

HELEN MAR KIMBALL

(Sealed May 1843)



Helen was born August 22, 1828, in Mendon, New York, the third child to Heber Chase Kimball and Vilate Murray Kimball. In 1832, Heber with Brigham Young, visited a branch of the church in Columbia, Pennsylvania, to investigate the Mormons.

Three months later Heber was baptized, and three years later he was called as one of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Helen, who was baptized at age eight in Kirtland, traveled with her family to Missouri and later Nauvoo.

Controversy has accompanied discussions of Helen Mar Kimball's plural marriage to Joseph Smith for several reasons. First, she was fourteen at the time of the ceremony. Helen described her introduction in an 1882 narrative:



With all the false traditions in which we were born, and in consequence of the degenerate tide with which the human family has been drifting for generations past, and as the Lord had no organized priesthood on the earth, it is not to be wondered at that in our ignorance of His ways the feelings of our natures should rebel against the doctrine of a plurality of wives.

I remember how I felt, but which would be a difficult matter to describe — the various thoughts, fears and temptations that flashed through my mind when the principle was first introduced to me by my father [Heber C. Kimball], who one morning in the summer of 1843, without any preliminaries, asked me if I would believe him if he told me that it was right for married men to take other wives, can be better imagined than told. But suffice it to say the first impulse was anger, for I thought he had only said it to test my virtue. ... My sensibilities were painfully touched. I felt such a sense of personal injury and displeasure for to mention such a thing to me I thought altogether unworthy of my father, and as quick as he spoke, I replied to him, short and emphatically, “No, I wouldn’t!” I had always been taught to believe it a heinous crime, improper and unnatural, and I indignantly resented it.

This was the first time that I ever openly manifested anger towards him, but I was somewhat surprised at his countenance, as he seemed rather pleased than otherwise. Then he commenced talking seriously, and reasoned and explained the principle, and why it was again to be established upon the earth, etc., but did not tell me then that anyone had yet practiced it, but left me to reflect upon it for the next twenty-four hours, during which time I was filled with various and conflicting ideas. I was skeptical — one minute believed, then doubted. I thought of the love and tenderness that he felt for his

only daughter, and I knew that he would not cast her off, and this was the only convincing proof that I had of its being right. I knew that he loved me too well to teach me anything that was not strictly pure, virtuous and exalting in its tendencies; and no one else could have influenced me at that time or brought me to accept of a doctrine so utterly repugnant and so contrary to all of our former ideas and traditions. This was just previous to his starting upon his last mission but one to the eastern states. Fearing that I might hear it from a wrong source, knowing, as he did, that there were those who would run before they were sent, and some would not hesitate to deceive and betray him and the brethren, he thought it best that I should hear it from his own lips.

The next day the Prophet called at our house, and I sat with my father and mother and heard him teach the principle and explain it more fully, and I believed it, but I had no proofs, only his and my father's testimony. I thought that sufficient, and did not deem it necessary to seek for any further.¹

As Helen declared, her father brokered the union, apparently motivated by a desire to be related to the Prophet through the plural marriage. In another narrative, Helen explained: "He [her father — Heber C. Kimball] taught me the principle of celestial marriage and having a great desire to be connected with the Prophet, Joseph, he offered me to him; this I afterwards learned from the Prophet's own mouth."²

Richard Anderson observed: "Helen says several times that her father took the initiative to arrange the marriage and very possibly he did so with a view to committing her to the Prophet before her budding social life produced a choice or a proposal" from someone else.³

A second area of controversy involves the question of whether the plural union was consummated.

It is clear that Helen's sealing to Joseph Smith prevented her from socializing as an unmarried lady. The primary document referring to the relationship is an 1881 poem penned by Helen that has been interpreted in different ways:

I thought through this life my time will be my own
The step I now am taking's for eternity alone,
No one need be the wiser, through time I shall be free,
And as the past hath been the future still will be.
To my guileless heart all free from worldly care
And full of blissful hopes and youthful visions rare
The world seemed bright the thret'ning clouds were kept
From sight and all looked fair but pitying angels wept.
They saw my youthful friends grow shy and cold,
And poisonous darts from sland'rous tongues were hurled,
Untutor'd heart in thy gen'rous sacrafise,
Thou didst not weigh the cost nor know the bitter price;
Thy happy dreams all o'er thou'st doom'd also to be

Bar'd out from social scenes by this thy destiny,
And o'er thy sad'nd mem'ries of sweet departed joys
Thy sicken'd heart will brood and imagine future woes,
And like a fetter'd bird with wild and longing heart,
Thou'lt dayly pine for freedom and murmur at thy lot;

But could'st thou see the future & view that glorious crown,
Awaiting you in Heaven you would not weep nor mourn.
Pure and exalted was thy father's aim, he saw
A glory in obeying this high celestial law,
For to thousands who've died without the light
I will bring eternal joy & make thy crown more bright.
I'd been taught to reveire the Prophet of God
And receive every word as the word of the Lord,
But had this not come through my dear father's mouth,
I should ne'r have received it as God's sacred truth.⁴

One year after writing the above poem, she elaborated:

During the winter of 1843, there were plenty of parties and balls. ... Some of the young gentlemen got up a series of dancing parties, to be held at the Mansion once a week. ... I had to stay home, as my father had been warned by the Prophet to keep his daughter away from there, because of the blacklegs and certain ones of questionable character who attended there. ... I felt quite sore over it, and thought it a very unkind act in father to allow [my brother] to go and enjoy the dance unrestrained with others of my companions, and fetter me down, for no girl loved dancing better than I did, and I really felt that it was too much to bear. It made the dull school still more dull, and like a wild bird I longed for the freedom that was denied me; and thought myself a much abused child, and that it was pardonable if I did murmur.⁵

After leaving the church, dissenter Catherine Lewis reported Helen saying: "I would never have been sealed to Joseph had I known it was anything more than a ceremony."⁶ Assuming this statement was accurate, which is not certain, the question arises regarding her meaning of "more than a ceremony"? While sexuality is a possibility, a more likely interpretation is that the ceremony prevented her from associating with her friends as an unmarried teenager, causing her dramatic distress after the sealing.

Supporting that the union was never consummated is the fact that Helen Mar Kimball was not called to testify in the Temple Lot trial. In 1892, the RLDS Church led by Joseph Smith, III sued the Church of Christ (Hedrickites), disputing its claim to own the temple lot in Independence, Missouri, that Edward Partridge, acting for the church, had purchased in 1831 and which his widow, Lydia, had sold in 1848 to finance her family's trek west.⁷ The Hedrickites held physical possession, but the RLDS Church took the official position that, since it was the true successor of the church originally founded by Joseph Smith, it owned the property outright.⁸

Although the Utah LDS Church was not a party to the suit, it provided support to the Hedrickites. The issue was parsed this way: If the Hedrickites could prove that plural marriage was part of the original church, then the RLDS Church was obviously not the true successor since it failed to practice such a key doctrine. Ironically, the Hedrickites were staunchly opposed to plural marriage and seemed to have pursued polygamy as a line of inquiry only for strategic purposes.⁹

Nine of Joseph Smith's plural wives were living in 1892, but only three were called: Emily Partridge (resident of Salt Lake City), Malissa Lott (who lived thirty miles south in Lehi), and Lucy Walker (who lived eighty-two miles north in Logan). All three of these women affirmed that sexual relations were part of their plural marriages to the Prophet.¹⁰

If Helen Mar had been sexually involved with the Prophet in their plural marriage, her exclusion from the depositions is difficult to explain. Helen lived in Salt Lake City (closer than Malissa Lott and much closer than Lucy Walker) and had written two books defending plural marriage. Her first, *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph: A Reply to Joseph Smith, Editor of the Lamoni Iowa "Herald"* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), was a direct response to the claims of the RLDS Church, the plaintiffs in the Temple Lot lawsuit. Her second book, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1884), echoed many of the same arguments. Helen's diary journal for March 1892 documents that she was aware of the visit of the Church of Christ (Temple Lot) contingent, but there is no indication that they or LDS Church leaders approached her to testify.¹¹

That she would have been an excellent witness to discuss and defend the fact that Joseph Smith taught and practiced plural marriage is undeniable. But if she could not testify to a full plural marriage with sexual relations, her deposition would not have been useful to the Temple Lot attorneys.

Skeptics may argue that Helen or church leaders would have been reticent to admit that Helen was fourteen years old when she was sealed to Joseph Smith. However, in the 1840s, a fourteen-year-old bride was eyebrow-raising, not illegal, and both Helen and church authorities were highly motivated to disprove the RLDS claims.

A third area of controversy involving Helen Mar Kimball arises from a statement she wrote in an 1881 autobiographical letter written to her children:

I heard him [Joseph Smith] teach and explain the principle of celestial marriage. After which he said to me, "If you will take this step, it will ensure your eternal salvation and exaltation and that of your father's household and all of your kindred." This promise was so great that I willingly gave myself to purchase so glorious a reward.¹²

This quotation is sometimes cited by critics as solid evidence that the Prophet promised exaltation to at least one of his plural wives and her family if they would agree to the marriage. Typically omitted from such accounts is the fact that one year later Helen clarified that she may

not have understood everything correctly: “I confess that I was too young or too ‘foolish’ to comprehend and appreciate all” that Joseph Smith then taught.¹³

Contemporaneous evidence from more mature family members who were better positioned to “comprehend and appreciate” the Prophet’s promises to Helen demonstrates that her statement reflects her misunderstanding of the blessings predicated on this sealing.

Just weeks after Helen Mar’s plural wedding to Joseph Smith, Helen’s father, Heber C. Kimball, in a July 10, 1843, letter to her from Pittsburg, expressed concern for her soul, reminding her that salvation in the next life would depend on how she lived this life: “My child, remember the care that your dear father and mother have for your welfare in this life, that all may be done well, and that in view of eternal worlds, for that will depend upon what we do here, and how we do it.”¹⁴

Helen’s mother, Vilate, had written to Heber a month earlier on June 8, 1843: “I am yours in time and through all eternity. This blessing has been sealed upon us by the holy spirit of promise and cannot be broken only through transgression or committing a grosser crime than your heart or mine is capable of.”¹⁵ If fourteen-year-old Helen Mar understood her eternal sealing to the Prophet ensured her exaltation, she was apparently alone in this understanding.

Thirteen months after her sealing to the Prophet, he was killed. Years later she reflected:

I am thankful that He [Heavenly Father] has brought me through the furnace of affliction and that He has condescended to show me that the promises made to me the morning that I was sealed to the Prophet of God will not fail and I would not have the chain broken for I have had a view of the principle of eternal salvation and the perfect union which this sealing power will bring to the human family and with the help of our Heavenly Father I am determined to so live that I can claim those promises.¹⁶

Helen died in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1896, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

[Evidences of Plural Marriage: See Appendix](#)

Endnotes:

1. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, “Scenes in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 5 (August 1, 1882): 39.
2. Typescript and copy of holograph reproduced in Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, eds., *A Woman’s View: Helen Mar Whitney’s Reminiscences of Early Church History* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1997), 482–87.
3. Richard L. Anderson to Dawn Comfort, May 9–15, 1998, copy of letter in Scott H. Faulring Papers, box 93, fds 1–3, (accn 2316), Marriott Library.
4. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, “Autobiography, 30 March, 1881,” CHL. Typescript and copy of holograph reproduced in Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, eds., *A*

- Woman's View: Helen Mar Whitney's Reminiscences of Early Church History* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1997), 482–87.
5. *Woman's Exponent* 11, no. 12 (November 15, 1882), 90; see Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, eds., *A Woman's View: Helen Mar Whitney's Reminiscences of Early Church History* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1997), 224.
 6. Catherine Lewis, *Narrative of Some of the Proceedings of the Mormons; Giving an Account of their Iniquities* (Lynn, Mass: by the author, 1848), 19.
 7. See B. C. Flint, *An Outline History of the Church of Christ (Temple Lot)* 5th ed. (Independence, Mo.: Board of Publications, Church of Christ, 2005), 112. The term “Temple Lot” is not an official part of this Church’s name but is frequently added parenthetically to differentiate it from many other churches with similar names.
 8. S. Patrick Baggette II, “The Temple Lot Case: Fraud in God’s Vineyard,” *Journal of the John Whitmer Historical Association* 23 (2003): 136.
 9. See R. Jean Addams, “The Church of Christ (Temple Lot) and the Reorganized Church of Latter Day Saints: 130 Years of Crossroads and Controversies,” *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 2 (2010): 29–53.
 10. Malissa Lott, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent’s Testimony, Part 3, page 105, question 227; Lucy Walker, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent’s Testimony, Part 3, pp. 450–51, 468, 473, questions 29–30, 463–74, 586. See also Lucy Walker, “Lucy Walker Statement,” n.d., quoted in Rodney W. Walker and Noel W. Stevenson, *Ancestry and Descendants of John Walker [1794–1869] of Vermont and Utah, Descendants of Robert Walker, an Emigrant of 1632 from England to Boston, Mass.*, 35.
 11. Charles M. Hatch and Todd M. Compton eds., *A Widow's Tale: The 1884–1896 Diary of Helen Mar Kimball Whitney* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2003), 494–95. Journal entries recorded on the days the depositions were taking place include Helen’s complaints of health problems, but also recount visits to family and friends. For example, on March 14 she wrote: “Sol’s girl baby died” and she “went down” to visit. The following day she attended the funeral. *Ibid.*, 495.
 12. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, “Autobiography, 30 March 1881,” MS 744, CHL. Typescript and copy of holograph reproduced in Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, eds., *A Woman's View: Helen Mar Whitney's Reminiscences of Early Church History* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1997), 482–87.
 13. Helen Mar Whitney, *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph: A Reply to Joseph Smith, Editor of the Lamoni Iowa "Herald"* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), 37.
 14. Heber Kimball to Helen Mar Kimball, July 10, 1843, reprinted in Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman's Exponent* 11, no. 5 (August 1, 1882): 39–40. See also Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, eds., *A Woman's View: Helen Mar Whitney's Reminiscences of Early Church History* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1997), 198–99.
 15. Vilate Kimball to Heber C. Kimball, June 8, 1843, CHL.
 16. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, “Autobiography, 30 March 1881,” MS 744, CHL. Typescript and copy of holograph reproduced in Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, eds., *A*

Woman's View: Helen Mar Whitney's Reminiscences of Early Church History (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1997), 482–87.

Appendix — Evidences of Joseph Smith's Sealing to Helen Mar Kimball

- Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, "Autobiography, March 30, 1881."
- Eliza R. Snow, "First list of wives," Document #1, Andrew Jenson Papers, MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16.
- William Clayton, Affidavit, February 16, 1874, in Jenson, "Plural Marriage," 225.
- Nauvoo Temple proxy marriage to Joseph Smith, February 4, 1846, in Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings*, 285.