION

(for my mother)

The crows' pitchy cries lift
on the shifting air,
yield to an interlude
of mourning doves, their muted notes
the crooning of an oboe
in late afternoon
when the sun rests
like a brass cymbal
against the tight blue
drum of horizon.
On the narrow savanna
the gleaming herd lows,
improvident snouts snuffling
the verge of the darkening grass,
the cells' incarnate chords
attuned, holding still.

—CAROL TUFTS