

Official Declaration 1

Plural marriage was an Abrahamic test. The Church's essay on the topic begins,

Latter-day Saints believe that the marriage of one man and one woman is the Lord's standing law of marriage. ... By revelation the Lord commanded Joseph Smith to institute the practice of plural marriage among Church members in the early 1840s. For more than half a century, plural marriage was practiced by some Latter-day Saints under the direction of the Church president.

The next line acknowledges, "Latter-day Saints do not understand all of God's purposes in instituting, through His prophets, the practice of plural marriage."¹ That seems to be key to at least part of what the Lord accomplished through plural marriage. He didn't explain it any more than to say that it would be Abrahamic in its wrenching test and in its promised blessings. He left it at that and promised to explain more later (D&C 132).

Saints went forward with faith and uncertainty. Plural marriage was a poorly kept secret in Nauvoo in the 1840s. In Iowa Territory and Utah Territory in the late 1840s and early 1850s, it was an open secret. In August 1852, Brigham Young appointed a special conference to have the revelation in section 132 read publicly, and apostle Orson Pratt give a lengthy defense of the practice of plural marriage. After that, the

¹ "[Plural Marriage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#)," Church Gospel Topics.

secret was out. More than one hundred missionaries were sent all over the world with instructions to preach it.

That was wildly unpopular in the United States and elsewhere. In 1862, in the midst of Civil War, the U.S. Congress passed the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act, which was designed to punish the Church for plural marriage by confiscating its property. President Lincoln had bigger problems and didn't enforce the law. After the Union was reconstructed, Congress turned its attention back to the Saints. With encouragement from the First Presidency, George Reynolds allowed himself to be convicted under the Morrill Act to test the constitutionality of the law. Though the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution stipulates that Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion, the Supreme Court upheld Morrill in 1879, ruling that a person may believe in but not practice plural marriage.

Latter-day Saints generally responded with civil disobedience, since, when it came to a choice between the two, obeying God trumped fidelity to what they regarded as a bad law. Congress, meanwhile, passed tougher and tougher laws against the Saints, the Supreme Court upheld them, and federal marshals enforced them. Apostle and jurist Dallin H. Oaks testified before a Congressional committee,

I know of no other major religious group in America that has endured anything comparable to the officially sanctioned persecution that was imposed upon members of my church by federal, state, and local government officials. ... Most of these denials of religious freedom received the express approval of the United States Supreme Court. It was a dark chapter in the history of religious freedom in this country.²

Meanwhile, Lorena Larsen married Bent Rolfsen as a second wife. It was not her ideal arrangement. Most women in her time and place didn't think of marriage as an ideal. They thought of it as an obligation and a protection. They expected it to be a lot of hard work, child rearing, and duty. And Latter-day Saint women expected it to end in exaltation.

² Reported in "Elder Oaks Testifies Before U.S. Congressional Subcommittee," *Ensign* (July 1992), 78–80.

Lorena wrote,

We had gone into that order of marriage because we fully believed God had commanded it, and while we had human nature to contend with, we worked and prayed for strength to overcome selfishness and greed and live on a higher plain, learn to love each other, or there would never be happiness.³

In response to the “raid” on her family and others, Lorena left home to work in the Manti temple so her husband would not be prosecuted. When she discovered she was expecting a baby, she and her family went to rural Colorado to avoid prosecution.

In his May 19, 1890, journal entry, President Wilford Woodruff noted: “The Supreme Court of the United States Decided to day Against the Church of Jesus Christ of latter Day Saints. They Decided to Escheat all the Church Property Real & Personal.” That meant that for the first time, all of the teeth of the Morrill Act and others passed since would bite. The temples would be confiscated. President Woodruff worried continually about the wisest course to take.

In late September he wrote in his journal:

I have arived at a point in the History of my life as the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints whare I am under the necessity of acting for the Temporal Salvation of the Church. The United State Government has taken a Stand & passed Laws to destroy the Latter day Saints upon the Subject of poligamy or Patriarchal order of Marriage. And after praying to the Lord & feeling inspird by his spirit I have issued the following Proclamation which is sustained by My Councillors and the 12 Apostles.⁴

About two weeks later at the Church’s October 1890 general conference, President Lorenzo Snow presented the Manifesto, as he called it, to the Saints for a sustaining vote. Consent appeared to be unanimous, but many were unsettled by the

³ Lorena Larsen, “Life Sketch,” 144–145.

⁴ *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 1833–1898, Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983–85), 9:112–14.

announcement and resentful of the government's oppressive measures that led President Woodruff to seek the revelation.

Lorena Larsen learned of the Manifesto near Moab, Utah, on her way home from Colorado. She wrote vividly about the experience:

My husband came to our tent and told me about it, and my feelings were past description. I had gone into that order of marriage solely ... because I believed God had commanded his people to do so, and it had been such a sacrifice to enter it, and live it as I thought God wanted me to. And as I thought about it, it seemed impossible that the Lord would go back on a principal which had caused so much sacrifice, heartache, and trial before one could conquer one's carnal self, and live on that higher plane, and love one's neighbor as one's self. My husband walked out without saying a word, and as he walked away I thought, Oh yes, it is easy for you, you can go home to your other family and be happy with her, while I must be like Hagar, sent away.

My anguish was inexpressible, and a dense darkness took hold of my mind. I thot that if the Lord and the church authorities had gone back on that principle, there was nothing to any part of the gospel. I fancied I could see my self and my children, and many other splendid women and their families turned adrift, and our only purpose in entering it, had been to more fully serve the Lord. I sank down on our bedding and wished in my anguish that the earth would open and take me and my children in. The darkness seemed impenetrable.

All at once I heard a voice and felt a most powerful presence. The voice said, "Why this is no more unreasonable than the requirement the Lord made of Abraham when he commanded him to offer up his son Isaac, and when the Lord sees that you are willing to obey in all things the trial shall be removed."

There was a light whose brightness cannot be described which filled my soul, and I was so filled with joy, peace, and happiness that I felt that no matter whatever should come to me in all my future life, I

could never feel sad again. If the people of the whole world had been gathered together trying with all their power to comfort me, they could not compare with the powerful unseen Presence which came to me on that occasion.

And as soon as my husband came back I told him what a glorious presence had been there, and what I had heard. He said, “I knew that I could not say a word to comfort you, so I went to a patch of willows, and asked the Lord to send a comforter.”⁵

Through personal revelations like the one Lorena received, Latter-day Saints learned to accept plural marriage in the 1840s and to let it go beginning in the 1890s. There have been many significant changes in the Church throughout its history. The way to cope well with them is to live in the light of personal revelation that confirms the Lord’s revelations to the prophets. In a world where everything, including Church practices, is subject to change, revelation to prophets and ordinary folks remains constant. So does the love of the God of Abraham.

⁵ Lorena Larsen, “Life Sketch,” 239–41.