

The Beginnings of Mormon Polygamy



As a personality of the nineteenth century, Joseph Smith stands out as extraordinary. While many writers have been critical of him and his teachings, most are impressed with at least some of his accomplishments.



Figure 1: Joseph Smith Preaching

He published a five hundred-page book of scripture, organized a new religion, dictated more than a hundred revelations, founded at least three cities, built one temple and began others, and revealed a remarkable theological framework that both expanded and contradicted Christian thinking of the era.

Of all of these endeavors, establishing the practice of plural marriage has been the most controversial. In the years following his death, both critics and believers alike have questioned his reasons for practicing polygamy.

Unfortunately, Joseph Smith, who was the only individual who could definitively explain his motives and intentions, left no personal record about these matters. Some clues can be found in his revelations, sermons, and a hodge-podge of statements collected from newspapers, memoirs, affidavits, and notebooks, but most sources are second-hand, late, and may suffer from reliability issues.

A Reluctant Polygamist?

Critics balk at the suggestion that Joseph Smith *reluctantly* established plural marriage. But in doing so, they rely on their own intuition while ignoring statements from many of Joseph's contemporaries that attest to his hesitancy.

Some of Joseph's closest associates wrote late-in-life that an angel commanded him to marry plural wives, and he initially resisted that directive.¹

Benjamin F. Johnson remembered that Joseph "put it off" and "waited until an Angel with a drawn Sword Stood before him and declared that if he longer delayed fulfilling that Command he would Slay him."²

Lorenzo Snow recalled that the Prophet "hesitated and deferred from time to time" and that he "foresaw the trouble that would follow and sought to turn away from the commandment."³



Figure 2: An Angel Visits Joseph Smith

Erastus Snow reported that the angel accused the Prophet of “being neglectful in the discharges of his duties” and spoke “of Joseph having to plead on his knees before the Angel for his Life.”⁴

According to Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, an angel was required to visit Joseph three times between 1834 and 1842 before he fully complied:

An angel came to him [Joseph Smith] and the last time he came with a drawn sword in his hand and told Joseph if he did not go into that principle, he would slay him. Joseph said he talked to him soberly about it, and told him it was an abomination and quoted scripture to him. He said in the Book of Mormon it was an abomination in the eyes of the Lord, and they were to adhere to these things except the Lord speak. ... [The Prophet reported that] the angel came to me three times between the years of 1834 and 1842 and said I was to obey that principle or he would slay me.⁵

Three of Joseph Smith’s plural wives described similar reluctance. Eliza R. Snow characterized Joseph as “afraid to promulgate it.”⁶ Helen Mar Kimball Whitney remembered that she had been told,

Had it not been for the fear of His displeasure, Joseph would have shrunk from the undertaking and would have continued silent, as he did for years, until an angel of the Lord threatened to slay him if he did not reveal and establish this celestial principle.⁷

She also said that “Joseph put off the dreaded day as long as he dared.”⁸ Lucy Walker reported that Joseph “had his doubts about it for he debated it in his own mind.”⁹

Practicing Polygamy was Challenging

The Prophet’s contemporaries recorded that Joseph Smith reacted to the command to practice polygamy with dismay, and he afterwards sympathized with the challenge that plural marriage represented to church members.

Bathsheba B. Smith remembered that he [Joseph Smith] recognized that it would be a “troubling” doctrine. She wrote:

I heard the Prophet give instructions concerning plural marriage; he counseled the sisters not to trouble themselves in consequence of it, that all would be right ... the result would be for their glory and exaltation.”

Bathsheba also related: “I heard him [Joseph Smith] tell the sisters one time not to feel worried, —that all was right ... all will be well in the end.”¹⁰

To help his potential plural brides overcome their initial disgust at the thought of polygamy, the Prophet promised several of them that they could receive their own spiritual confirmation that polygamy was divinely sanctioned. Divine manifestations were later reported by some of these women, confirming to them the correctness of the principle.¹¹

The practice of polygamy in the Mormon Church unfolded at a time when some religious fringe groups experimented with marital dynamics, including polygamy, as they reinvented the image of religion. Eyewitnesses, however, give us no indication that Joseph Smith instituted this marital innovation for any reason other than that he was commanded to do so.

To continue this brief narrative of the unfolding of the practice of polygamy in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, proceed to the section on [Joseph's Proposals](#).

Endnotes:

1. For a complete list of these accounts, see [Brian C. Hales, "Encouraging Joseph Smith to Practice Plural Marriage: The Accounts of the Angel with a Drawn Sword," *Mormon Historical Studies*](#).
2. Benjamin F. Johnson, *My Life's Review* 1st ed. (Independence, Missouri: Zion's Printing & Publishing Co., 1947 (rpt., Mesa, Ariz.: 21st Century Printing, 1992), 95–96, and Dean R. Zimmerman, ed., *I Knew the Prophets: An Analysis of the Letter of Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, Reporting Doctrinal Views of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1976), 43.
3. Lorenzo Snow, quoted by Eliza R. Snow in *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Company, 1884), 69–70; Lorenzo Snow, Affidavit, August 18, 1869, in Joseph F. Smith Affidavit Books, 2:19, MS 3423, fd. 5, LDS Church History Library.
4. Erastus Snow, quoted in A. Karl Larson and Katherine Miles Larson, *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, 2 vols. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1980), 2:611, June 17, 1883.
5. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner Smith, "Remarks" at Brigham Young University, April 14, 1905, Vault MSS 363, fd. 6, 2-3. See also Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner Smith, "Statement" February 8, 1902, Vesta Crawford Papers, University of Utah, Marriott Library, MS 125, Box 1, fd. 11; original owned by Mrs. Nell Osborne; see also Juanita Brooks Papers, Utah State Historical Society, MS B103, Box 16, fd. 13; Mary E. Lightner, Letter to A. M. Chase, April 20, 1904, quoted in J. D. Stead, *Doctrines and Dogmas of Brighamism Exposed* ([Lamoni, Iowa]: RLDS Church, 1911), 218–19; Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Letter to Emmeline B. Wells, Summer 1905, MS 282; copy of holograph in Linda King Newell Collection, MS 447, Box 9, fd. 2.
6. Eliza R. Snow, quoted in J. J. J., "Two Prophets' Widows: A Visit to the Relicts of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, August 18, 1887, 6/E.
7. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1884), 53.
8. Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, eds., *A Woman's View: Helen Mar Whitney's Reminiscences of Early Church History* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1997), 142.
9. Lucy Walker, Deposition, *Church of Christ in Missouri v. Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*. 70 F. 179 (8th Cir. 1895), respondent's testimony, part 3, page 474, questions 600; microfilm at CHL; hereafter cited as Temple Lot Transcript.
10. Bathsheba Wilson Bigler Smith, Autobiography, holograph: MS 8606; typescript: MS 16633, LDS Church History Library; Bathsheba B. Smith, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent's Testimony, part 3, pages 291, 313, questions 14, 466.
11. See, for example, Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, "Statement" signed Feb. 8, 1902, Vesta Crawford Papers, MS 125, bx1 fd 11. Original owned by Mrs. Nell Osborne, SLC (courtesy Juanita Brooks); Desdemona Fullmer, Autobiography, excerpted in D. Michael Quinn Papers, Addition, Uncat WA MS 244, Box 1, Special Collections, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Ithaca, New York.