

Chapter 8

“What’s Love Got to Do with It?”: Earthly Experience of Celestial Marriage, Past and Present

Carrie A. Miles

In 1842, Joseph Smith—the founder of Mormonism¹ and first practitioner of LDS celestial or plural marriage—proposed marriage to Lucy Walker, a 16-year-old girl who had come to live with him and his wife Emma after her mother died. Lucy was understandably disturbed by this proposal. Joseph tried to reassure her, but ultimately confessed, “I have no flattering words to offer.”²

Scholars have offered many explanations for why a group of Christians in nineteenth century America should begin to practice a form of marriage then derided as a “relic of barbarism.” But it is not clear if any of them explain why an already married prophet of God would propose an illegal marriage to an astonished teenager without professing either admiration, love, or even lust for her. Even less do they explain why a young girl should agree to such an apparently passionless marriage to a man twice her age. Indeed, Lucy herself wrote that Smith’s proposition “aroused every drop of Scotch in my veins.” Yet she accepted his proposal.

The marriage of Joseph Smith and Lucy Walker took place over 160 years ago, but understanding its basic elements is critical to understanding contemporary Mormon fundamentalism, especially the practice of polygamy. Such continuity should not be surprising. Although Mormon polygamy and “fundamentalism” are generally used as pseudonyms, the term “fundamentalism” does not mean

polygamy. It refers rather to those institutions that claim to adhere to the fundamental, basic, or original doctrines of a belief system, whatever the doctrine or system. Thus Christian “fundamentalists” cling to a “fundamental” view of the origins of humankind, one that is at variance with later notions of biological evolution. Fundamentalist Mormons believe that they have the “correct, unchanged principles; the same principles that Joseph Smith taught in the original Mormon Church”³ and that the LDS Church was wrong in moving away from those original teachings. Thus they preserve or emphasize many aspects of nineteenth-century Mormon teachings about marriage that were lost or obscured in the LDS Church, most significantly those that equate celestial marriage with polygyny.

But how are we to understand the fundamentals of the earthly expression of celestial marriage? Proposals such as Smith’s make little sense to people today, for whom there is no reasonable basis for marriage except romantic love and sexual attraction. Even the title of a contemporary television series about Joseph Smith’s successors in polygamy betrays the conventional American expectation that marriage is somehow about love or at least lust. This show, *Big Love*, opens to the romantic strains of the Beach Boys’ “God Only Knows What I’d Be without You.” One man glides smoothly in circles on thin ice, hand-in-hand with his three beautiful wives. The camera comes in close to reveal yearning and devotion in all four faces, implying that theirs is a “big love” indeed. Yet several recent memoirs of actual fundamentalist marriages demonstrate that romantic love and sexual attraction are neither necessary nor sufficient motives for choosing to enter into plural marriage. Love may have nothing to do with celestial marriage.

No doubt that the opportunity to have sex with a number of women provides an obvious and powerful motive for men to accept polygamy. For women as well, polygamy means that they can choose as marriage partners attractive, charismatic, or otherwise high-quality men, regardless of the man’s existing marital status. No doubt that Joseph Smith was an extremely appealing man, and this was a big part of women’s willingness to enter into celestial marriage with him. Biographies of some of the women, however, reveal that they had no sexual interest in Smith. Sexual motives alone cannot account for the form and persistence of Mormon fundamentalism. To understand plural marriage solely in terms of modern American notions of romantic love or sexuality is to fail to understand it at all. To fully understand celestial marriage as practiced by Mormons early and late, we must do as Lucy, Joseph, his other 32 wives, and thousands of contemporary polygamists do. We must set aside romantic modern notions of marriage based on sex and companionship. For the essential mechanism of celestial marriage is about something entirely different. Indeed,

as we will see below, the fact that Joseph Smith chose the term “celestial marriage” to characterize polygamy already gives important information about why thousands of women were and are willing to participate in a system that appears to offer them limited earthly advantage.

In this chapter, I first recount economic thinking on what makes ordinary, earthly polygamy possible. Interestingly, the factors that make polygamy desirable and possible in Africa or Saudi Arabia are not those underlying Mormon fundamentalism. However, we will see, the questions raised by the economic approach to secular polygamy leads to a clearer understanding of religiously based plural polygamy. While on the surface quite different, the mechanism making both earthly and celestial marriage desirable is the same.

The Economics of Polygamy

By the time Joseph Smith began preaching polygamy, Christianity had been struggling for nearly two thousand years to stamp out it and other forms of non-companionate marriage. Prior to the Industrial Revolution in the West (dated to about 1800) and continuing in non-industrialized countries today, marriage was and is based not on romance, but on material need. In pre-industrial economies, people had to produce everything they consumed themselves, including care in illness or old age. They vitally needed children as a source of labor and security. In such economies, having children is the primary purpose of marriage, which is itself a legal contract that virtually every culture has in some form, intended to protect the woman in her role as child bearer.⁴ Love often had little to do with choice of partner. Indeed, as the merging of resources from the bride and groom’s families, marriage was often considered too important to trust to the vagaries of romantic love. Historically, marriages were arranged by parents without much concern for the feelings of their children. Indeed, under such circumstances it was not unusual to have one or both participants married against their will.⁶

Thus in the pre-industrial, non-Christian world, marriage is more of a market transaction than a source of emotional fulfillment. In such societies, polygamy occurs when individuals or their families 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 because men vary greatly in the material resources they bring to marriage.⁵ 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 are not the same, however; one may be a captain of industry, the other a

beggar—a difference of millions and perhaps survival versus starvation. Thus, a woman may be better off 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 may be plenty of women who would be happy to be Bill Gates's third, fourth, or twentieth wife, if such a thing were legal and Mr. Gates interested.)

In contrast, when a woman's primary function is to bear children, women do not vary as much as men do. A woman may bear one child or twelve, but she doesn't bear thousands. Therefore there is not a corresponding 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, while we find that 85 percent of human societies have practiced polygyny, polyandry is very rare (.1 percent).⁶

Polygyny is most attractive to men who desire numerous children or the other things women produce. In some parts of Africa, for instance, polygyny was practiced by the larger landholders because women do most of the farm work. Indeed, in even the recent past, men could not become important or wealthy in Africa without numerous wives and children to provide labor. Where polygyny was/is practiced, it is not considered to be disadvantageous to women, as they would not have married polygamously had they had a better monogamous alternative.

Polygyny is thus accepted and normal where marriage is based on material economic concerns. In fact, polygamy tends to exist formally wherever there are not laws or positive moral positions taken against it. Even when formally forbidden, it occurs informally. Rich men take and support mistresses, for instance, some openly. Informal polygamy is not limited to men, either. Women who are wealthy in their own right may take lovers or marry and divorce a string of husbands (e.g., Catherine the Great, Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Jennifer Lopez).

The Problem with Economic-Based Marriage in a Christian Context

If polygamy is a common and normal state, then, there is no reason to view Mormon polygamy as depraved, as based on excessive lust, the enslavement of women, or the indoctrination and abuse of children, as it has often been accused of being. Within Christian cultures, however, would-be polygamists face the problem that Christian marriage is not supposed to be 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 (“For this reason, a man shall . . . cleave unto his wife, and they two shall become one flesh” Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:6; Ephesians 5:31) and based on mutual love. Polygyny was quickly disallowed within early Christianity, and the church, from early to modern times, fought hard to limit it as well as arranged or coerced marriage. Although the church was not always successful in instilling its values, by the nineteenth century, when Mormon plural marriage came into being, 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.⁷ Based instead on “considerations of male sexual desire, financial arrangements, and heirship,”⁸ polygyny is the antithesis of Christian marriage. Although experiments with alternative, non-monogamous forms of marriage occurred among other Christian groups (such as the Branch Davidians in the late twentieth century, the Oneida colony in the nineteenth, or the sixteenth-century Anabaptists), they were the exception, not the norm, and were soundly decried by the rest of Christianity.⁹

The Exception That Proves the Rule

Like Lucy Walker, young people among the FLDS and other practitioners of plural marriage hold the same hopes for flattering words, romantic love, and companionate marriage treasured by the rest of American society. Indeed, Joseph Smith’s marriage to his first and legal wife, Emma Hale, was obviously based on mutual affection, attraction, and even high romance, as she eloped with him contrary to the wishes of her father. What was it, then, that made it possible for Mormons to practice polygamy on such a large scale in a culture that was utterly hostile to the practice?

Here the economic explanation for the prevalence of polygyny in the material world comes into play, but with a small twist. It was certainly not the standard secular motives based on financial concerns that allowed Mormon polygamy. Joseph Smith could not and did not support all (or arguably, any) of the women he married. He had few physical resources to offer them, and from Lucy Walker’s account, no emotional sustenance to give either. So the economic explanation is a dead end on this score. But economics is not limited to issues of money. Becker points out that polygyny is a desirable state only when there is an unequal distribution of some resource among men. So if it was not physical resources that made some Mormon women willing to share Joseph with many other women, what was it? What was it that Joseph Smith

had to offer women that made part of him preferable to all of another man? In a more general sense, the question is, What was the resource that some Mormon men, especially Joseph, had a lot of, which other Mormon men had in varying amounts, which some men didn't have at all, and which women can get only in conjunction with a husband?

The answer to this question is found in Mormon doctrine. A central teaching of the LDS 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." Someone who was exalted would eventually become a god over his own world. Joseph Smith, as prophet, revealed and held the "keys" to the religious rituals necessary to attain this exaltation—baptism, temple endowment, family sealings for eternity, and second anointing.¹⁰ Early Mormonism taught explicitly that the eternal salvation of anyone living during this period would have to come directly or indirectly through him. Smith made these rituals available to both men and women, but the power to save was delegated only to men. Only a man who was himself worthy of exaltation could bring a woman into the celestial kingdom. Women who were not sealed to such a worthy husband could not be exalted.

The masculine power to save was unequally distributed, however. Some men had more of it; some men had none at all. As the focal point of salvation in this period of time, Joseph especially had an unique assurance that he would be exalted. He told 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."¹¹ Moreover, Rollins wrote, Smith said that, "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.'"¹²

What Joseph Smith had in greater abundance than other men, what his followers had in varying amounts, what some men don't have at all, and what women have access to only from a husband, was the ability to "save . . . in the Celestial kingdom." Women who were "sealed" to an appropriately saved man were assured of the level of exaltation that their husband would enjoy. Here, then, lies the motive for polygynous marriage among the Mormons: according to such theology, it is more to women's advantage to have "part" of a worthy man's exaltation than to have all of a man with less ability to save. The mechanism allowing polygyny is the same as in non-Christian, pre-industrial countries. The only difference is the variable on which men vary.

The Need for Children and the Subordination of Women

In the nineteenth century, women rarely had identities apart from their husbands. People today might wonder why it is that women were delegated to the role of pawns or property in this celestial scheme. Why would God tie a woman's exaltation to a man, or to marriage? Once again, a twist on the basic economic analysis provides the answer. Economist Gary Becker traces the historic sexual division of labor—the pattern of men and women performing different work—to the crucial need for children as a source of labor and security for their parents. A pregnant or breast-feeding woman simply cannot perform certain kinds of work without endangering the child. In consequence, women came to be “domestically specialized,” leaving most of the work that required extra-household labor and coordination to men. In such circumstances, men become dominant over women both inside and outside the home.¹³

Although Americans in the mid-nineteenth century were still largely agrarian and retained a strong need for children, the Industrial Revolution was already diminishing the material reasons for large families. It was not the economic need for children that shaped Mormon polygamy and continued woman's subordination to man into the celestial realm: It was theological. Mormon theology teaches that God is the literal father of billions of spirit children, all of whom are waiting for their chance to come to heaven to acquire a physical body. Mormonism, believing itself to be the sole possessor of the path to exaltation, has urged its faithful followers to have as many children as possible in order to put them on that path. Joseph Smith's successor, Brigham Young, taught that,

There are multitudes of pure and holy spirits waiting to take tabernacles [bodies]. Now what is our duty? To prepare tabernacles for them; to take a course that will not tend to drive those spirits into families of the wicked, where they will be trained in wickedness, debauchery, and every species of crime. It is the duty of every righteous man and woman to prepare tabernacles for all the spirits they can . . . This is the reason why the doctrine of plurality of wives was revealed, that the noble spirits which are waiting for tabernacles might be brought forth.¹⁴

One early leader wrote, “The First Command was to ‘Multiply’ and the Prophet taught us that Dominion and powr in the great Future would be Commensurate with the no (number) of ‘Wives Childin & Friends’ that we inherit here and that our great mission to earth was to Organize a Neculi of Heaven to take with us. To the increase of which there would be no end.”¹⁵ Yet another

wrote, “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.”¹⁶ (Original spelling retained.)

Salvation

Thus it is no coincidence that the code name for Mormon polygyny is “celestial marriage.” The basis for such marriage was neither material wealth nor companionate love, but the unique ability to save held by certain men—an ability that was magnified by possessing numerous progeny. Although those women who left written records of their relationships with 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 and even that of their families. For example, one of Joseph Smith’s close associates, Heber Kimball, offered Joseph his 14-year-old daughter, Helen Mar Kimball. She later wrote of her marriage to Joseph Smith:

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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹

It appears that Smith used spiritual coercion as well as assurances of salvation to induce women to marry him. Smith’s revelation on celestial marriage (recorded as section 132 of the Mormon Doctrine and Covenants) damns those who do not participate in it: “For behold, I reveal unto you a new and an everlasting covenant; and if ye abide not that covenant, then are yet damned; for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory.”²⁰ No matter how worthy a monogamist may be, the best he or she can expect in the next life is to act as servants or ministering angels to the more worthy polygamists. The negative consequences were not just other-worldly: Joseph told Mary Elizabeth Rollins, who was already married to another man, that their adulterous union

was commanded by God, who would send an angel to enforce his compliance with a drawn sword. And if it was not his admiration that drove Lucy Walker to marry Smith, 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.”²¹

Love and Hierarchy

Since some men would achieve a greater exaltation than others and some men would not achieve exaltation at all, early LDS leaders taught that it was only fair that women be free to choose the man who could best ensure their salvation. Joseph Smith assured Lucy Walker, “A woman would have her choice [of men], this was a privilege that could not be denied her.”²² Joseph’s own tremendous ability to save was a powerful factor encouraging women to choose him, regardless of prior obligations. At least 11 of the women Joseph married plurally were already the wives of other men—and continued to live as wives to their first husbands. Mary Elizabeth Rollins 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 in it though he thought a great deal of Joseph. . . . After he said this I went forward and was sealed to Joseph for Eternity.”²³ After his death, her husband was sealed to Mary and Joseph as a son.

An 1861 sermon by Brigham Young also demonstrates the power of unequal distribution of charisma in motivating 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.”²⁴ Such a marriage “is right in the sight of God”²⁵ (original spelling retained). 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. Anthropologist Lawrence Foster observes, “Thus, in Utah, while men could practice polygamy, easy divorce gave women the opportunity for what amounted to serial polygamy.”

Finally, men who were not considered to be spiritually worthy were not allowed to keep their wives. When John Hyde was excommunicated in 1857, 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.²⁶

Brigham Young further taught that “if a man forfeits [sic] 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”²⁷ (original spelling retained).

Smith and Diminishing Marginal Returns

Joseph Smith occupied an enviable position relative to men whose polygyny is based on material considerations. When it is the superior provision of material resources that attracts women to marry polygynously, 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. At some point, he stops marrying more wives. In contrast, there was and is no limit to the power to save among Mormon groups that hold this doctrine. On the contrary, these groups explicitly teach that the more women a man has sealed to him, the greater his power to save them, as a man’s exaltation increased with the size of his “kingdom.” 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.²⁸

“Put Aside All Desire . . .”

As plural marriage became institutionalized in Utah, its basis in salvation, not romantic love, became even more obvious. Brigham Young taught:

Elders, never love you 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.²⁹

Similarly, Lucy Walker, who subsequently married Brigham Young’s second-in-command, Heber C. Kimball, after Joseph’s death, 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.³⁰

Another widow of Joseph Smith, who married Brigham Young after his death, wrote, “[A] successful polygamous wife must regard her husband with indifference, and with no other feeling than that of reverence, for love we regard as a false sentiment; a feeling which should have no existence in polygamy.”³¹

Other sources 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.’”³² “Sister Booth’s” unwillingness to trust her salvation to her husband Robert’s worthiness reflects the perception that Clayton held the superior ability to save.

Polygyny and Sex

The unequal distribution of charisma makes sexuality itself only indirectly important in celestial marriage. Mate selection, for instance, may not be based primarily on sexual attraction, although undoubtedly it is 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 an eternal salvation for older unmarried women and widows. For instance:

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."³³

Such marriages were not uncommon and 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 one of them) than he would his grandmother.

Similarly, there are indications that sexual jealousy was not an issue in some cases where one might expect it to be. There is no evidence that Joseph Smith 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.³⁴ 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 apparently 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."³⁵ 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 to on earth wasn't important, because it was clear to whom she belonged in heaven. Similarly, it didn't matter with which of the husbands a woman slept or which fathered her children, as, once sealed to Joseph, any children were also accounted to Joseph's celestial reckoning.

Sex and Succession

After Joseph Smith's martyrdom in 1844, both 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: many churches support needy widows without marrying them off to church leaders. (Todd Compton's *In Sacred Loneliness*, which

details Joseph's plural wives' struggle to get West with little or no help from Joseph's successor husbands, suggests that it is even an offensive explanation.) Further, not all of these women needed Young or Kimball to support them or to father their children. Some of the wives were young enough to find husbands of their own. Helen Mar Kimball, for example, married a young man, Orson Whitney. Other 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 explain why Brigham Young or Heber C. Kimball should marry women like Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Zina Huntington, Prescinda Huntington, and Sylvia Sessions, who had all been married to Joseph but who each had another husband with whom she continued to live, and with whom they continued to meet their physical needs. These women were now 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 followed Joseph's death. 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 writes that Joseph Smith suggested at least eight different ways succession might occur, so his direction on this matter was not decisive.³⁶ 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. Although the Twelve Apostles were sustained as head of church after Brigham Young gave a speech during which some believed they saw his appearance transformed into that of Joseph Smith, apparently even after this event there was still not widespread agreement in Nauvoo that the Apostles should lead the Church.

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 (perhaps in an attempt to bolster a sense of urgency about its adoption). 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,"³⁷ 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 the cold as far as their claim to this power. Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball, his second in command, almost certainly married Joseph's widows in order to solidify their claims to his power. 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 Smith while he was still alive. Kimball married five or six of the wives Joseph took while living 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 his most important power. They were both now sealed (indirectly) to Joseph himself, and were qualified to serve as proxies to Joseph's widows if not to his church.³⁸

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 it now seems foolhardy in the face of the increasing hostility and threats of violence from Gentile neighbors, the Twelve could not 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.

Applications to Contemporary Fundamentalism

Marriage and Hierarchy II

As in the early LDS Church, contemporary Mormon polygamy is not based on the unequal distribution of material wealth. While a few Mormon polygamist men are relatively well-to-do, many plural wives have to support their children and themselves with little emotional or physical help from their over-taxed, much-married husbands. Plural wives who are supported by their husbands often live in crowded communal homes filled with other wives and many children. Irene Spencer, the daughter of a polygamist, makes the common observation that, "polygamist husbands, like my father, were rarely able to support all their wives and children. It was common for subsequent wives... to draw welfare as supposed single moms."³⁹ The prevalence of plural wives on public assistance as single mothers is discussed in many Utah counties. As the second of an eventual ten wives of Verlan LeBaron, Irene Spencer herself was sent to live in Mexico, where without recourse to even welfare, she lived in abject poverty.

I discuss elsewhere how the mainstream LDS Church's belief in special individuals' unique ability to save has either ceased to exist or, if it persists, has become invisible.⁴⁰ 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 the individuals themselves. 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 or a mechanism to practice it again.

Mormon fundamentalism, however, continues to observe the unequal distribution of charisma that made nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy possible. One smallish polygamous group even calls itself "the Patriarchal Hierarchy." Most of the long-standing groups, including the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS), share a common origin myth that reinforces the special status of certain individuals. These groups claim that in 1886, while in hiding from federal persecution against polygamy, LDS church president John Taylor received a revelation from Joseph Smith stating that the practice of celestial marriage absolutely must continue. He anointed a man named John W. Woolley with the responsibility to continue the practice until the second coming of Christ. The leaders of these consequent groups claim their authority from connections with Woolley's son Lorin. One group known as the Kingstons adds to this pedigree the belief that they are physically descended from Jesus Christ as well as spiritually from Woolley/Taylor. Based on this royal descent, the Kingstons base status within the community on kinship and encourage incestuous marriages to preserve the bloodlines.⁴¹

One major polygamous group that does not descend from Woolley is the LeBaron clan (The Church of the First Born of the Fullness of Times). The LeBarons claim to hold "special" priesthood authority as spiritual descendents of Joseph Smith, who secretly passed it to their ancestor Benjamin F. Johnson in Nauvoo. Reportedly, Johnson passed that priesthood on to his grandson Alma Dayer LeBaron and specified that this authority was to be passed down to each successor's worthiest son.⁴² LeBaron's descendants' murderous infighting to enforce their claims to special authority has landed two of their self-styled prophets in prison for murder.⁴³

Also feeding into fundamentalist belief in the extraordinary power of some individuals is a passage from one of Joseph Smith's revelations that quotes God as saying that he "will send one mighty and strong, whose mouth shall utter words, eternal words; while his bowels shall be a fountain of truth, to set in order the house of God."⁴⁴ This messianic figure was expected to bring the various fragments of Mormonism (including the LDS Church) back into unity

again around the principle of celestial marriage.⁴⁵ Various men have claimed to be the “one mighty and strong,” to whom all earthly deference is due.

Populating Your Celestial Kingdom

As in the secular, pre-industrial motives for marriage, fundamentalist Mormon polygamy today is driven by the desire for children, as seen in the following quotations: “The wives and children sealed to a deserving man while on Earth will assist him in populating the world he is given to rule over in the next link of this godhood chain. The larger his family here, the better head start they’ll have there.” “Women cannot become gods in their own right. A woman’s hope lay solely in being a wife and mother—one of many wives to her husband; mother of many, many children. She thereby contributes to her husband’s future kingdom and will ultimately share in his glory as a goddess... A woman is dependent on her husband god to ‘pull her through the veil’ of death into heaven and divinity.”⁴⁶ Another writer notes the fundamentalist saying that, “Women are vessels to be worn out in childbirth.”⁴⁷

The desire for as many children as possible also partially explains the young ages at which polygamist girls are married. One plural wife wrote, “One fourteen-year-old girl who’d just had her first baby confided in me that she’d never even had a menstrual period until after the baby was born. Her husband had married her at that young age so she could bear as many children as possible. This was important to him because he wanted to become a god with his own kingdom in heaven, where he and his wives and children could be numberless and beget spirit children to populate other worlds.”⁴⁸ Adding to the urgency motivating earlier childbearing is Mormonism’s belief that they are living in the “latter days” and that marriage and childbearing could only be done in this mortal existence. Time was running out, church leaders preached. Christ would return soon—any girl who wanted to marry and have children should do so without delay.⁴⁹

Love Is Not Important

Belief in the superior man’s ability to provide salvation, coupled with the desire for many children, contribute strongly to the decoupling of marriage and romantic or companionate love among fundamentalists. Parallel with the material motives for earthly polygamy cited earlier, girls who married polygamously had been taught that “it was better to have a tenth of a good man than a ‘worldly’ man all to [themselves].”⁵⁰ Thus religious belief motivated Irene Spencer to call off her wedding to the non-polygamist LDS man she loved in order

to become second wife to Church of the First Born leader Verlan LeBaron. "I wanted to become a goddess and receive the highest exaltation in heaven. Would I throw that away in order to satisfy my small, selfish desires in the present?"⁵¹ LeBaron's position as president of the Quorum of the Apostles in the Church of the First Born made him especially attractive. As only third in command in the First Born hierarchy, however, LeBaron was apparently not always attractive enough. Spencer tells of how a young woman who Verlan wanted to marry turned him down because the woman "wanted prestige and the highest glory she could obtain in exchange for her sacrifices. She snubbed Verlan...and instead asked Joel, our self-proclaimed prophet, if she could become his seventh wife."⁵²

LeBaron's sixth wife, Susan Ray Schmidt, writes that girls were advised against or even forbidden to marry young monogamous men who had not yet proven themselves capable of offering salvation.⁵³ The Kingstons go even further, explicitly teaching that "no church member can reach heaven unless one of his daughters is married to a Kingston leader."⁵⁴

Love as a weak element in marriage is especially true among the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, whose leaders "place" or "assign" women in marriage based on revelation by the prophet without consulting the women themselves. Memoirists Carolyn Jessop, the very unwilling fourth wife of powerful FLDS businessman Merrill Jessop, and Elissa Wall, whose forced marriage at age 14 resulted in FLDS prophet Warren Jeffs' conviction as accessory to rape, all write of their lack of love or even a passing acquaintance with the men they married. Jessop and Wall were more-or-less arbitrarily assigned (and coerced) to marry men they actively disliked and feared. Jessop cites one of her sister-wives denigrating romantic connections between husband and wife, saying, "A woman who thinks she needs a relationship with her husband is a worldly tradition and it's something she needs to give up."⁵⁵

Among the FLDS, falling in love is even seen as an act of rebellion. Jessop writes, "We were taught that men and women made a covenant to marry each other before coming to earth." Only the prophet could reveal who had covenanted with whom. Therefore, "Falling in love with someone independently of the prophet's revelation was absolutely forbidden, even if it was someone within the FLDS, because that would be a violation of the covenant made to God before birth."⁵⁶ A wife's obedience and desire to serve her husband is more important than her love for him.

Moore-Emmett's collection of biographies of women who left polygamous marriages contains story after story of women agreeing to marriage to men they did not love but whom they felt (for often vague reasons) that God wanted them to marry.⁵⁷

Church of the First Born women were allowed to receive their own revelations of whom to marry, but as Spencer's case showed, even this did not guarantee that love would be a major factor in their marital choices. Susan Schmidt, who later married Spencer's husband Verlan, was at one point courted by his brother Ervil LeBaron, along with another girl. Schmidt quotes the other girl as saying, "'No! I do not love him. Sometimes I can't stand the man. . . . The thing I keep reminding myself of is that he's the Patriarch of God's true church. He's promised me that I'll begin to love him.'" Trying to convince Schmidt to join her in marrying Ervil LeBaron, this same girl reportedly said, "So we're not madly in love with him. So what? I care more about my spiritual welfare than about passion and romance. . . ." When the girl finally married Ervil, Spencer told Schmidt, "She doesn't love him. . . . She can hardly stand him, but he convinced her that she would go to hell if she didn't marry him." Schmidt wrote, "I knew of other girls in the colony who had married men without being in love. The brethren had assured them that the proper feelings would come, if they married a righteous man of the priesthood."⁵⁸

Women as Currency

One of the features of marriage prior to industrial development was its use to cement business relationships between families. Despite their emphasis on the spiritual consequences of polygamy, this secular function of marriage is observed among fundamentalists, especially the FLDS. For example, after her coerced marriage at age 18 to 50-year-old Merrill Jessop, Carolyn Jessop discovered that she was part of a business deal. Carolyn's father had filed a lawsuit against Merrill Jessop. Jessop asked the prophet, his uncle, to arrange for him to marry one of Carolyn's father's daughters in order to induce him to drop it. Merrill Jessop also engineered the marriage of his daughters to the FLDS prophet in order to solidify his own connections with him. "Merril was beaming," Carolyn Jessop writes of her husband at the wedding ceremony. "Now he had direct access to the prophet."⁵⁹ Carolyn also mentions the power associated with being the father of a daughter considered worthy of marriage to the prophet. Similarly, Elissa Wall writes of her family's joy at her 22-year-old sister's marriage to an FLDS prophet 60+ years her senior, not only because this marriage assured her sister's salvation, but also because it increased her family's influence.⁶⁰

Another example of women's use as measures of men's religious status is seen in the practice of reassigning widows. Just as Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball solidified their position as Joseph Smith's successors by marrying his plural wives, men in both the FLDS and Church of the First Born scrambled

to marry high-status widows. “A prophet’s widow generally is not allowed to remarry below the status of her husband. She’s usually married off to the new prophet.”⁶¹ Merrill Jessop’s next two wives after Carolyn were women who had been recently widowed by the death of LeRoy Johnson, the president of the FLDS. She writes:

There is tremendous prestige in marrying a former prophet’s wife. It demonstrates to the community that after his death, the prophet sent a divine revelation about whom his wife should marry. For a prophet of God—even a deceased one—to have enough confidence and love for a man to give him one of his wives indicates that the man is of exceptional character.

A quick marriage to several of [the deceased prophet’s] widows could catapult [men] into leadership roles in the FLDS hierarchy by signaling that these were the men Uncle Roy [Jessop—the previous prophet] loved and trusted most.⁶²

The Law of Purity

If romantic love is not an important part of celestial marriage, what about sex? Of course, outsiders speculate that sex (such as that portrayed in *Big Love*), particularly male desire, is the major motivator for polygamist marriage. However, while sex is obviously a big part of polygamy in general, it seems to provide only a weak motive in particulars. For one thing, many of the fundamentalist groups preserve the nineteenth-century “Law of Purity,” which regulates sexual activity within marriage.⁶³ Spencer writes, “sex had the same singular role within polygamous families that wives had—procreation. . . . If a husband and wife indulged in sex for any other purpose, they could even commit adultery with each other. Consequently, it was forbidden during pregnancy, lactation, and menses, as well as after menopause.” Spencer’s memoir is laced with references to her sexual frustrations and arguments with her husband Verlan LeBaron over his strict observance of this law.

Although the Law of Purity does justify polygyny as necessary to meet the sexual needs of husbands of frequently pregnant and hence sexually unavailable women, restricting sex to procreation suggests that Mormon polygamy is not about sensual indulgence.⁶⁴ Further, it appears that few polygamist men have the luxury of selecting their wives based on their sexual attractiveness. The demand for numerous wives to fund a celestial kingdom results in a shortage

of women. As a result, fundamentalist men are usually willing to marry any woman who indicates an interest in them or who is assigned to them by the prophet, whether or not the man has any sexual or romantic feelings for her. Carolyn Jessop writes about the frustration of some of her sister wives, who were eager to have children, when their shared husband had little interest in having sex with them. FLDS prophet Rulon Jeffs continued to marry young women well past the age when he was capable of sexual relations with them, again to the frustration of the women involved. Notably, however, in both cases, the women were frustrated less by their unfulfilled sexual longing for men several times older than them, but because without sexual relations they were not able to fulfill their divinely mandated goal of motherhood.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The writers of *Voices in Harmony*, a collection of pro-polygamy essays by plural wives, assure their readers that they have found love and happiness in their plural marriages (although it is often the relationship with their sister-wives that are most meaningful to them). It is striking, however, that the book spends a great many of its 249 pages testifying to belief in the doctrines supporting celestial marriage. Religious belief, especially those teachings that celestial marriage is essential to salvation, appears to be a far more important motivator for marriage than the husband-wife relationship itself.

Immersed as we are in the cultural idea that marriage should be based on romantic love, the whole notion of polygamy makes little sense to modern Americans. It is only when we consider celestial marriage as based on the unequally distributed ability to save that we can begin to understand it. And the desire for salvation—not admiration, flattering words, or sexual attraction—is what polygamist Mormons have said was their motive all along. As Lucy Walker, Brigham Young, and innumerable other Latter-day polygamists, told us, romance and flattering words were “not what the principle was about.”

NOTES

1. The official Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has expressed a preference not to be called “Mormon,” but to be referred to by its full name on first usage, with the acronym LDS in following uses. I use the term “Mormon” in this chapter because I am referring not just to the LDS Church but to the broader range of groups that descended from the founding of the LDS Church.

2. Lyman O. Littlefield, *Reminiscences of the Latter-Day Saints*. (Logan, Utah: 1888).

3. Susan Ray Schmidt, *His Favorite Wife: Trapped in Polygamy* (N.p.: Kassidy Lane Publishing, 2006), 238.
4. Gary S. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 30–31.
5. Becker, 102.
6. Richard Posner points out that informal polyandry—prostitution, in which 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. Posner, *Sex and Reason*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
7. Posner, 45. Also Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).
8. Posner.
9. Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Sarah Barrington Gordon, *Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
10. While other strains of Christianity practice baptism, other Mormon rituals are unique to them. The temple endowment is given during attendance at Mormonism's confidential temple ritual; sealing for eternity purpose to bind family members together as family past "til death do us part." The second anointing, which took place in the nineteenth century but does not appear to be practiced today, was a second temple ritual.
11. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, "Remarks by Sister Mary E. Rollins Lightner, Who Was Sealed to Joseph Smith in 1842. B. Y. U., April 14, 1905, She Is 87 Years old." Historical Archives, 3.
12. Ibid.,
13. Carrie A. Miles, *The Redemption of Love* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006), chapter 3.
14. *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 197.
15. 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, 1976; letter written 1903).
16. 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 (1979): 394–402.
17. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, Autobiography, 1881 (Historical Archives).
18. Rex Eugene Cooper, *Promises Made to the Fathers: Mormon Covenant Organizations* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 140.
19. Littlefield.
20. *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), Section 132, verses 4 and 5.
21. Littlefield.

22. Lucy Walker Kimball, "Statement of Mrs. L. W. Kimball," Historical Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1858.
23. Lightner, 1905, 7.
24. Brigham Young, "A Few Words on Doctrine."
25. James Beck Notebooks, 1859–65, Vol. 1, October 8, 1861, LDS archives.
26. In Cooper, 192.
27. "A Few Words on Doctrine," speech at Tabernacle by Brigham Young, October 8, 1861, Brigham Young addresses, recorded by George Watts, LDS archives. As cited in Todd Compton, "A Trajectory of Plurality: An Overview of Joseph Smith's Thirty-three Plural Wives," *Dialogue* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 24.
28. Thomas M. Tinney, *The Royal Family of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr.* (N.p.: Thomas Milton Tinney, 1973).
29. *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 9: 37, 1856; in Hardy, 91.
30. In Hardy, 104.
31. Zina D. Jacobs Smith Young, 1869, cited in Andrea Moore-Emmett, *God's Brothel* (San Francisco: Pince-nez Press, 2004), 101.
32. Cooper, 139.
33. *Ibid.*, 123.
34. Richard Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 39.
35. In Brody, 307.
36. D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *Brigham Young University Studies* 16 (1976): 187–233.
37. Cooper, 151.
38. 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 (II Samuel 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.
39. Irene Spencer, *Shattered Dreams: My life as a Polygamist's Wife* (New York: Center Street, 2007). See also Susan Ray Schmidt, *His Favorite Wife: Trapped in Polygamy* (N.p.: Kassidy Lane Publishing, 2006).
40. Carrie A. Miles, "Polygamy and the Economics of Salvation," *Sunstone* (August 1998): 44.
41. Moore-Emmett, 67.
42. *Ibid.*, 116. Also Spencer, 44.
43. (See <http://extras.sltrib.com/specials/polygamy/PolygamyLeaders.pdf> for a genealogical chart of the origins of various fundamentalist groups.)
44. *Doctrine and Covenants*, Sec. 85: 7
45. <http://www.mormonfundamentalism.com/OneMightyandStrong9.htm>. Downloaded on September 11, 2008.
46. Spencer, 10
47. Moore-Emmett, 95.

48. Spencer, 41.
49. Ibid., 42.
50. Ibid., 306.
51. Ibid., 46.
52. Ibid., 345.
53. Schmidt, 20.
54. Moore-Emmett, 85–86.
55. Jessop, 268.
56. Ibid., 23.
57. Moore-Emmett, 102; see also John R. Llewellyn, *A Teenager's Tears: When Parents Convert to Polygamy* (Salt Lake City: Agreka Books, 2000), chapter 8.
58. Schmidt, 83–84 88, 95, 19.
59. Jessop, 165.
60. Elissa Wall, *Stolen Innocence* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 36.
61. Jessop, 119
62. Ibid.
63. Mary Batchelor, Marianne Watson, and Anne Wilde, *Voices in Harmony* (Salt Lake City: Principle Voices, 2000), 72. Jessop, 178.
64. It also seems that non-member fantasies about sexual activities involving more than one man and one woman are strictly fantasies. *Big Love* has been criticized as shockingly untrue in its portrayal of the husband having sex with one wife within earshot of the others.
65. Jessop, 172.

