

# Polygamy and Mormon Identity

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In the nineteenth century, as the Mormons withdrew from American society to establish their own sectarian community, polygamy became a defining characteristic—even the primary symbol of Mormon identity—for both the Latter-day Saints (LDS) and their antagonists. A protracted conflict with the federal government, in which abandoning polygamy became a necessary condition for Utah statehood, ended with capitulation, and the Mormons began the twentieth century with an aggressive campaign of assimilation into American society. At the heart of this “quest for respectability” was a concerted effort to separate Mormonism from polygamy in the public eye and to eradicate the practice among the Latter-day Saints themselves. Polygamy had become a major source of embarrassment as the Saints sought to emphasize values and practices that they shared with other Americans. Having assimilated sufficiently to become a model minority and the fifth largest religious denomination in American society, the Mormons, according to some non-Mormon scholars, are on the verge of becoming the next “new world religion” (Stark; Shipps; Bloom 79–128; Davies, *The Mormon* 241–66; Davies, *Introduction* 245–54). However, “Mormon fundamentalists” (polygamist sects) continue to threaten LDS respectability by reminding people of the link between polygamy and Mormonism. Consequently, contemporary Mormon officials are engaged in a concerted effort to expunge polygamy from Mormonism by marginalizing dissidents, manipulating symbols, and rewriting history. Anticipating a major doctrinal change, we argue that should church leaders be successful, neither the Saints themselves nor the rest of the world will perceive a link between

Mormonism and polygamy in the future. Thus, we will explain the significance of polygamy (plural marriage)<sup>1</sup> for Mormon identity throughout LDS history by examining (1) the origin and institutionalization of plural marriage during the nineteenth century, (2) discontinuation of the practice of plural marriage with the Saints’ assimilation into mainstream America during the twentieth century, (3) the current situation with efforts to eliminate any link between polygamy and Mormonism in both LDS and public consciousness, and (4) anticipation of a major doctrinal change as Mormons redefine themselves during the twenty-first century.

## Mormon Polygamy during the Nineteenth Century

Mormonism emerged in America in the 1830s during a period of profound social change. A nascent industrial revolution had begun undermining the social foundations of the agrarian social order. By separating work from the household and relocating it in the factory and office, industrialization destroyed the extended family upon which agricultural societies depend. Children, as economic assets given their work on the farm, soon became economic liabilities, and extended kin, even grandparents, were difficult to relocate given the geographical mobility demanded by factory labor. It was hardly obvious to those displaced from the farm, like Joseph Smith’s family, that the nuclear family of parents and their immediate offspring would become the modal form of kinship in the new industrial order. On the

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contrary, to contemporaries, it appeared as if the family and community were disintegrating. A few religious figures and social reformers introduced novel forms of family and community. While the Shakers, for instance, responded by embracing celibacy and repudiating marriage, the Oneida perfectionists rejected monogamy and introduced group marriage. In both cases, the community became the new family (Foster 21–122). Aware of these and other communal groups, Joseph Smith's personal experience of economic insecurity, death of siblings, and fragile community structure also reinforced his quest for renewing the kinship and community bonds associated with agrarian societies. However, he soon came to believe that the institutions of family and community required radical restructuring.

Following the formal organization of the church in 1830, Smith began redefining marriage and the family. An 1831 revelation anticipating plural marriage portended new forms of kinship. Though not authorized by Ohio law, in 1835, Smith intentionally performed illegal marriages under "authority of the holy priesthood," and he began questioning the legitimacy of civil marriage and the meaning of adultery (Brooke 212). In 1835, Smith apparently had an extramarital affair with Fannie Alger, who subsequently became one of his plural wives (217). But only after "taking" several plural wives and attempting to convince Emma, his legal wife, that plural marriage was legitimate did Smith produce the written revelation that contemporary Mormons acknowledge in their scriptural canon. This revelation formally announced the new Mormon conception of the ideal family, stipulating procreation as a fundamental objective.<sup>2</sup>

The "new and everlasting covenant of marriage" elevated the family to a new status. If traditional marriages performed until "death do you part" were legitimate in civil society, this new covenant promised "eternal marriage." Thus, "celestial marriage," originally identified with plural marriage, not only enabled the family to exist forever, but also became a necessary condition for exaltation. As ultimate salvation, exaltation is a form of deification that Mormonism posits as its

fundamental goal. In fact, the revelation threatened anyone who refused to comply with "the principle" of plural or celestial marriage: "For no one can reject this covenant, and be permitted to enter into my glory..." (*D&C* 132:4).

A subsequent distinction between celestial and plural marriage linked monogamy to eternal marriage. Thus, monogamous relationships, when formed in terms of this covenant, also have come to be considered eternal. This, along with an inordinate emphasis on fecundity, is the principal legacy of plural marriage for the contemporary Mormon conception of the family. Monogamous families also can exist through eternity.

This new Patriarchal Order of Marriage was legitimated both by Smith's claim of revelation and the polygamy of biblical patriarchs. Having emerged from the "Burned-Over District," a hotbed of the restoration movement, Mormonism proclaimed itself to be the restored gospel. Modern revelation to contemporary prophets and apostles would guide the church during the latter-days. With the eventual "restoration of all things," it followed that plural marriage would appear in the guise of Old Testament patriarchs. As God had sanctioned the multiple wives and concubines of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, primarily to ensure adequate fertility, he expected no less from "modern Israel," his Latter-day Saints. Smith justified his innovations in terms of revelation, biblical precedence, and procreation, but he also used plural marriage to test the loyalty of subordinates, preserve secrecy for his decision-making, create kinship structures with their attendant obligations of affiliation, and reinforce his power and control (Brooke 265–66; Ostling and Ostling 56–70).

Though there is evidence of limited polyandry on the part of Joseph Smith and other leading Mormon officials (Van Wagoner 37–46), the 1843 revelation provided no support for it. Appearing in written form to convince his first wife Emma of the legitimacy of plural marriage, the revelation was known only to a few of Smith's associates. Meanwhile, Mormon leaders continued to deny the practice of plural marriage when responding to critics, but the controversy over whether Smith