

On Fidelity, Polygamy, and Celestial Marriage

By Eugene England

This classic essay is a thorough examination of the ideals of marriage that also challenges the assumptions held by many Latter-day Saints that plural marriage will be the dominant order of marriage in the celestial kingdom.

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THIS IS AN essay in speculative theology. In it I explore an idea—the general Mormon expectation of future polygamy—that has important religious and moral implications but about which there is little definite scriptural direction and no clear official doctrine. I attempt here, in the spirit of a venerable tradition in Mormon thought from Joseph Smith’s King Follett Discourse and Orson Pratt’s *The Seer* to the sermons and writings of Hugh B. Brown and Lowell Bennion, to make a reconsideration, unauthoritative but serious. I suggest some new, possibly beneficial ways we might think and feel about celestial marriage—both as it is and as it might be. My essay is not a critique of official Mormon practice or doctrine but an invitation to reexamine some unofficial ideas and expectations which persist among most Mormons because of a past practice—a practice I believe was divinely inspired but also divinely, and permanently, rescinded.

Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* contains a crucial scene after Brutus has decided to join the conspiracy and kill Caesar. Brutus is reflecting on that decision in his orchard in the early morning, when his wife Portia joins him. Awakened when he left her side and further alarmed by the voices and cloaked figures of the departing conspirators, she worries that all this may be related to his “musing and sighing” at dinner the evening before and the “ungentle looks” and “impatience” with which he waved her aside. Even now Brutus claims he is merely “not well in health” and tells her to “go to bed.” But Portia will not be dismissed and speaks straight to the heart of his real illness:

You have some sick offense within your mind,
Which, by the right and virtue of my place,
I ought to know of
I [ask] you, by my once commended beauty,
By all your vows of love, and that great vow
Which did incorporate and make us one,
That you unfold to me, yourself, your half,
Why you are heavy. . . .

Within the bond of marriage, tell me, Brutus,
 Is it [there stated] I should know no secrets
 That appertain to you? Am I yourself
 But, as it were, in sort or limitation,
 [That is, am I one with you in only a limited way?]
 To keep with you at meals, comfort your bed,
 And talk to you sometimes? Dwell I but in the suburbs
 Of your good pleasure? If it be no more,
 Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife. (2.1.268–75; 280–87)

Portia then reminds Brutus of the qualities of lineage and character that first drew him to her and, as further proof of her firmness and courage to bear his painful and intimate secrets, reveals that she had wounded herself in the thigh but had suffered patiently all night without troubling him. Brutus exclaims, “O ye gods. Render me worthy of this noble wife!” But then he does nothing to achieve that worthiness. A knock at the door signals an additional conspirator to be won over, and Brutus readily allows this crucial opportunity with his wife to be interrupted. Although he promises Portia that “by and by thy bosom shall partake/The secrets of my heart,” he never keeps that promise. Had he shared his deepest self with his other half, his wife, and been, advised by her better perspective, this man, whom Marc Anthony later calls “the noblest Roman of them all,” might have been deterred from bringing greater evil on Rome than the evil he sought to cure. Instead, he also destroys the life of the intrepid Portia, who kills herself by swallowing hot coals after she learns what he has done and sees his fate. And Brutus finally takes his own life after Octavius and Anthony defeat his armies at Philippi.

Shakespeare thus shows how well he understood the importance of *fidelity*, the complete faithfulness, loyalty, and sharing that is possible only when a man and a woman join their full lives—physical, mental, and spiritual—in what he called “the marriage of true minds” (Sonnet 116). He saw fidelity as central to married love, which he portrayed as the supreme form of human happiness and wholeness at the end of each of his comedies and the violation or interruption of which lies at the heart of most of the tragedies and late romances.

I believe Shakespeare is right. Marital fidelity is central to mortal joy and eternal life, even godhood, and great catastrophes are already resulting from our current neglect of it, in society generally and in too many Mormon marriages. It is the key to our concepts of sexual morality before and after marriage. And there is, I believe, a serious danger to the ideal of fidelity—and thus both to our sexual morality and to our concepts of ourselves as eternal men and women—in the expectation, shared I fear by many Mormons, that the highest form of marriage in the celestial realm is what is technically called polygyny, plural wives for a single husband.

I believe official Mormon polygyny, as it was practiced in the nineteenth century, was inspired by God through his prophets. I am the descendant of polygynists. I honor those literal ancestors and my many spiritual ancestors who lived that law—faithfully, morally, and at enormous costs to themselves and the Church. Those costs included alienation from American culture and from their own moral training, martyrdom for a few, and very nearly the total destruction of their Church and culture

by the United States government, which was willing to use brutal and unconstitutional means to force Mormon conformity. I believe that the good achieved by polygyny outweighed those costs and made possible the establishment and success of the restored kingdom of God on earth during its beginning period. And when that practice had achieved its purposes, limited to a specific historical period and place, God took it away.

I believe God removed polygyny by direct inspiration to his prophets and did it because polygyny was no longer worth the costs it exacted. He did not remove it because our ancestors lacked the courage or ability to continue to pay those costs or merely wanted to accommodate themselves to mainstream American values. I believe that any persons who thoroughly and honestly examine the evidence will conclude that there were terrible difficulties and mistakes, embarrassing vacillations and equivocations, even transgressions and deceptions (by both leaders and lay members of the Church), that accompanied both the beginning and the end of polygyny. But if such persons also tender some faith in the restored gospel and its prophetic leadership and exercise some human empathy and compassion, they will find that the terrible problems that came with plural marriage did *not* come, as some have alleged or implied, because Joseph Smith was uninspired or merely lustful or because Brigham Young and John Taylor persisted in a mistake against God's will. As I read their letters, journals, and sermons and the accounts and testimony of those who knew them best, I find ample evidence, despite the serious mistakes and problems, that Joseph Smith had great self-control and that all three prophets were deeply inspired leaders, who would not persist in a form of marriage—the supreme sacrament of Mormon theology—that was contrary to God's will.

The anguish, mistakes, and problems that instituting polygyny brought to the Mormons came precisely because most of the people involved were trying heroically both to be moral (that is, true to God's laws given in the past) and also to respond to what they believed was undeniable new revelation—revelation that directly countered their own moral inclinations and Christian training. And I believe that in that clash of the old moral code with new revelation lies the best answer to the question of *why*. Why would God require such a strange practice, one counter to standard Christian morality and inherited rationality, one that even contradicted sensible and God-given moral laws—and thus could be practiced only at enormous cost?

I believe the answer is similar to the answers to some similarly difficult questions, such as: Why would God command his faithful prophet Abraham to kill his son Isaac, when God himself condemned human sacrifice as immoral? or, Why would God allow his prophets to deny priesthood blessings to blacks, counter to his own teachings about universal equality? Polygyny was indeed (as the Lord himself tells us in Doctrine and Covenants 132 by explicitly comparing Abraham's taking of a second wife to his offering of Isaac) what can be called an "Abrahamic" test, that is, a command by God to violate an earlier commandment:

God commanded Abraham, and Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to wife. . . . Was Abraham, therefore, under condemnation? . . . Nay; for I, the Lord, commanded it. Abraham was commanded to offer his

son Isaac; nevertheless, it was written: Thou shalt not kill. Abraham, however, did not refuse, and it was accounted unto him for righteousness (v. 35; see vv. 34–37).

God apparently uses such a unique and uniquely troubling test because it is the only way to teach us something paradoxical but true and very important about the universe—that trust in our personal experiences with divinity must sometimes outweigh our rational morality. Obedience to the divine commands that come directly to us must sometimes supersede our understanding of earlier commands if we are ever to transcend the human limitations of even our best inherited culture and religion. We must learn, sometimes very painfully, to be open to continuous revelation. We must learn such a lesson partly because truth and history are too complex to be reduced to simple, irrevocable commandments—even from past prophets—like “Thou shalt not kill” or “Thou shalt always have only one spouse.” Truth is ultimately “rational,” but it is not always or immediately clear to our present reason.

Our ancestors’ painful obedience, then, to the new and “contradictory” revelation of polygyny both tested and confirmed them as saints, worthy to build God’s kingdom. They learned, as Shakespeare also knew, that “Sweet are the uses of adversity” (*As You Like It* 2.1.12). And they learned that lesson from the most wrenching human adversity—when opposites are posed by God himself. But precisely because it was an Abrahamic test, and thus a means to reveal and develop qualities necessary in one particular and unusual historical setting, polygyny is not a practice to project into the eternities as the basis for a celestial order. Heaven is, by definition, a place where the cultural limitations and historical peculiarities of earth-life no longer prevail. Abrahamic tests and other special historical requirements, such as “lower” laws like the Levitical priesthood and tithing, teach us much about God’s flexible dealing with human limitations and historical conditions but little or nothing about a supernatural celestial order, beyond such temporary mortal conditions.¹

What, then, is such an order like? What should be our model of celestial marriage? Though we are given very little direct description of that highest heaven, the scriptures clearly stress fidelity and union of opposed equals:

Neither is the man without the woman nor the woman without the man, in the Lord (1 Cor. 11:11).

And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. . . . Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh (Gen. 2:23–24).

For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things (2 Ne. 2:11).

Black and white, bond and free, male and female ... all are alike unto God (2 Ne. 26:33).

Ye have broken the hearts of your tender wives, and lost the confidence of your children, because of your bad examples before them; and the sobbings of their hearts ascend up to God against you. And

because of the strictness of the word of God, which cometh down against you, many hearts died, pierced with deep wounds (Jacob 2:35).

These and other scriptures, together with the teachings of modern prophets and the temple marriage sealing ordinance, support a theology of absolute and equal fidelity between a man and a woman as the basis for sexual morality, marital happiness, eternal increase, and, in its fullest implications, for godhood itself, the creative power that makes all existence possible. This theology of marriage is unique to Mormonism and is to me the most attractive and impressive part of the gospel—after the atonement of Christ. And just as the atonement is the key to our salvation from sin and death in this life, so celestial marriage is the key to exaltation, our eternal progression in the life to come.

The Mormon theology of marriage has two main characteristics. First, it implies that complementary oppositions lie at the very heart of physical, moral, and social existence. The most fundamental of these is the male-female polarity. That fundamental opposition, when it is tamed and matured into physical and spiritual unity, makes possible the creation and proper nurture both of mortal children and of spirit children to populate new universes. Female-male unity (which God has powerfully imaged in the concept of becoming “one flesh”) ideally involves complete sharing—with a separate, co-eternal individual and without loss of our own individuality—of all our singularity, vulnerability, trust, hopes, and potentialities.

Since celestial marriage is the crucial requirement for exaltation to godhood, Mormon theology suggests that the maturity essential to discovery and exaltation of the self is ultimately possible only in a fully equal, bi-polar but thus complementary, individual-to-individual synthesis. The supreme figure for this ideal, powerfully reinforced each time faithful Mormons attend temple endowment or sealing ceremonies, is that of the earth’s first lovers and parents: We are each invited to become, figuratively, an Adam or an Eve. We are thus imaginatively united in that perfect one-to-one unity established in the beginning by God, because “it is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Hebrew “alone” means incomplete, unfulfilled, rather than lonely (Whittaker 1980, 36). We are united that we might “know” each other, meaning in Hebrew to fully comprehend and share our being (Whittaker 1980, 36). The highest model for marriage, then, established in the garden and reinforced in the most sacred LDS ceremonies, is monogamous and centered in full one-to-one fidelity.

The image of becoming one flesh is realized most literally, of course, in conception, when our bodies actually unite to make new life. The sexual relationship perfectly represents spiritual union within polarity, that one-to-one sharing that ultimately makes possible the creativity of godhood. We can violate that creative union of two opposites, in various ways—by immature haste or promiscuity, by self-gratification or lust (either outside marriage or within it, if sex is used selfishly), by lying to each other, by not sharing fully and often our deepest feelings and hopes, by refusing to be vulnerable and thus walling off parts of ourselves, by not working constantly to justify and build complete trust.

The second main idea about marriage in Mormon theology is that since the

highest form of love in the universe is the fully sexual and exclusive love of a man and a woman eternally committed to each other, it is the key to our highest joys and exaltations—and our greatest pains and failures. It is the love that ultimately, whatever the accidents of mortal life which may prevent children now, is able to continue the work and glory of Godhood through eternal increase and creation. Therefore heterosexual married love is the ideal held out for all and made available to all.

Mortal probation continues for a long time after death to provide equal opportunities to all, and our theology promises that any genetic, developmental, or cultural problems or physical accidents that prevent marriage or children in this life will be resolved and that opportunities for such marriages and children will be provided in the next life.

But Mormon theology also promises dire results if we willfully oppose or neglect that ideal, even the piercing of our hearts with deep wounds. There are absolute prohibitions against homosexual activity and extramarital intercourse and very strong discouragements of lust—of promiscuous, selfish, or obsessive eroticism—even within marriage. The only rational explanation, it seems to me, for such warnings and prohibitions is that by their very nature certain practices tend to center on self rather than relationship and to deny the creative integrity of sexual intercourse—that is, its unique capability, at least in potential, to produce new life—or to violate the perfect trust and fidelity that the vulnerability and creative power of male-female union both nurture and need.

What, then, about polygyny? It, of course, does not fit the model of one-to-one fidelity I have described. First, we must consider the possibility that polygyny really does not violate fidelity, that if people are good enough they can have trust and sexual wholeness with more than one person. This could well have been true of our polygynous ancestors. Might it be even more likely in the celestial realms where the conditions and our capabilities will be much better than what we know now? I have found that this is the hope and assumption of many, perhaps most, Latter-day Saints who have seriously considered the possibility they might eventually be required to live in plural marriage.

I find two serious problems with such a hope. First, it is based on a dangerous notion: that simply getting more of a good thing is always better—that a great love for one person is even better if extended into great love for many persons. Consider, however, the differences between the elements that make up truly complete love. They include charity or unconditional, Christlike love—but also friendship and erotic love, love that makes choices, love that is based on differential desires. The unconditional, *redemptive* love God has for all his children and commands us all to learn is certainly capable of being multiplied. But such unconditional love is only a *part* of married love. And the other elements of a complete, married love, including restrictive obligations, covenants of complete and exclusive sharing, and the creative sexual love that makes new children and universes possible, are not improved by multiplication. In fact, they are usually destroyed or at least weakened by it. Romantic, married love is, I believe, strengthened by being *exclusive*, even for the gods.

Eternal marriage uniquely includes all the elements of love: the exclusive as well as the inclusive and unconditional. Although it can expand to include sacrificial love for populous worlds of spirit children, it will nevertheless be injured by forces that weaken by division the powerful bonds of filial obligation and sexual fidelity. In other words, celestial married love differs from mortal love not because it includes a larger group of individuals but because it includes more *kinds* of love than any other relationship—sexual love and quite idiosyncratic “liking” as well as charity or Christ-like love. But those unique and exclusive extra qualities, which give married love the greatest potential of any relationship, require the fully mutual fidelity only possible between one whole woman and one whole man.

Such fidelity, I believe, moves us beyond polygyny or polyandry, beyond patriarchy or matriarchy, even beyond priesthood in its usual functions and meaning. It seems to me that those are all lower laws, serving their inspired purposes—but only during certain mortal times with their cultural limitations. The ideal celestial order of marriage—of power, of creation, and of administration—will be the one the temple marriage sealing ceremony invites us to look forward to if we are faithful: a full and equal complementarity of a queen and a king, a priestess and a priest. It will be what President Ezra Taft Benson has called, after giving the term his own unusual definition, the “patriarchal order.” In “What I Hope You Will Teach Your Children About the Temple,” President Benson lists three priesthood orders, the Aaronic, Melchizedek, and “patriarchal,” pointing out that the third is “described in modern revelation as an order of family government where a man and woman enter into a covenant with God—just as did Adam and Eve—to be sealed for eternity, to have posterity, and to do the will and work of God throughout their mortality” (1985, 8).²

Just as the lower Aaronic (or Levitical) priesthood is superseded by the Melchizedek when historical conditions or individual maturity warrant, so I believe the Melchizedek priesthood is a preparatory order to some extent superseded by the fully equal order that men and women receive when sealed in the temple. And though we are apparently not yet mature enough for God to inspire us to implement that order fully and administratively on earth, we should, it seems to me, try to imagine it for the future, at least in the celestial kingdom, and prepare ourselves for it by living it as fully as possible now.

And that brings me to a second problem with the dubious argument that celestial marriage will be polygynous because we will be morally superior there, more able to love inclusively. Such an expectation can tempt us to love inclusively and superficially—even promiscuously—in this life. Mormons sometimes joke about looking forward to polygamy—because it will be more sexually diversified for men or less sexually demanding or psychologically intense for women (or simply allow a division of labor in a household to the advantage of women). The serious edge under these jokes sometimes emerges in open longing for something “better” than we have known in monogamy, perhaps a wider circle of easy friendships, unfettered by the full demands and resultant exclusions of being one flesh.

The trouble with these jokes and serious hopes is their projected flight from the full responsibilities of married love, which include loving unconditionally—but also

include being a special, intimate friend, having children, sharing one's deepest self, and being fully vulnerable. In Michael Novak's words, "Seeing myself through the unblinking eyes of an intimate, intelligent other, an honest spouse, is humiliating beyond anticipation" (1976, 41). And we are tempted to avoid that humiliation, however redemptive it is. Having comparatively shallow, friendly, intellectual, artistic relations with a group of people, even having merely sexual adventures with a variety, is not as difficult as developing a full relationship of fidelity with one person. And I fear that many Mormon men and women let the expectation of polygyny as the ideal future order justify their inclination to be vaguely promiscuous or superficial in sexual relationships, to flirt or share their identity with a number of people, or simply to withdraw from the struggle into blessed singularity—and there, too often, to be satisfied with some version of love of self. In short, some Mormons, assuming future polygyny, practice for it now by diverting their affections and loyalties away from the arduous task of achieving full spiritual and physical unity with the one person they would otherwise inescapably have to face, an imperfect spouse.

The nineteenth-century Mormon experience shows that such temptations are related to the very nature of polygyny. Those who lived it best, most devotedly and successfully, apparently found they could do so only by making the relationships more superficial—that is, less romantic, less emotionally intense and focused. Zina Diantha Huntington Jacobs Smith Young, wife of three men, including Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, and one of the strongest public advocates of polygamy, was quoted in the *New York World*, 19 November 1869, as saying, "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" (in Van Wagoner 1986, 102). Vilate Kimball, first wife of Heber C, counselled an unhappy plural wife that "her comfort must be wholly in her children; that she must lay aside wholly all interest or thought in what her husband was doing while he was away from her" (Van Wagoner 1986, 102–3).

Diaries, letters, and reminiscences of polygynous wives and children reveal that regular down-playing of the romantic dimension of married love was indeed one of the costs of polygyny, whatever its compensating values. Even the best relationships appear to be bittersweet. But I fear that such a flight from the complete love that includes romance may actually appeal both to overly idealistic unmarried Mormons and to Mormons who are not completely happy in their marriages now. If so, it is an unfortunate compromise, one without genuine compensating values and one to be repented of rather than rationalized by the hope that eternal marriage will be polygynous. One of the horrifying results of this idea, conveyed by some teachers of LDS youth, that polygyny is a "purer" love since it is a more inclusive and less selfish love and thus the celestial form of marriage, is that they thus help prepare some young Mormon women to be seduced by the argument of fundamentalists that they can engage in that "higher" order right now! Such thinking also tends to encourage promiscuity in the young married, who may therefore share their deepest feelings, even sexual interests, too broadly; it encourages passivity in the middle-aged, who may thus neglect the constant struggle for full fidelity, which includes

romance and friendship as well as charity; and it encourages irresponsibility in the old, who may finally retreat from their life-long task of building a deep and full celestial love into bored tolerance or silent alienation.

NOW LET ME turn to a consideration of why, in addition to the serious danger to fidelity, I believe polygyny, though it was once an inspired practice, is not an eternal principle. I have five main reasons.

1. A requirement so central and important to our eternal salvation should be firmly grounded in the scriptures, but it is not. In fact, the clearest scriptures state that polygyny is only an occasional requirement, otherwise extremely dangerous. In the Book of Mormon, the prophet Jacob reports the Lord's insistence that David's and Solomon's polygyny was "abominable," apparently, as the Lord suggests to Joseph Smith in Doctrine and Covenants 132:37–38, because they went beyond what he commanded them. The Lord tells the Nephite men categorically to have one wife only and no concubines—no divided fidelity of any kind (Jacob 2:27). In this general exhortation to chastity and monogamy, God offers only one exception: "For if I will . . . raise up seed unto me, I will command my people" (Jacob 2:30). The only such exception, that we know about since that time is documented in Doctrine and Covenants 132, where the Lord commands his young Church to practice polygyny, and we must assume that commandment was given for the fundamental purpose stated in the Book of Mormon—to raise up seed unto him.

I think the operative words in the Lord's statement of his one exception are "unto me." Polygyny, historical evidence indicates, did not produce a larger number of children; it was more likely instituted because of the Abrahamic test which it provided parents and because it concentrated children in well-organized and elite families. My sense is that it produced a more devout and religiously well-trained progeny, seed unto God. That is certainly what some leaders, such as Brigham Young (*JD* 3: 264) and Erastus Snow (*JD* 24: 165), believed was a central purpose and effect of polygyny. My chief evidence that they were right is the subjective one that well into the 1950s and 60s, when the surge in converts began, I was present at a number of meetings where standing count indicated that a huge majority of active Mormons, especially leaders, were descendants of polygynists, a much larger percentage than the percentage of Mormons who actually practiced polygyny.

At any rate, Doctrine and Covenants 132 does not say or imply that polygyny is anything more than an exception, commanded for a specific purpose relevant to a specific historical circumstance and, by implication, to be rescinded when those circumstances changed or when the costs began to outweigh the benefits.

All of the passages in section 132 about eternal conditions and promises relate to "the new and everlasting covenant," to what will happen "if a man marry a wife . . . and it is sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise" (v. 19), that is, to eternal marriage, not to plural marriage. The language concerning plural marriage, it seems to me, simply grants permission to engage in this unusual practice then required of some Mormons, with precise conditions designed to make certain that such an extremely difficult and dangerous requirement be controlled within the moral and religious bounds of the priesthood and the temple: "If any man espouse a virgin,

and desire to espouse another [by the law of the priesthood], and the first give her consent, and if he espouse the second . . . then is he justified” (v. 61).

Only two verses of Section 132 could be read as support for *eternal* polygyny. Verse 39 declares that David will not inherit his wives “out of this world” because of his sin against Uriah and Bathsheba, possibly implying that had he not sinned he would inherit those wives in the next life. And verse 63 states that plural wives are given to a man “to multiply and replenish the earth . . . and to fulfill the promise which was given by my Father before the foundation of the world, and for their exaltation in the eternal worlds, that they may bear the souls of men; for herein is the work of my Father continued, that he may be glorified.” This latter verse is ambiguous. It could mean simply that obedience to God’s command of polygyny on earth, by those so commanded, makes possible their exaltation and thus the continued bearing of spirit children in their eternal marriages, of one woman and one man, in the celestial kingdom. Or it could mean that *some* polygyny is eternal: that for those who are sealed into it in this life, polygyny in heaven is necessary for their exaltation, since it makes it possible for the wives involved to “bear the souls of men” in the celestial kingdom.

If verse 39 means that David could have inherited his plural wives and the second interpretation of verse 63 is correct, at most these verses suggest that polygyny will continue for those sealed into it here on earth, not that it will be required of others. Yet that second interpretation of verse 63 seems to me completely unacceptable because it requires that we see the purpose of plural wives as simply, or mainly, to bear more spirit children. Such a notion strikes directly at the heart of our concept of men and women as coeternal and equal partners in the celestial realms. It is based on one of the popular rationales for eternal polygyny but the one which is perhaps most repugnant to an increasing number of faithful Mormons—that since women take nine months to bear mortal children and presumably will take that long to bear spirit children as well, each man must have many wives, keeping them all pregnant most of the time, to produce those billions of spirit children for “the eternal worlds” referred to in Doctrine and Covenants 132:63. That argument seems to me so obviously wrong I am tempted to simply dismiss it, but I have found that enough influential Mormons and teachers of religion espouse such an argument that I must respond.

Suppose it would take a woman, bearing a child each nine months, 60 billion years to produce the spirit children for an earth like ours (the 80 billion or so people demographers compute will have lived on earth by 2000 a.d.). It does not seem reasonable to me that God would require polygyny, with all its attendant problems, simply to reduce that time to twenty or even ten billion years by giving each man four or six wives. If humans can already produce test-tube babies and clones, God has certainly found more efficient ways to produce spirit children than by turning celestial partners into mere birth machines. To anticipate such a limited, unequal role for women in eternity insults and devalues them.

My basic point is that the scriptures are at most, ambiguous about the place of polygyny in celestial marriage. I find no scriptural evidence that polygyny is required either for all of us or for those who are to be the most exalted. The silence of the

scriptures concerning something so important and fundamental cannot be an oversight: “Surely, the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7).

Yet a number of nineteenth-century Mormon apostles and prophets, in their defense of polygyny, claimed it was the celestial order of marriage, including Brigham Young (*JD* 11:269, 271; 16:166) and Joseph F. Smith (*JD* 20:28). However, in the same sermons where they declared polygyny to be the celestial order, these leaders also asserted or implied, with the same conviction, one or more of the following: that the wives of those who do not practice polygamy will be, in the next life, given to those who do (*JD* 16:166); that the more wives and children one has, the greater one’s future glory (*JD* 1:61; 20:29–31); that if Utah did not receive statehood before polygamy was abolished, it never would (*JD* 11:269); and that the practice of polygyny by the Church would *never* be taken away (especially John Taylor, see Van Wagoner 1986, 128). Since we no longer believe—or accept as inspired—those other claims, the associated claim, that celestial marriage is polygynous, is at least called into question.

I can understand that it might have been necessary for nineteenth-century Mormons and their leaders, who invested so much in the practice of polygamy and paid such terrible individual and group costs for it, to justify their commitment in part by the belief that it was more than an inspired but temporary practice. However, that does not make their belief true—or at least does not universalize eternal polygyny. The situation is similar to that of denial of priesthood to blacks. Some apostles and prophets until fairly recent times have stated that the denial was more than an inspired Church practice—that it was rooted in pre-existent choices and the eternal nature of blacks or their ancestors (*JD* 11:272; First Presidency Statement 1949; McConkie 1958, 102). But in the same sermons or writings they also recorded their equally firm beliefs that interracial mixing with blacks should bring death (*JD* 10:110) or that the Civil War would not free the slaves (*JD* 10:250) or that blacks would never receive the priesthood in this life until all whites had (*JD* 11:272; 7:291; First Presidency, 1949; McConkie 1958, 476). All of those claims have been proven false, one by direct revelation from God, and that fact, I believe, at the very least leaves us free to question the associated claim that dark skin or black ancestry is a sign of a mistake in the pre-existence.

Because God spoke in the 1978 revelation to end the practice of priesthood denial to blacks we should seriously question the rationale that well-meaning Church members developed to explain that practice: the racist and unscriptural doctrine still persisted in by some that blacks were not “valiant” in the premortal world. And because God spoke in 1890 to end the practice of polygyny, we should also question the rationale that well-meaning Church members had developed to justify it: the sexist and unscriptural doctrine of post-mortal plural marriage.

We should all aspire to the courage of Elder Bruce R. McConkie, who after the 1978 revelation had flatly contradicted his earlier teachings that blacks would never receive the priesthood on earth, apparently recognized he must also discard some associated teachings: “Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is

contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world [about how ‘all are alike unto God ... black and white (2 Ne. 26:33)’ (1983, 153).

We now have additional light and knowledge, because of the 1890 revelation and subsequent Church teachings and practices, on what that same Book of Mormon passage means in claiming “all are alike unto God . . . male and female.” Certainly analogies do not provide proof by themselves, but this one should encourage us to reassess past teachings which were linked to teachings we now know to be false and that are contrary to our post-Manifesto understanding of marriage.

I realize this is a troubling, perhaps dangerous, position: If we start questioning some statements of Church leaders, why not all? If they were wrong about some of their rationales for polygyny and priesthood denial, why are they not wrong about God’s involvement in first instituting those practices—or anything else in the Restoration? Though I sympathize with—even share—this anxiety, the assertion that revelation is either totally true or totally untrue is still a false dichotomy: We simply do not believe, as Mormons, that we must accept all scripture and prophetic teaching as equally inspired, and we have no doctrine of prophetic infallibility. The scriptures and our modern Church leaders themselves have made this point again and again and have given us some guidelines for distinguishing binding truth and direction from good advice and both of these from “the mistakes of men” (“Preface” to the Book of Mormon; see also D&C 1:24–27).

In the particular case of polygyny a reasonable guideline can be formulated : If a Church practice which served valuable historical purposes is rescinded, thus proving false some statements which were made in the process of defending it as permanent because it is based in some eternal doctrine, then all such statements are called in question and can be thoughtfully and prayerfully assessed in relation to other fundamental scriptures and doctrines (as I am trying to do here) without opening the Pandora’s box of complete skepticism. I can (and do) believe that Joseph Smith and Brigham Young were divinely called prophets who received direct revelation across a remarkable range of important practices and doctrines. I am not thereby constrained to believe (and do not) that they never made a mistake or never suffered from human limitations of understanding that plague us all. Modern prophets themselves have explicitly renounced specific practices and teachings of both those earlier prophets (the Adam-God theory, for instance), sometimes even supplying rational arguments to help us understand how such mistakes or changes could occur, without thereby calling into question those prophets’ general inspiration or prophetic authority.

2. My second reason for questioning eternal polygyny, in addition to the lack of scriptural support for such a doctrine, is that if polygyny were the highest order of marriage, surely the Lord would want us to practice it whenever and wherever we could on earth. But he does not. I feel certain, and those I have consulted who are trained in the law agree, that a serious effort by the Church to strike down the anti-polygamy laws as unconstitutional would succeed. But the Church not only does not make such an effort; I understand it takes action against those who seriously advocate doing so. We do not even allow our members to continue practicing polyg-

yny in countries where it is legal. Thus, one of the strangest paradoxes of Mormon history is that the Reorganized Church, which claims the Lord never revealed polygyny, allows members to practice it in India and Africa, while the Utah-based LDS Church, which claims the Lord did reveal it, does not allow *anyone* to practice it.

3. There is a general Mormon assumption that the plural wives who were sealed to polygynists (or are sealed to widowers) are bound in eternal sealings that cannot be broken and so at least *those* marriages must be plural in eternity. But this assumption has been essentially refuted by the modern Church practice, initiated by President David O. McKay, of sometimes sealing a woman *to more than one man*. Of course, this form of plural marriage (polyandry) usually occurs only in temple work done for a dead woman who was married to more than one man during life. She is now sealed to all her husbands without our presuming to make a choice for her—and, of course, her choice in the spirit world of one eternal companion must then invalidate the other sealings and leave those men free to find eternal companions. Sealings thus seem to guarantee bonds only when they are subsequently agreed upon but do not forcibly bind anyone. But if this is so in such polyandrous sealings, then it might just as well be the case in polygynous ones. The man involved could have the opportunity to work out a one-to-one relationship as the basis for celestial marriage from among the women to whom he was sealed, and the other sealings must then be invalidated by mutual consent, thus freeing those women to form one-to-one celestial marriages with others.

Who would those others be? Possibly the “extra” husbands of widows similarly released by *their* choice of one eternal companion, or, of course, the many single men who have lived on earth, but also, it has been half-seriously suggested, the surplus of male babies who die and inherit celestial glory. Being required to make such a choice may sound like harsh doctrine for those women who in good faith look forward to being with the one man they have known and loved, even if he has other wives. But that doctrine is no harsher than the same doctrine for the man married to one woman whom he loves deeply, even though she has been married to others, perhaps sealed to one of them and now, under President McKay’s change, sealed to all. All but one of these men must find new companions. Obviously we must trust in the great and almost unique Mormon principle of continued life and development after death but before judgment, when opportunity will abound for single men and women, as well as unmatched spouses, to find their eternal companions.

4. That semi-serious aside about surplus male babies leads to my fourth argument: Another popular rationale for polygyny is that there are and will be more righteous women than men. This rather patronizing and certainly unprovable sentiment cloaks a sexist assumption, demeaning to both men and women. And a fine satire on the question, “In the Heavens Are Parents Single? Report No. 1,” by the “Committee on Celestial Demographics,” published in the Spring 1984 *Dialogue*, makes a plausible case that there will actually be *many more men than women* in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom. We know that 104 males are born for every 100 females and 47 percent of males born into the world have died before age eight, as opposed to only 44 percent of females. If we accept the usual interpretation

of Doctrine and Covenants 137—that all children who die under eight are exalted—then already, from the over 70 billion who have come to earth, nearly 17 billion males and 15 billion females are destined for the highest degree of the celestial kingdom on the basis of premature death alone, a surplus of nearly 2 billion males (1984, 85–86). Even if women were naturally more righteous, it would take a huge disproportion in that righteousness to merely equalize those numbers, to say nothing of creating a situation that required plural wives.

Of course, that “Report” is extremely speculative and fundamentally wrong-headed, as good satire always is. I believe it is more likely and certainly more consistent with free agency that children who die and are thus, in the words of Doctrine and Covenants 137:7, “heirs of the celestial kingdom,” are not thus guaranteed exaltation but only guaranteed an *opportunity* for exaltation—and that the number of males and females in the celestial kingdom is essentially equal.

Actually, I believe those numbers are exactly equal. Since celestial marriage itself is a prior requirement for the highest decree of the celestial kingdom, then it would seem that we arrive there, not as different numbers of men or women who then must pair off—or pluralize off—into marriages, but only after having achieved, as part of our righteousness, a celestial marriage. We arrive partnered. In other words, arguments about relative numbers of righteous men and women are irrelevant; the highest degree of the celestial kingdom will be, by definition, a place made up entirely of eternal male-female couples.

5. My fifth reason for believing celestial marriage is not polygynous—and my main reason for thinking that we must not simply say, “We can’t possibly imagine what it will be like in heaven and so shouldn’t worry about it”—is that it seems to me, from reflection and from talking with Mormon women, that the devaluation of women inherent in the expectation of polygyny is destructive of their sense of identity and *worth now*. For instance, the argument considered above, that there must be polygyny because there are more celestial women than men, sounds on the face of it complimentary to women. But if we reflect a bit, it is simply a way of saying that one good man is in some sense the equivalent of more women than one, however “righteous” those women are compared to the average man. Can one man emotionally and sexually satisfy more than one woman? Or is he capable of being “equally yoked” to more than one woman—spiritually or intellectually or managerially or whatever? In either case, the implications seem to diminish women, reducing them, in some essential way, to less than full equivalence with men.

If we believed that the celestial order would be truly polygamous, allowing either polygyny or polyandry because somehow we would all—men and women—be capable of a “higher,” more inclusive love than could accommodate various groupings, the case would at least be rational and nonsexist. However, both the historical order Mormons once practiced and the celestial order many Mormons anticipate are purely polygynous. They accept in the eternal marriage unit only plural wives, not plural husbands. Since there is no good reason to believe that polygyny will be needed to accommodate an excess of women in the celestial kingdom, then the expectation that there will be plural wives but not plural husbands cannot help but imply fundamental inequalities between men and women that have to do with their

most central qualities and feelings, those involving sexual and spiritual identity and relationships (such as the insulting concept discussed above, that women are needed chiefly as birth machines for spirit children).

I believe we can remove that vague implication of inferiority without becoming alienated either from nineteenth-century Mormonism or from our present faith in the gospel and the Church. It is possible and spiritually healing, I believe, to affirm our polygynous ancestors for their obedient sacrifices and courageous achievements, which made the foundations of the restored church secure—and yet to reject the expectation of future polygyny. For too many of us, that expectation undermines the foundations of our present identities as women and men and diverts us from the difficult struggle for complete fidelity in our marriages that the gospel standard of morality and the expectation of celestial marriage as the basis of godhood require.

I do not presume to speak for others. My intent is simply to help free us, as Mormon men and women, to think about our marriages and the future with more openness, less bound to the expectation of future polygyny. Let us not be limited to our past understanding. In the speech I referred to earlier, Elder McConkie observed, “Since the Lord gave this revelation on the priesthood, our understanding of many [scriptures] has expanded. Many of us never imagined or supposed that they had the extensive and broad meaning that they do have” (1982, 152). And though he then discussed only how our understanding of how black and white are “alike unto God” had expanded, I suggest that we also need to consider that our understanding of how men and women are alike and equal unto God may still be narrow, in need of further expansion. Men who have suffered from an unhealthy sense of superiority and women who have felt degraded by the assumption of future polygyny should feel free to seek the inspiration that may help unburden them.

Certainly none of us can presume an exact knowledge of the celestial order and what we will be capable of there, but our whole religion is built on the assumption that this life is, in its essentials, very much like that future life and a direct preparation for it. We have been clearly commanded to try to develop perfect one-to-one fidelity in our marriages here, and in the temple marriage sealing ceremony we have been given, I believe, a clear vision of what the highest future order of marriage will be: It will be a full and equal, one-to-one partnership of a king and a queen, a priestess and a priest, a perfectly balanced and yet dynamic bi-polar union that makes possible “a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever” (D&C 132:19).

Difficult as complete married fidelity and unity is to achieve, there is nothing sweeter on earth than our approximations of it. And we have been given no clear evidence that it will not continue to be the sweetest thing in heaven, the foundation of godhood and a blessing available to all who, freed from this world’s limitations, really want it.

NOTES

1. Joseph F. Smith, in a discourse in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, 7 July 1878, suggested both the danger of polygyny, a powerful principle “that savors of life unto life, or of death unto death,” if it were misunderstood or misused and that he understood it was applicable “when commanded

and not otherwise” and was “particularly adapted to the conditions and necessities . . . the circumstances, responsibilities, and personal, as well as vicarious duties of the people of God in this age of the world” (*JD* 20:26).

2. Joseph Smith preached on 27 August 1843 regarding three priesthoods:

The Melchizedek Priesthood holds the right from the eternal God, and not by descent from father and mother; and that priesthood is as eternal as God Himself, having neither beginning of days nor end of life.

The 2nd Priesthood is Patriarchal authority. Go to and finish the temple, and God will fill it with power, and you will then receive more knowledge concerning this priesthood.

The 3rd is what is called the Levitical Priesthood, consisting of priests to administer in outward ordinances, made without an oath; but the Priesthood of Melchizedek is by an oath and covenant.

This version, which appears in Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 4th printing (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1964), p. 323, is, in turn, quoted from Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, B. H. Roberts, ed., 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (1949; rpt. ed., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1951), 5:555. This sermon was reconstructed from Joseph Smith’s diary for that date, kept by Willard Richards. The original text reads:

[The Melchizedek priesthood is] a priesthood which holds the priesthood by right from the Eternal Gods.—and not b[y] descent from father and mother
2d Priesthood, patriarchal authority finish that temple and god will fill it with power.

3rd Priesthood. Levitical.

Priests made without an oath, but the Priesthood of Melchisedek is by oath and covenant (Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds. *The Words of Joseph Smith* [Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1980], pp. 244–45).

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