

## VARIATIONS ON A THEME

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### Introduction

The story of Mormon polygamy, whispered first in Kirtland and Nauvoo, and variously proclaimed, denied, and prohibited, now surfaces in a prodigious work by Todd Compton. The result of extensive and painstaking research, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, offers heretofore unavailable biographical information on the women who were sealed in marriage to Joseph Smith. Compton has provided this information in a well ordered format,<sup>1</sup> and deserves praise for an articulate and interesting resource on Joseph Smith's plural wives.

As with most books on controversial subjects, readers want to know the author's standpoint. What exactly is the flavor of this book? Is it written from the antagonistic, atheistic perspective of Fawn Brodie, or does it come from a believer's viewpoint, or somewhere in the middle? Compton volunteers a comment on this subject, though it hardly seems helpful:

I am a practicing Mormon who considers himself believing but who rejects absolutist elements of the fundamentalist world view, e.g., the view of Joseph Smith as omniscient or morally perfect or receiving revelation unmixed with human and cultural limitations. However, I do accept non-absolutist incursions of the supernatural into human experience. (p.629)

The ambiguity of that statement seems to me to be more of a warning than an explanation. Given the subject matter of polygamy, Compton's use of the term *fundamentalist* is most puzzling. Ordinarily, in the context of Mormon polygamy, the term is synonymous with "practicing polygamist," yet in this instance he seems to be using it in the pejorative sense of a religious extremist—a practicing Mormon. At the same time, however, he erroneously implies that Mormons subscribe to the idea that Joseph Smith was "omniscient" and "morally perfect."

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<sup>1</sup>With the notable exception of Compton's method of referencing his sources. It is very difficult to determine what he has referenced and what he has not referenced.

The part about “non-absolutist incursions of the supernatural” illustrates further the need to read the book to see what he’s trying *not* to say.

### **The Principle**

Historically, Mormons have defended Joseph Smith’s practice of plural marriage as having been authorized and commanded by God. They believe that marriage and sexual relations are so closely tied to spirituality that there can be no middle ground. For them, plural marriage was a commandment from God or Joseph Smith’s entire prophetic career is suspect. Members of the Reorganized Church, however, didn’t seem to be hobbled by such a conclusion. Most concluded that if Joseph Smith did it, he sinned. Now we see a variation of that hypothesis offered by Dr. Compton: 1) Joseph Smith’s doctrine of plural marriage was a social experiment, *not* a revelation, 2) Joseph Smith was an adulterer who, under false pretenses, ruined the lives of many women, and 3) one can accept items 1 and 2 and *still* be a believing Mormon.

The book begins with a prologue, providing Compton’s list of Joseph Smith’s plural wives, the dates of their marriages as well as information regarding temple proxy sealings that invariably followed when the Nauvoo temple became available. The prologue also offers commentary on the respective ages of Joseph’s wives, sexual relations, ramifications of polyandry, and other ancillary issues dealing with plural marriage. Although first mentioned in the introduction (xiv-xv), the prologue sets the tone of the book which consistently implies that plural marriage, rather than being commanded by God, was a human experiment and the cause of depression, anxiety and loneliness among the women who practiced it. This conclusion, however, isn’t the result of comparisons with other monogamous frontier women, it is merely the premise of the book offered from a feminist perspective. As evidence of the emotional trauma inflicted upon polygamous women, Compton cites Annie Clark Tanner, a polygamous wife who wrote that

her husband abdicated his responsibilities to provide for her and told her to seek support from her grown sons. Compton offers her complaint, that to her, Mr. Tanner seemed to be less of a husband and “more like a guest.” While this clearly illustrates that Annie was denied reasonable expectations from her marriage, the context of her situation is *hardly* representative of a typical plural marriage. Annie Tanner wrote this in 1913. She was the second wife of a man who married three of his five wives *after the manifesto*.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Tanner married all his plural wives between 1883 and 1904, at the height of public outrage against polygamy, when polygamists faced imprisonment if they visited or supported their plural families. Certainly Annie Clark Tanner experienced loneliness and feelings of abandonment; but it hardly seems reasonable to offer her experience as typical of plural marriage as established by Joseph Smith.

I was most disappointed by the naturalistic presentation of the data, both in the prologue and the individual biographies. The fact that plural marriage was first and foremost a principle of religion seems to have been lost to discussions of polyandry, “sexual attraction” and the dangers of “jealous husbands.” (p.3). Although Compton includes familiar stories that have tended to emphasize the religious aspects of plural marriage, he dilutes this information with personal speculation that constantly questions the propriety of Joseph Smith’s actions and suggests that this doctrine was founded in Joseph Smith’s fertile mind rather than in revelation from God. His comments and biographies come peppered with subjective comments that continually remind readers that LDS plural marriage “probably” had some other source than revelation. However, one need not necessarily be a believer in Joseph Smith to also believe that he was not motivated by lust. George Bernard Shaw offered his opinion that Joseph Smith was nothing less than devoutly religious in his attempt to implement plural marriage among equally devout followers:

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<sup>2</sup> Hardy, B. Carmon. *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage*. Urbana and Chicago: University of

Now nothing can be more idle, nothing more frivolous, than to imagine that this polygamy had anything to do with personal licentiousness. If Joseph Smith had proposed to the Latter-day Saints that they should live licentious lives, they would have rushed on him and probably anticipated their pious neighbors who presently shot him.<sup>3</sup>

Compton minimizes or dismisses or denies the religious foundation that undergirded the practice of plural marriage, and this allows him to offer revisionist claims that might otherwise not merit consideration. For example, Compton offers William Marks' 1853 recollection that Joseph Smith tried to distance himself from plural marriage, concluding that if he weren't able to stop the practice, the Church would be ruined and the saints expelled from the United States. Even though Compton cautions that this recollection is seen through RLDS lenses, its inclusion says much more than Compton's introductory comment. He claims that Marks' account "suggest[s] ... that Smith came to have doubts about polygamy before his death." Marks does far more than suggest that Smith *had doubts*, he asserts that Joseph Smith unequivocally stated that plural marriage was *a curse* and that he himself *had been deceived* in allowing its practice. The fact that Compton soft pedals this devastating condemnation of Joseph Smith's character is only secondary to the fact that Marks' claims simply do not hold up to historical inspection.

Marks' recollection implies that plural marriage in the Church had acquired a life of its own, over which Joseph Smith had no control. In reality, as Church president, Joseph Smith exercised absolute control over the sealing power before his death and Brigham Young continued that practice afterwards.<sup>4</sup>

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Illinois Press, 1992. Post Manifesto Polygamous Marriages A Tentative List With Remarks. Appendix II #186.

<sup>3</sup> Shaw, Bernard. *The Future of Political Science in America*. An Address by Mr. Shaw to the Academy of Political Science at the Metropolitan Opera House. New York, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April, 1933. (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1933) as cited in Vetterli, Richard. *Mormonism Americanism and Politics*. Salt Lake City, Ensign Publishing pp. 461-462.

<sup>4</sup> Aug. 10th 1845 Letter of Brigham Young to William Smith, RLDS Archives.

## Polyandry

The most difficult position for LDS people to accept is the idea that Joseph Smith engaged in full polyandry—and Compton emphasizes this claim at every opportunity. Polyandry refers to a woman living with more than one concurrent husband; and polyandry is the primary and consistent theme of this book. While it is true that Joseph Smith was sealed to women who had currently living husbands, there is no evidence that this resulted in simultaneous sexual partners. Yet, in the biographical sketches, Compton repeatedly affirms that these sealings were tantamount to marriage in every respect, pointing out that at Joseph’s death, plural wives were all *widows* even though they had living husbands at the time. This consistent emphasis upon polyandry and its salacious overtones has made this book the darling of anti-Mormons and assured it a prominent place in their bookstores. The claim of *de facto* polyandry as opposed to theological polyandry—sealing for eternity without earthly cohabitation—relies mostly upon guilt by association. That is, since Joseph Smith cohabited with some wives, Compton concludes it’s *likely* that he cohabited with others even if they were married to other men at the time.

In discussing polyandry, LDS leaders have claimed that Joseph Smith was sealed to other men’s wives for eternity, rather than for time and eternity.<sup>5</sup> Compton disallows this as implausible, noting “there are no known instances of marriages for ‘eternity only’ in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.” (p. 14). While specific instances may not be available, Joseph F. Smith, in his testimony before the senatorial committee investigating Reed Smoot, said that he was personally aware of such marriages occurring until about 20 years previous:

Mr. TAYLER. Living persons have been united for eternity, have they not?  
Mr. SMITH. I think there have been some few cases of that kind.

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<sup>5</sup> “It is also possible, though the Church does not now permit it, to seal two living persons for eternity only, with no association on earth.” (John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith Seeker After Truth Prophet of God*, SLC, Deseret News Press. 1951, p.234)

Mr. VANCOTT. To what time, Mr. Tayler, do you limit your question?  
Mr. TAYLER. I was going to ask him. How recently have you known that kind of a marriage?  
Mr. SMITH. Not very recently.  
Mr. TAYLER. Do you mean five years or twenty-five years?  
Mr. SMITH. Oh, twenty years or more.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph F. Smith's testimony in this regard is important in another aspect, for he stated unequivocally, that sealings for eternity did not allow for earthly cohabitation. After Smith saying that it was possible to be sealed for time, time and eternity, or only for eternity, the committee chairman asked about the possible rights of cohabitation between those sealed only for eternity:

The CHAIRMAN. According to the doctrines of your church, did that carry with it the right of earthly cohabitation?

Mr. SMITH. It was not so understood.

The CHAIRMAN. Then, what is your—

Mr. SMITH. It does not carry that right.<sup>7</sup>

Since such a marriage did not carry rights of cohabitation in 1904, it is plausible that Joseph F. Smith was simply describing a policy that had been in place since the days of Nauvoo. Evidence that this was also the policy in Nauvoo is found in the one historical document, largely ignored by Compton, specifying the parameters of plural marriage: the 132<sup>nd</sup> section of the Doctrine and Covenants. This document came as *the* revelation explaining and approving plural marriage, in an effort to justify Joseph Smith's actions and convince doubters. If his actions included polyandry, it seems very strange that the revelation does not address that concept.

The sealing of other men's wives to Joseph Smith might have served the same purpose of sealing children to their parents. Although Compton points out in his notes that "[m]arriage, sealing and adoption, in fact, were nearly interchangeable concepts" (p. 637), this seems to be much too important to be relegated to, or lost in a footnote.

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<sup>6</sup> Proceedings before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate in the Matter of The Protests Against the Right of Honorable Reed Smoot, a Senator From the State of Utah, to Hold His Seat.

## Sealings and Adoption

Subsequent Church leaders struggled with the practical application of the concepts of sealing and adoption at a time when practically all adult members of the Church were first generation Mormons. Joseph Smith's teachings emphasized that everyone needed to be sealed, in order to complete an eternal chain:

The first thing you do, go and seal on earth your sons and daughters unto yourself, and yourself unto your fathers in eternal glory, and go ahead, and not go back, but use a little wisdom, and seal all you can...<sup>8</sup>

Many early Mormons had living parents and spouses who weren't members of the Church, and consequently weren't eligible for sealing blessings. The obvious solution for those needing sealing blessings would have been to arrange to be sealed to someone likely to attain exaltation—such as Joseph Smith. Thus commenced a policy referred to as the “law of adoption” whereby faithful members would be sealed to Joseph Smith or other church leaders. In succeeding years, members were encouraged by Wilford Woodruff to be sealed to their own ancestors as far as they could find them and then to seal those individuals to

*Joseph Smith:*

We want the Latter-day Saints from this time to trace their genealogies as far as they can, and to be sealed to their fathers and mothers. Have children sealed to their parents, and run this chain through as far as you can get it. When you get to the end, *let the last man be adopted to Joseph Smith, who stands at the head of the dispensation.*<sup>9</sup>

With Joseph Smith standing in the position as the last link of the chain, it shouldn't be surprising that many women were sealed to him, including women who were civilly married to other men.

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Washington: Government Printing Office 1904 Volume I. p. 185

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* pp. 479-480.

<sup>8</sup> Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.340

<sup>9</sup> Collected Discourses. Edited by Brian H. Stuy. Burbank, California, and Woodland Hills, Utah: B.H.S. Publishing, 1987-1992. Vol. 4, April 8, 1894 [emphasis added]

Compton dismisses the idea that Joseph’s polyandrous marriages were most likely for “eternity” rather than for “time and eternity” because the language of the ceremonies included “time and eternity.” This may have resulted simply from the perception that a woman needed to be sealed for time before she could be sealed for eternity—and that sealing for *time* apparently, didn’t constitute an earthly marriage.

When church leaders implemented ordinance work in the Nauvoo temple, they repeated the sealing ceremonies that had been performed before the temple was available. In every instance, a woman was first sealed for time before being sealed to Joseph Smith for eternity. Where the woman had a living husband who was not LDS, she was sealed for *time* to another individual, but that did not constitute a marriage allowing cohabitation. For example, Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner had a non-Mormon husband with whom she lived throughout her life. In the temple, she was sealed to Brigham Young for “time” before being sealed to Joseph Smith. She never lived with Brigham Young and the intent of her sealing with him seems merely to have been to qualify for the eternal sealing.

In the prologue, Compton suggests that Joseph’s marriages crossed over the line of propriety. He claims that Joseph Smith’s marriage to Helen Mar Kimball included sexual relations, even though this relies solely upon a hostile source: Catherine Lewis. Compton notes that Lewis’ other assertions are obviously suspect, but allows that this most damaging claim has some basis in fact. There is reason to doubt that Joseph’s marriage to Helen Kimball included sexual intimacy. We know that marriages of young girls during Utah’s polygamous years were performed with the understanding that cohabitation would be postponed until the girl had arrived at a suitable,



marriageable age.<sup>10</sup> For example, in Nauvoo, Brigham Young sealed a 14 year old girl to William Smith, emphasizing in the record that she was still *Miss Rice*.<sup>11</sup>

Compton offers evidence that Joseph Smith fathered a child with the married Sylvia Sessions Lyon. That evidence includes a signed statement in 1915, by Josephine Fisher that her mother [Sylvia] told her on her deathbed that she [Josephine] was the daughter of Joseph Smith. Additionally, Compton offers a third or fourth hand recollection of Salt Lake Stake President Angus Cannon where he claims “it was said” that Josephine’s grandmother [Patty Sessions] made the same claim and that Brigham Young “refer[red] to the report.” My own skeptical nature urges me to ask if any of these statements *really* carries the weight of documentary evidence? The nebulous “it was said” doesn’t directly attribute the comment to Patty Sessions, nor does the fact that Brigham Young might have referred to the report strengthen its case. Young could have referred to the report by either validating it or asking, “She said *what?*” We simply aren’t told that Josephine’s grandmother specifically made the claim or that Brigham Young validated it. Susa Young Gates indicated that her father wasn’t aware of such a child when she wrote that her father and the other apostles were especially grieved that Joseph *did not have any issue in the Church*<sup>12</sup>.

Readers should be cautioned about the book’s doctrinal deficiencies. Compton’s perspective seems to be awfully rigid and in many respects alien to mainstream LDS thought. For example, Compton often refers to Mormon (historic and current) belief in “omniscient” (p. 629) or “infallible” (p. 23) leaders. These concepts seem to be caricatures based upon a view of Mormonism from without rather than from within. Mormons have long recognized that their

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<sup>10</sup> See Eugene E. Campbell, *Establishing Zion: The Mormon Church in the American West 1847-1869* (SLC: Signature Books, 1988), p. 198 note 5.

<sup>11</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, p.221 “Young’s diary uncharacteristically emphasized “Miss” for William’s polygamous bride because she was fourteen years old.”

<sup>12</sup>Cited by Compton, p. 661 [emphasis added].

leaders are mortal, fallible men with faults and limitations. Joseph Smith taught clearly that a prophet wasn't always a prophet<sup>13</sup> and explained: "I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught."<sup>14</sup>

## **Conclusion**

*In Sacred Loneliness* takes exception to that claim by allowing that there was indeed, error in the revelation on plural marriage. The followers of the Reorganized Church rejected this principle as gross immorality, concluding that Joseph's involvement in it disqualified him from further prophetic leadership. *In Sacred Loneliness* agrees with the idea that the revelation was false, but it implies that those who participated in this "experiment" somehow retained favor with God. That premise has been rejected by Latter-day Saints since the days of Joseph Smith—for it suggests that sexual immorality isn't *really that bad*. It disparages the prophets and apostles who taught plural marriage, as well as the devout men and women who believed, defended, and practiced this principle for over seventy years. It strikes at the very foundation of Mormonism by suggesting that Joseph Smith and his successors—God's appointed leaders—were capable of institutionalizing licentiousness under the guise of piety. Readers, therefore, should be cautioned that the premise of this book is inimical to the Mormon concept that its leaders are holy men whose lives have qualified them to act in the name of God.

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<sup>13</sup> Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.278

<sup>14</sup> TPJS p. 368.