“Regeneration—Now and Evermore!":
Mormon Polygamy and the Physical
Rehabilitation of Humankind

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LATTER-DAY SAINT BELIEF in polygamy, although introduced in the 1830s and 1840s, was not publicly defended until the church relocated from the Midwest to the Great Basin. Its practice by thousands of Mormons in the late nineteenth century may have constituted the largest prescribed departure from traditional monogamy in Western civilization since the Middle Ages.¹ Determined to present their views as persuasively as possible, church leaders commenced a campaign in 1852 to convince the world that what they were doing was not only scriptural but practical and scientific.² Most accounts of Mormonism’s polygamous experience

¹In the strictest sense, the marriage of one man to several women is “polygyny.” Because Mormons and non-Mormons of the nineteenth century commonly referred to their system as “polygamy,” “celestial marriage,” “the principle,” “plural marriage,” or simply “plurality,” we will employ these same usages throughout this paper. For Mormonism’s famous 1843 revelation approving polygamy, see The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Salt Lake City, 1982), sec. 132 (hereafter D&C). Scholarly overviews of Mormon plural marriage are provided in Kimball Young, Isn’t One Wife Enough? (New York, 1954); Stanley S. Ivins, “Notes on Mormon Polygamy,” Western Humanities Review 10 (Summer 1956): 229–39; Lawrence Foster, Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1981), 123–225; Louis J. Kern, An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community (Chapel Hill, NC, 1981), 137–204; and Richard S. Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy: A History, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City, 1989).

²The 1852 announcement, first delivered in sermons by Orson Pratt and Brigham Young on August 29, 1852, was printed in pamphlet form as Deseret News, Extra, Containing a
grant only incidental importance to the naturalistic arguments used. And those who acknowledge the unique biological powers ascribed to plural marriage generally fail to integrate Mormon claims with sexual assumptions common at the time. While revelatory command was always significant to them, nineteenth-century Mormons borrowed extensively from guidebook authors, scientific thinkers, and sexual theorists of the day. Their purpose was to convince others that only through the substitution of polygamy for monogamy could men and women be restored to their pristine capacities and the world prepared for the millennium.

To understand their claims, one must recall that Mormon plurality arose in a period when American society was regularly addressed by reformers contending for domestic revolution. John Humphrey Noyes, whose familial reconstructions followed the Nauvoo period of Mormonism by only a few years, said that secular and religious reformers were at that time “wonderfully similar” in their goals. Both Robert Dale Owen and Charles Fourier, who together inspired scores of communitarian attempts, sought

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greater freedom in marital experimentation—Fourier specifically comment-
ing that polygamy was “a practice which cannot in any case be prevented.”6
Another spokesman of the 1830s frankly asked why men should not be
permitted to take additional women into their households, if first wives
approved, and thereby diminish the number of husbands “ranging about.”7
Whether contending for an end to all sexual activity, as did the Shakers, or
inviting the freedoms associated with Frances Wright at Nashoba, the times
were filled with proposals for sexual innovation.8

Millennialist expectations ran parallel to the visions of utopian claim-
ants, many declaring that the end of the world was near. The Saints were
part of a numerous company urging attention to signs and wonders as
evidence that the fateful time was at hand. “Prepare ye, prepare ye,” they
were told in an early communication from heaven, “for that which is to
come, for the Lord is nigh.”9 As one scholar described it, early nineteenth-
century America was “drunk on the millennium.”10 Here, as in other ar-
eas, Mormons were in close stride with the nation’s religious mood. And,
as with others, early Mormon belief in an apocalyptic, premillennial Sec-
ond Coming gradually yielded to postmillennial meliorism. It was a halt-
ing, never fully completed transit, with the Saints alternating between cata-
clysmic and gradualist expectations, but one in which they always saw
themselves as builders as well as heralds of a perfected earthly kingdom
that Christ would inherit at His coming. Efforts to create a “new heaven”
were closely dependent on making a “new earth.” And, as we shall see,
many Mormons were certain that only plural marriage could fully redeem
the world from its decadence.11

Finally, utopian and postmillennial notions often united with an enthu-
siasm for scientific achievement, mostly in the area of biological theory,

6The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier: Selected Texts on Work, Love, and Passionate At-
see Arnita Ament Jones, “Free Love and Communal Households: Robert Dale Owens and
Fanny Wright on Women’s Rights,” Indiana Academy of the Social Sciences Proceedings,
8Regarding Shaker sexual thought, see Stephen J. Stein, The Shaker Experience in America:
A History of the United Society of Believers (New Haven, CT, 1992), 31–32, 34–36, 75,
231–32, 267. For Frances Wright, see Celia Morris, Fanny Wright: Rebel in America
(Urbana, IL, 1992), 141–47.
10Nathan O. Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity (New Haven, CT,
1989), 184.
11For the history of Mormon millennialism within the context of American religious be-
 lief, see Grant Underwood, The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism (Urbana, IL, 1993);
Dan Erickson, “As a Thief in the Night”: The Mormon Quest for Millennial Deliverance (Salt
Lake City, 1998). Historians who hold that Mormonism vacillated between pre- and
reflecting what James Whorton in his discussion of antebellum health reform called “Christian physiology.” Because of the possibilities for directed mutation, Lamarckian suppositions were especially popular. Belief that conscious reproductive choice would bring improvement to the human species logically comported with both utopian and postmillennial expectations. While Sir Francis Galton did not invent the term “eugenics” until 1883, and social programs associated with the Mendelian revival were primarily a development of the early twentieth century, confidence in humanity’s capacity for physical improvement was commonplace among nineteenth-century reformers. Careful attention to sexual behavior seemed an entirely appropriate way to build a better civilization. Galton himself, reflecting the cultural hauteur of his time, was certain that careful breeding could carry even “superior” European “races” to higher levels.

Mormon polygamous advocates drew extensively on these strands of thought. And, like so many of the thinkers on whom they relied, these advocates held few assumptions more dear than the proposition that semen was invested with extraordinary qualities and all who wished long, robust lives must not waste it. As the French writer Alexander Mayer warned, dissipation of “la liqueur séminale” was certain to impair health


and longevity. Sexual prodigality, many feared, was afflicting society with a vast seepage of energy. One American physician, illustrating the perils of careless expenditure, described a masturbatory victim as “the most shame-faced and degraded looking human being conceivable; it was next to impossible to catch his eye; he stooped and walked as tottering as a man of ninety.” Joining the lament, Mormons declared it a “fact . . . patent to all” that, because of licentious behavior, the majority of men were “feeble, undersized and shorter lived than their ancestors . . . [and were] small of stature, slight of limb, and look[ed] like boys turned old suddenly.”


Samuel Bayard Woodward, Hints for the Young on a Subject Relating to the Health of Body and Mind (Boston, 1838), 41. Orthodox and ultraist alike insisted that, in the words of one, inattention to such things had led to “continual deterioration of the race.” William A. Alcott, The Physiology of Marriage (Boston, 1866), 23. The centrality of sexual behavior in nineteenth-century American thought, for both destructive and improving consequences, is further illustrated in Ronald G. Walters, Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1974). For the extraordinary fears associated with masturbation, see Robert Neuman, “The Priests of the Body and Masturbatory Insanity in the Late Nineteenth Century,” Psychohistory Review 6 (Spring 1978): 21–32. Mormon concern with masturbation is examined in Lester E. Bush, Jr., Health and Medicine among the Latter-day Saints: Science, Sense, and Scripture (New York, 1993), 148.

Charles W. Penrose, “Physical Regeneration,” Millennial Star 29 (August 10, 1867): 497, 498. Also see Daniel H. Wells in an 1857 address, Journal of Discourses by Brigham Young, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, His Two Counsellors, the
Only by arresting this “great leakage of vital force,” they warned, could the fateful descent be reversed. 18

Commentators argued that the problem lay as much with married partners as with those who engaged in the “solitary sin” or visited prostitutes. In the words of one authority, married people “thinking themselves entitled to a perfect glut of indulgence . . . little suspect it as the cause of their physical diseases or mental alienations.” 19 Sexual license, it was believed, deranged the balance of vital energies in both genders, exhausted their bodies, and left them vulnerable to illness. By such abandon, couples “make their lives wretched, and give birth to short-lived, suffering children.” 20 Amatory embraces during pregnancy were considered especially dangerous because the expecting mother was in a fragile condition and the unborn child susceptible to injury. T. L. Nichols summed up the perils succinctly: “Every time a husband excited in his [pregnant] wife the sexual passion, he robs his child of some portion of its vitality, and her of some of the strength she needs.” 21

With such views, one might naturally ask whether seminal expenditure was safe under any circumstance. Some, believing American society to be ailing from sexual excess of all kinds, were reluctant to approve more than what was needed for reproduction. Extensive abstinence was urged as both morally necessary and hygienically restorative. Seminal

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18“Mormonism’ Not Sensual,” Millennial Star 39 (3 December 1877): 790. The idea that all human society was in decline was a proposition easily accepted by a people believing that the world had stumbled in darkness for centuries. In the founding revelation given to Joseph Smith, Jr., the young prophet was told that the world had departed from divine truths and that “none doeth good no not one.” The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, comp. and ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City, 1984), 6.

19Orson Squire Fowler, Amativeness: Or Evils and Remedies of Excessive and Perverted Sexuality Including Warning and Advice to the Married and Single (New York, 1857), vi. Also see his Sexual Science; Including Manhood, Womanhood, and Their Mutual Interrelations (Cincinnati, OH, 1870), 695–97; Thomas L. Nichols, Esoteric Anthropology (London, 1853), 98, 115, 179, 180, 190; Newman, Philosophy of Generation, 55–64.

20Nichols, Esoteric Anthropology, 180–81. O. S. Fowler warned that sexual excess took an especially heavy toll on wives, constituting the chief reason for “female complaints” and sending half of all married women to the grave prematurely; Amativeness, 43–46. For concern with the dangers of “sexual excess” among Victorian women generally, see Daniel Scott Smith, “Family Limitation, Sexual Control, and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America,” Clio’s Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women, ed. Mary Hartman and Lois W. Banner (New York, 1974), 129.

21Nichols, Esoteric Anthropology, 311.
preservation’s best-remembered American proponent, Sylvester Graham, after describing the average man of his time as “a living volcano of unclean propensities and passions,” recommended that husbands and wives improve their health by engaging in only twelve sexual encounters a year.\(^{22}\) Then, citing Jeremy Taylor, Graham said this was why God commanded circumcision: as a metaphor for the “cutting off all superfluity of naughtiness.”\(^{23}\)

There was another tradition, of course, as old as that urging spermatic conservation, and one most Americans, including Mormons, found more congenial to their natures. This was the argument that sexual intercourse was a universal practice in one form or another and that excessive repression was unreasonable. A disciplined accommodation, especially when employed with reproductive intent, could actually be salubrious.\(^{24}\) In the words of E. N. Jencks, a Massachusetts author whose work was frequently cited by Mormons, “divine law has taught us that . . . normal gratification of the reproductive instinct is the highest function of the body.”\(^{25}\) One of the nineteenth century’s most widely read American writers of advice books, William Alcott, warned that “long continued celibacy [actually] contracts the mind, if it does not enfeeble it.”\(^{26}\) Wilford Woodruff, an apostle and

\(^{22}\)Sylvester Graham, *A Lecture to Young Men, on Chastity. Intended Also for the Serious Consideration of Parents and Guardians* (Boston, 1839), 38–39, 72–73.


\(^{26}\)William A. Alcott, *The Young Man’s Guide*, 8th ed. (Boston, 1836), 255–56. And, as another writer said, “There is no virtue in disuse, any more than in wrong or over-use.”
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later president of the Mormon Church, so agreed with Alcott’s views that he declared his book “one of the best Gentile works I ever saw.”

Latter-day Saints, while concurring on the importance of spermatic preservation, said that scripture and nature alike commanded the race to perpetuate itself. Hence, sexual activity for reproduction was encouraged, but only when it was “an object of purpose, and not merely the accidental results of passion.” From the 1850s until the end of the century, church members were told that a major distinction between themselves and the rest of Christendom was that people outside the Mormon fold “regulate their sexual intercourse by lustful feelings, not by the pure and holy feeling of procreation.” Like Augustine, who said it was not sexual congress but the lascivious imagination accompanying it that ensnared men’s souls, Mormons believed they could multiply for God without surrendering to carnal passion.

Few themes are more prominent in Mormon homiletic literature at the time than disavowal that concupiscence either had or should have any part...
in marital life. In the first sermon he delivered after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, Brigham Young told of the ruin imposed on children whose mothers were distracted by erotic excitement during gestation. Apostle Orson Hyde warned both monogamous and polygamous Mormons in 1857 that shortened life spans and “puny . . . helpless, scabby children” resulted from parents who had exhausted themselves through sexual indulgence beyond what was needed for conception. Apostle Erastus Snow censured an audience in St. George, Utah, for “bringing on premature decay and early death by the too frequent use of sexual intercourse.” Sexual relations with barren wives were also considered sinful and unhealthful. Heber C. Kimball chastised church members for continuing to cohabit with partners who could not conceive, for they were thereby living “in the spirit of adultery.” Such men should “take a course to regenerate,” not “degenerate.” Kimball promised parents that, on the other hand, when conjugal relations were undertaken to have children, their offspring would “be mighty and godlike.”

Agreement between Mormon and non-Mormon concerning the importance of reproductive sexuality did not save the Saints from attack, however. How, it was asked, could concerns over the dangers of sexual excess be reconciled with a practice that, presumably, involved the expenditure of more, not less, of life’s germinal treasure? Indeed, the most scathing criticisms made of the Saints described them as a people weakened and in physical decline because of polygamy and its presumed excessive seminal effusion. The most famous and oft-quoted of such portrayals, that of Dr. Roberts Barthelow, an assistant military surgeon who visited Utah in the summer of 1857, was almost identical to passages in advice manuals warning of the consequences of masturbation, spermatorrhoea, and debauchery: altered
countenances, disease, and shortened lives. In a later report on the same subject, Barthelow declared that the Mormon community was so weakened by sexual prodigality that they would surely die out were it not for the regular arrival of new converts.38

Mormons answered by appropriating another assumption of the time: the widely held conviction that men possessed greater sexual need and capacity than women.39 Dr. George Napheys, a respected physician and author of the day, bespoke the common belief that wives seldom felt one-tenth the desire for amorous fulfillment that their husbands did.40 In the words of another writer, although men called “to . . . heaven and earth . . . [for help], the intensity of . . . [their] passion sweeps down every barrier, and rushes to its gratification.”41 Emphasizing this difference, Mormons said that a plurality of wives, when sexual intercourse was confined to perpetuation of the species, allowed both genders to live in greater harmony with their respective natures. “A person possessing [only] a moderate knowledge of physiology, or who has paid attention to his own nature and the nature of the gentler sex,” said Brigham Young, “can readily understand this.”42


39The history of this belief was a major thread in Keith Thomas’s classic, “The Double Standard,” Journal of the History of Ideas 20 (April 1959): 195–216. Also see Cynthia Eagle Russell’s description of the nineteenth century’s scientific location of women, in all their capacities, at a lower station on the phyletic ladder, in her Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 78–103. With specific regard to female lack of sexual desire, this was a common and emphatic claim in nineteenth-century human interest and advice literature. See Anna Fergurson, The Young Lady; or Guide to Knowledge, Virtue, and Happiness (Boston, 1848), 117; Orson Squire Fowler, Love and Parentage, Applied to the Improvement of Offspring (New York, 1857), 89; and especially popular among Mormons, Jencks, Philosophy and History of Marriage, 62, 168–69, 171–72, 220–22.


41The quotation is from Jencks, Philosophy and History of Marriage, 171–72.

42Brigham Young (1870), JD 13: 317.
Associated with this rejoinder was the popular judgment that males were often less spiritual than females, a conviction that not only justified a gendered division of social and domestic vocations but one that explained the difficulty of finding enough righteous husbands for the larger number of virtuous women. Again, it was said, plurality better answered the differing spiritual natures of the sexes. Principled men, fewer than their female counterparts, could find acceptable outlets for sexual urgency through reproductive encounters by husbanding the surplus of deserving women. As Julie Dunfey has pointed out, arguments for polygamy were thus brought to support, rather than erode, Victorian premises: “If most men were depraved and most women pure and lacking in passion, it followed that there were not enough good men to marry all the good women and thus allow them to fulfill their proper sphere.”

As early as 1842, Mormonism’s first pamphlet defense of plurality alluded to male difficulty with the sexual constraints of monogamous marriage. And, as George Q. Cannon put it in 1869, everyone knew male fecundity endured longer than that of females, thus justifying a man’s need for additional partners at midlife and beyond. Not only did women possess only a fraction of male libidinous impulse but, in order to preserve the purity and health of a coming child, mothers needed to retire from sexual excitement until pregnancy and lactation were complete. Without other spouses, the argument ran, monogamous husbands too easily yielded to their passions, turned to dissipating resorts, or imposed themselves on already pregnant wives, flouting “the great principle that nothing should be done in vain.”

The proposition that women’s natures logically assigned them to different “spheres” of activity and that their spiritual sensitivity specially fitted them to serve as moral guardians in the home was fully accepted by nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints. One Mormon writer, while pleading the benefits of polygamy, referred to the female sex as “the fairest and most lovely specimen of the creative power of God.” Jesse Haven, *Celestial Marriage, and the Plurality of Wives!* (Cape Town, South Africa, 1854), 4.

Julie Dunfey, “Living the Principle” of Plural Marriage,” 529.

[Udney Hay Jacob], *An Extract, from a Manuscript Entitled “The Peace Maker,” the Doctrines of the Millennium (Nauvoo, IL, 1842), 57.*

George Q. Cannon (1869), JD 13: 206.


As quoted from an unnamed Mormon apostle by the French observer, Jules Remy. *A Journey to Great Salt Lake City... with a Sketch of the History, Religion, and Customs of the Mormons,* 2 vols. (London, 1861), 2: 109. Disregard for the delicate, nonsexual feelings of wives was alleged by Mormons to be commonplace with monogamous husbands: “Such will indulge their appetites, and every pernicious and unhallowed lust must be gratified at the risk of... [his wife’s] poor heart breaking.” Helen Mar Whitney, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage. By a “Mormon” Wife and Mother—Helen Mar Whitney* (Salt Lake City, 1884), 54–55. But to require men to live in a condition of celibacy during their wives’ pregnancies was naive, for, as another Mormon put it: “Nature speaks.” William Budge,
Female members who defended polygamy were as forceful as the men. Mary Jane Mount Tanner, commenting on the problems of a cousin, pithily observed: “I think she has children fast [but] . . . it was not her husband’s fault[.] if it was she should be a Mormon and get him some more wives that would save her all that trouble[.]”

The argument found such support that one of Utah’s earliest dissent publications, at odds with church leadership on other issues, admitted that “the two sexes . . . are different in their tendencies; and . . . upon this very difference turns the whole question of the propriety of plural marriage. Women are endowed with monogamic tendencies and men with polygamic ones.” Thus, plural marriage permitted both sexes to fulfill their natural inclinations without, as Mormon Apostle Amasa M. Lyman said, “stepping aside from the path of virtue and honor.” George Q. Cannon was more direct. Rather than yielding to derelict monogamous habits, he said, “We close the door . . . and say that whoredoms, seductions and adulteries must not be committed among us . . . at the same time we open the door in the other direction and make plural marriage honorable.”

Mormonism’s indictment that traditional marriage was inclined to dissipation was complemented by another concern widely held in Western society: the belief that thoughts and proclivities were “faithfully daguerre-otyped” onto offspring. Parents’ thoughts could be passed to the embryo during coitus and other intimate moments, with women’s emotions further imprinting the child during gestation and the time of nursing.
Conception should therefore occur only when both parents were tranquil, relaxed, and filled with tender emotions. The uncanny certitude of the possibility of influencing the developing child could be frightening. One non-Mormon said that if a woman, when copulating, thought about someone other than her actual physical partner, the resulting child would resemble the person imagined.54 Another told of a gentleman who “abused himself” when in bed beside his pregnant wife with the result that, after the baby was born, it soon fell victim to “exhaustion and decrepitude.”55 Some writers provided rules of thought for prospective parents to assure poetic, mathematical, and other gifts in their offspring.56

Mormon acceptance of these ideas was complete. When Latter-day Saint husbands were hunted and sent to prison for polygamy, some wives were convinced that emotional distress brought by the ordeal was transferred to and left “marks” on their unborn children.57 Because vice was considered hereditary, mothers were told to conceive and carry their infants in a prayerful frame of mind that “a Noble Spirit from Eternity may Come

54Interestingly, O. S. Fowler contended that the greater excitement aroused in forbidden unions was transmitted to the illegitimate offspring, producing dispositions that were “lively, sprightly, witty, frolicsome, knowing, quick of perception, apt to learn, full of passion, quick-tempered, impulsive throughout, hasty, indiscreet, given to excesses,” etc. See his Love and Parentage, 33.

55Newman, Philosophy of Generation, 80.

56Fowler, Sexual Science, 780–803. These assumptions continued until the end of the nineteenth century. In 1898, the unusually large number of male births in New York City was credited to military excitement generated by the Spanish-American War. “Schenk to World on Excess of Boys,” [New York] World, 30 December 1898, p. 1. Also see Alice B. Stockham, Karezza: Ethics of Marriage, rev. ed. (Chicago, 1903), 24, 64–65.

57Julietta Bateman Jensen, Little God Pieces: The Story of My Mormon Mother’s Life (Salt Lake City, 1948), 205; James L. Wyatt, interviewed by Leslie Embry, 18 June 1976, p. 11, LDS Polygamy Oral History Project, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; and the comments of Apostle Moses Thatcher as reported in Abraham Hoagland Cannon Journal, 2 October 1890, Lee Library. For further remarks, see Bush, “Birth Control among the Mormons,” 37 n. 43, and Health and Medicine among the Mormons, 146–47.
into the tabernacle & that the Holy Ghost may rest upon the father Mother & child.”58 One Mormon writer urged that, to assure that a new child would not inherit “disease, distortion, decay, and death,” appropriate food and music should precede the procreative act.59 Apostle Orson Hyde, as part of a sermon urging the taking of additional wives, warned listeners that idiocy and other deficiencies were caused by fathers who did not restrain themselves during their wives’ pregnancies.60

Again, Mormons turned the matter to a defense of plurality. Inasmuch as more sexual outlets were available, wives were less likely to suffer the impositions of sexually needful husbands and were thus able to conceive and carry infants in a more peaceful, spiritual state of mind. As Belinda Marden Pratt, a plural wife herself, explained, sexual indulgence was intended for the procreation of healthy offspring; therefore “natural law would dictate, that a husband should remain apart from his wife” during her pregnancy so that “her heart should be pure, her thoughts and affections chaste, her mind calm, her passions without excitement.”61 And polygamy, it was said, permitted this far more than monogamy.

Another concern assimilated into Mormon apologetic discourse involved spousal incompatibility and the dangers of “alienation” of affections. Some believed that costs associated with spermatic loss were partially restored by an exchange of energies between loving partners. Conversely, when mutual affection was absent or when the natural course of the sexual act was interrupted, serious harm followed. This was why “the solitary sin” was considered more hurtful than consensual intercourse; why coitus interruptus, or “conjugal onanism” as it was called, was considered a theft of the compensating current; and, especially important, why alienation of feelings between married partners should be avoided.62

58Brigham Young, as reported in Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 4: 122, 8 April 1852; and Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 5: 7–8, 11 January 1857. Apostle Moses Thatcher, pleading the powers of polygamy on “natural” and “scientific” grounds, urged members to live by “the laws of nature,” if they wished to escape penalties transmitted to the third and fourth generations of their children. “Discourse by Elder Moses Thatcher,” Deseret News, 26 May 1883, p. 1.
60As recorded in Gallup, “Reminiscence and Diary,” pp. 193–95, 11 February 1857, Church Archives.
61Pratt, Defence of Polygamy, 4–5; Whitney, Why We Practice Plural Marriage, 54–55.
In his 1842 pamphlet defending polygamy and patriarchal authority, Udney Hay Jacob identified alienation of wives’ feelings as a national scourge that he believed had caused social disorder, bad offspring, and loss of longevity. Writers in Utah also used the term “alienation,” occasionally employing it as grounds for divorce. The greater emotional satisfaction possible in a family of several female partners, where jealousy was subordinated to concern for the common good, was a claim repeatedly heard from the Mormon pulpit. Parental affection, peace, and happiness, it was said, exceeded by many times what one found in monogamy. An imaginative conversation written to persuade a reluctant female member of polygamy’s advantages stated that monogamy vitiated the body and mind of offspring, sowing “the seeds of death and mortality in their systems.” By contrast, in plurality a synergistic current was generated making the entire family “stronger than they otherwise could be.” As one Mormon enthusiast expressed it to a monogamous friend: “I wish you were a polyomist [sic] there is something immensely Godlike in it it increases the powers of the mind, [and] brings forth inbolden relief all the powers of the human Soul.”

An American writer of the time observed that Latter-day Saints so effectively turned the arguments of their critics to their own use that champions of monogamous marriage were placed on the defense. And Mormon spokesmen, sensing the strength of their claims, condemned monogamy with a sharpness that would astonish most Latter-day Saint church members today. Nothing, they said, had been so corrupting to society and health as Christianity’s departure from the divine economy of the sexes.

63 Jacob, An Extract, 10, 13, 25, 32. Also see the speech George A. Smith made in the Nauvoo Temple, as reported in George D. Smith, ed., An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton (Salt Lake City, 1991), 221.
65 For a sample of the chorus (mostly men) making these claims, see Erastus Snow (1881), JD 22: 152; “Discourse by Apostle Erastus Snow,” Deseret News, 14 July 1883, p. 1; Jedediah M. Grant (1856) JD 4: 84; and Margaret S. Smoot, “Experience of a Mormon Wife,” Provo City, Utah County, Utah, 1880, p. 8, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.
66 “Nelly and Abby: A Familiar Conversation between Two Cousins, on Marriage,” Millennial Star 15 (9 April 1853): 227. Also see the comments made to Elizabeth Wood Kane in the early 1870s: Elizabeth Wood Kane, A Gentle Account of Life in Utah’s Dixie, 1872–73: Elizabeth Kane’s St. George Journal (Salt Lake City, 1995), 119–20.
67 Charles Smith to Henry Eyring, February 1869, Charles Smith Diaries, copy, Lee Library.
found in Old Testament polygamy. Joseph F. Smith, an apostle and counselor in the First Presidency, was uncompromising: “Our system of marriage promotes life, purity, innocence, vitality, health, increase and longevity, while the other engenders disease, disappointment, misery and premature death, that is the difference. . . . They are not alike at all.” And in an epistle of 1885, the church’s First Presidency described the consequences of adherence to the monogamous ethic as one where the “channels which God has provided for the lawful exercise of the appetites with which He has endowed man . . . have been dammed up, and the history of Christendom informs us with what terrible results—the degradation and prostitution of woman, and the spread of the most terrible scourge known to humanity, the social evil, with its attendant train of loathsome horrors.”

So confident were the Saints that God had revealed the truths of nature to them that they proudly pointed to what they perceived as evidence of the gift. Disputing their critics, they boasted that nowhere in the world were there more intelligent, faster-learning children than in the Territory of Utah. Latter-day Saint young men and women were more virtuous than those found elsewhere. And those practicing polygamy, they said, were stronger, more vigorous, and longer-lived. In a frequently quoted sermon, Heber C. Kimball, a counselor to Brigham Young, said he could promise sixty-year-old men that if they would enter polygamy it would “renew” their age. And Luke William Gallup, a monogamist Mormon, but one who supported the Saints’ polygamist program, wrote his doubting family in the East: “all who practice Nature’s laws are rewarded, becoming healthy & strong, and the Man who observes this & marries more than one wife for the sake of posterity will lengthen out his days, enjoying a long life & a happy one.” How could anyone say their marriage practices were a threat

74Kimball (1857), JD 5:22. Both Kimball and Young said they meant to live until they were 150 to 150 years of age, and that it was not unreasonable to expect to live until one was 200, yet feel as lively as when 40 or 50. Journal of Heber C. Kimball, bk. 90, p. 137, 17 July 1846, Church Archives; Brigham Young (1857, 1860, 1867), JD 5: 210; 8: 62; 12: 119.
to health, asked one anonymous enthusiast, “when we daily meet boys, resultants of such unions, weighing over 200 pounds and their parents perhaps not over 150.” Because the Saints better understood “the social relations,” Apostle George A. Smith declared, Mormon men and women were even better looking than those produced by monogamy.

Assumed in all of these arguments was a certainty that God’s command to practice polygamy placed Mormons in greater harmony with the laws of nature. One of their founder’s communications had said that matter and spirit were the same and that God’s commandments did not distinguish between things temporal and things spiritual. John Taylor defined religion so broadly that he said he could not tell whether plural marriage was a religious or a secular principle. And George Q. Cannon, an important church spokesman of the time, said “the physiological side of the question” constituted the most powerful case one could make for polygamy. Travelers to Utah reported that more was said of plurality’s social and biological advantages than of its spiritual gifts.

As the Saints saw it, God had simply shown them the most reasonable process for ending human decadence and restoring the race to its primeval stature. Like others in the nineteenth century, they also believed natural law was God’s instrument for accomplishing such things. Opponents were challenged to show them where Mormon arguments failed. Wanting such

77George A. Smith (1856), JD 3: 291.
78DeC 29: 31–35 (1830); 131: 7 (1843). “One of the greatest things Joseph Smith ever did,” said Brigham Young, “was to familiarize Heaven & Earth and Cause them to shake hands together and become Familiar Together.” As reported in Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 5: 422, 27 January 1860.
79John Taylor (1866), JD 11: 219. In a summons to live and abide by the law of plural marriage in the mid-1850s, church members were told to “[e]stablish the laws of Nature and of Nature’s God in your houses, and teach them to your offspring. Thus shall Zion boast of noble sons and fair daughters; and so shall man be brought back into the presence of his Maker.” “A Chapter on Restitution,” Deseret News, 12 January 1854, n.p.
82Turner, Without God, 95; Elisabeth Hansot, Perfection and Progress: Two Modes of Utopian Thought (Cambridge, MA, 1974).
83Those who disagreed with them were challenged to produce evidence of Mormon error, “either from the Bible or Nature—we are willing to meet you on these grounds.” [George Q. Cannon], “Pacific,’ ‘Post,’ and Mormonism,” Western Standard 1 (15 November 1856):
proof, Mormons insisted that the man who married two or more wives and honorably provided for them would do more for humankind than “ten thousand monogamists who write and preach about morality and virtue.”

Plural marriage was “the cord that shall revolutionize the whole world . . . [the] leaven hid in three measures of meal until the whole is leavened.”

Others were invited to join in the great project. Success was inevitable, they said, because there was “such a tide of irresistible arguments, that, like the Grand Mississippi, it bears on its bold current everything that dares to oppose its course.”

While denying an evolutionary explanation of life’s origins, throughout the balance of the nineteenth century Mormons appropriated Darwinian imagery in behalf of plurality’s transforming effects. Benjamin F. Johnson said “survival of the Fittest,” assured that polygamy would become “the . . . centre of light and life” for human society on earth. And George A. Smith proudly told of a professor who, after studying Mormon society, predicted that their health and marriage practices would “in about seventy years . . . produce a race of men who would be able to walk the rest of the human race under foot.” In these ways, Mormon polygamous thought was more than Darwinian. It was eugenic. “Let us get the body improved first,” said Apostle Amasa M. Lyman, “that the spirit may live and dwell in a pure tabernacle. When this is done, we can go and cultivate the spirit as much as is needful.”

n.p. “Upon this subject, the people want arguments, not denunciations; reason, not sophistry; evidence, not popular traditions or customs; they want a clear, lucid demonstration that the practice is evil.” Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” *Seer* 1 (August 1853): 127.

84“The Only Remedy,” *Deseret News* [Weekly], 31 July 1867, p. 244.
85“The Only Remedy,” *Deseret News* [Weekly], 31 July 1867, p. 244.
86“The Only Remedy,” *Deseret News* [Weekly], 31 July 1867, p. 244.
88Benjamin Franklin Johnson, *Mormonism as an Issue* (Tempe, AZ: privately published letter to the editor of the *Arizona Republican*, 1890), 15. A Mormon apostle had stated this idea earlier when he said, “[U]pon natural principles, upon scientific principles,” those who live in plurality “will have stronger bodies, stronger minds, and by the force of the ‘survival of the fittest,’ will, eventually, under the direction of divine revelation, govern the affairs of the world.” Thatcher (1883), *JD* 24: 116.
89George A. Smith (1867), *JD* 12: 144.
91“Lyman (1866), *JD* 11: 208. “The church’s goal,” a writer for *Harper’s* was told, was “to produce a perfect race of men, and to make each generation more nearly perfect than the last.” Julian Ralph, “A Week with the Mormons,” *Harper’s Weekly* 37 (8 April 1893): 330.
Locating the rise of Latter-day Saint religion within the nineteenth century’s reform tradition is commonplace. But, if we are to recapture the full character of Mormon intentions, the centrality of plural marriage for physically restoring humankind needs greater emphasis. Repeatedly, the Saints referred to themselves as engaged in a “revolution,” as being pioneers of thought that would break down debilitating habits of the past.

The Mormons, John Taylor affirmed, “are taking a stand to revolutionize the ideas of ages, to overturn the fallacies of centuries, and to root out and destroy the corruptions of past generations.” “Our business,” said Apostle Joseph F. Smith, “is to reclaim this earth. We have set out to regenerate the human family.” George Q. Cannon predicted that if members did all they were told, they could become a special race, possessing the complexions of angels.

When the national crusade against polygamy became threatening, Mormon defenders said that they never intended for the practice to be generally adopted, and that even among themselves, few took plural wives. But this was a rhetorical retreat, part of a larger effort to discourage hostile legislation. Before that time, Mormon tenets, including plural marriage, were regularly held up by churchmen as lamps to the nation. After polygamy was first publicly announced, Brigham Young predicted it would “sail over, and ride triumphantly above all the prejudice . . . of the day; it will be fostered and believed in by the more intelligent portions of the world, as one of the best doctrines ever proclaimed to any people.”

While the church of the late nineteenth century was different from that of the 1830s and 40s, many of the insecurities that gave rise to reform impulses, including Mormon polygamy, remained the same. There is no better review of the context and possible motivations for such innovations than the opening essay, “A New Heaven and a New Earth,” in Lawrence Foster’s *Religion and Sexuality*, 3–20.


Taylor (1867), JD 11: 354.

Joseph F. Smith, as quoted in Journal of Jesse Nathaniel Smith, typescript, p. 363, 26 September 1884, Church Archives. Also see Kimball (1856), JD 5: 203; Thatcher (1884), JD 25: 114–15.

George Q. Cannon (1868), JD 12: 224.


the end of the century, many Mormons continued to believe that scientific support for plurality was so compelling that the arguments would eventually sweep away all opposition. Progressive attitudes assured adoption of the idea. All great innovations had brought criticism when first introduced, they said. Polygamy was no different. Mormons would someday be recognized for their marital reform as heroes and benefactors, as “the Galileos” of their time.

Mormon confidence in polygamy’s transforming power carried such strength that remarkable things were predicted. Heber C. Kimball was remembered by his daughter to have prophesied that in no more than fifty years the nation would pass laws permitting the practice. Charles W. Penrose, dizzied by the vision, predicted that before the century ended, Mormon polygamists would be sent abroad as “rulers and ambassadors” and would “receive as much adulation, world-wide applause, and national respect . . . as the Grandest Sultan, the Holiest Pope, or the most powerful Emperor could desire.” Like the Puritans, they were “a city on a hill,” a pattern to the rest of the world. Orson F. Whitney captured the euphoria in verse:

'Twas thus Celestial Marriage was revealed,
The Patriarchal Order, long concealed,
The Abrahamic Covenant, restored,
To raise a chosen seed unto the Lord.

“Regeneration—now and evermore!”

The millennium, Mormons said, could not commence before the “primitive law” of plural marriage was restored, until “the old patriarchal institutions” were again put in place.Only this principle would fully

renew humankind for Christ’s return. Brigham Young declared that “the whole Curse of the Earth had got to be taken off . . . by the Latter day Saints.” Young’s successor, John Taylor, remembered that Joseph Smith, Mormonism’s founder, had told him that polygamy was so important that “the kingdom could not go any further unless this law was observed.” The Saints, Taylor said, were thinning the veil that separated them from heaven. By joining sexual reform to the American sense of redemptive destiny, Mormons believed they were hastening the coming of a perfected, millennial world.

Certain that both God and nature approved their system, Mormons often predicted that the practice would never be abandoned. It was described as the most important revelation God had given the Saints, the “very keystone” of their faith, the “chief corner-stone” of the world they were trying to build. After 1890, when the practice was formally ended in exchange for Utah’s statehood, hundreds of plural marriages were secretly performed by authorities who believed the principle had to be kept alive. And arguments dating from the first decades of the church’s history, affirming polygamy’s redeeming advantages, continued to be heard in Mormon discourse until well into the twentieth century. Its practice declined only slowly and is adhered to by thousands of Fundamentalist


106 Brigham Young, as quoted in Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 6: 232–33, 13 July 1865.
109 For a discussion of the “redeemer nation” theme as context for Mormon millennialist thought, see Erickson, “Thief in the Night,” 19–32. Describing the connection between millennial expectations and American expansionist visions, another writer said that, for the Mormons, “Millennium and Manifest Destiny turned out to be hardly more than variant spellings for the same thing.” Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (New York, 1964), 5.
110 There are many statements to this effect. The following are illustrative: Brigham Young (1868), *JD* 12: 262; Pratt in *The Bible & Polygamy*, 56; “Discourse by Apostle George Teasdale,” *Deseret News*, 26 January 1884, p. 1; and Apostle John Henry Smith, in Charles Walker Diary, 2: 718, 16 September 1890.
112 This is the chief theme of Hardy’s *Solemn Covenant*.
113 See the instances described in Hardy, *Solemn Covenant*, 103–4, 187–90, 345–46.
dissidents today who, still proclaiming polygamy’s social and physical gifts, criticize the mainstream church for abandoning “the principle.”

Romania Pratt, a nineteenth-century medical doctor and polygamous wife, gave what was perhaps the best summary of Mormonism’s expectations concerning plurality: “With this principle universal, but limited and governed by laws of marriage inhibiting sensuality and selfishness . . . , the solution to the growing social evil would be found. . . . Were this the order of the world, abortions, feticides, infanticides, seductions, rapes and divorces would be relics of the barbarous age, while intelligence, light, peace and good will and love would be the motor forces of the world—in short, the Millennium would have come.”

Mormons did not view polygamy as an inscrutable trial imposed from heaven; neither was it looked upon as a requirement with rewards reserved only for the hereafter. Rather, as we have attempted to demonstrate, plural marriage was held out as an improving reform with palpable results. Its implementation was considered necessary if humankind was to be physically redeemed and prepared for the millennium. By allowing men to take additional wives, but confining sexual intercourse to reproduction, actual physiological transformations were expected to occur. Theories current at the time were imported and adapted to support such views. Most of what was said, however, has been largely forgotten. Mormon leaders left behind not only the practice but the promises once claimed for their best-remembered doctrine. And contemporary church members, enlarged in numbers and respect beyond what their nineteenth-century predecessors thought possible, now champion monogamy as what the world needs most.

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114Examples of Fundamentalist adherence to the transforming powers of polygamy are to be read in “Our Position,” Truth 10 (March 1945): 268; “I Too Am a Man,” Truth 10 (March 1945): 276; unpaginated foreword to Joseph W. Musser, comp., Celestial or Plural Marriage (Salt Lake City, 1944); Lyn L. Bishop and Steven L. Bishop, Keys of the Priesthood Illustrated (Draper, UT, 1971), 321–24; Harold W. Blackmore, All about Polygamy: Why and How to Live It! (Hurricane, UT, 1978), 47–52; and Dorothy Solomon, “A Very Different Kind of Family,” Good Housekeeping, April 1979, p. 246. Accounts of the rise and history of Mormon polygamous Fundamentalism are found in Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy, 177–217; Martha Sonntag Bradley, Kidnapped from That Land: The Government Raids on the Short Creek Polygamists (Salt Lake City, 1993), 6–40; and Irwin Altman and Joseph Ginat, Polygamous Families in Contemporary Society (New York, 1996), 43–60.

115Romania Bunnell Pratt, “Extract from Dr. R. B. Pratt’s Lecture,” Woman’s Exponent 10 (15 June 1881): 16.

116For accounts of this change in Mormon thought and practice, see the appropriate sections of Thomas G. Alexander, Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930 (Urbana, IL, 1986); and Hardy, Solemn Covenant.