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PLURAL MARRIAGE: BEAUTY FOR ASHES

Julie A. Russell

Abstract: *When Eliza R. Snow agreed to become one of Joseph Smith's plural wives, she feared she would never be looked upon as a decent woman. Nevertheless, she accepted Joseph Smith's proposal and eventually became a strong advocate of the practice. Reading about her understanding of plural marriage and the many testimonies of others who practiced it, I have realized that plural marriage teaches us much about humility, keeping God's commandments, and following His prophets. In nineteenth-century America, it provided a way for women and men to set aside self and embark on a soul-refining journey filled with trials and obstacles that parallel many of the trials and obstacles of our day.*

You could argue that the practice of plural marriage (or polygamy, as some refer to it) is as controversial now as it was in the nineteenth century. In the mid-1800s, Joseph Smith and other members of the leadership of The Church of Jesus Christ practiced it in the shadows — fearful that mainstream society would misunderstand their intentions in taking multiple wives.¹

In modern times, the subject, unavoidable every fourth year in Sunday school, can still blow through a classroom of practicing Latter-day Saints like a bad smell no one wants to acknowledge. But plural marriage is an integral part of the Church's history. Women and men rallied to maintain the practice in the mid-1800s when the U.S. Government threatened to incarcerate its practitioners. Despite their great efforts, however, plural marriage was abolished in 1890, leaving some women and children to fend for themselves as their husbands

1. See Matthew J. Grow et. al., eds., *Saints: The Standard of Truth* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 1:291.

resumed a monogamous marriage with their first wives.² Nevertheless, I find the practice to be a profound example of the refiner's fire, in which we can find beauty for ashes, holiness for misery, and the keys to persevering in a world that regularly throws proverbial stones at us for holding firm to doctrine that challenges the cultural ideas of the day. It teaches us that living the commandments, controversial or not, does not preclude us from unanticipated fallout even while in the very act of sacrificing self to do what God has asked.

For several months I scoured the pages of Relief Society, Primary, Young Women's, and Young Men's minute books from 1869 to 1888 as part of research for a project at the Church History Department. I scanned one page after another of handwritten pages ranging from perfect penmanship and spelling to indecipherable lettering and broken English. On occasion, my eyes slowed enough to catch familiar themes that repeated from one ward's minute book to the next. Salvation and unity were the most prominent among those themes, but, as you might guess, so is the topic of plural marriage.

Many women during that time expressed in Relief Society meetings their heartfelt testimonies of the sanctity and blessings of the practice of plural marriage.³ Nevertheless, it is clear that some members of the various congregations — both men and women⁴ — struggled at one point or another to accept it as a godly practice,⁵ which is something most

2. See Matthew J. Grow et. al., eds., *Saints: No Unhallowed Hand* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2020), 2:612–15, 623–30.

3. See also Elizabeth Ann Whitney and Newel K. Whitney's reaction to "this new and strange doctrine." They both prayed and received a miraculous vision in answer to their questions about plural marriage. Elizabeth Ann Smith Whitney, "A Leaf from an Autobiography," *Woman's Exponent*, December 15, 1878, 7:105. <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/WomansExp/id/6548/>; and "Revelation, 27 July 1842," p. [1], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-27-july-1842/1>.

4. Brigham Young, John Taylor, and Heber C. Kimball, all of whom eventually had tens of wives, expressed their initial reluctance and disbelief of the practice. Brigham wished to die, and Heber "shed bushels of tears" over the doctrine of plural marriage. See Brian C. Hales and Laura Harris Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy, "Other Mormon Leaders Practice Polygamy,"* <https://josephsmithspolygamy.org/history/mormon-leaders-polygamy/>.

5. See, for example, Eliza R. Snow (discourse, West Porterville Relief Society, 19 Aug. 1878), *The Discourses of Eliza R. Snow* (website), <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/eliza-r-snow/1870s/1878/08/1878-08-19-b>; Eliza R. Snow (discourse, Croydon Relief Society, 26 October 1878), *The Discourses of Eliza R. Snow*, <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/>

twenty-first century Latter-day Saints can relate to. But Eliza R. Snow, plural wife to two prophets of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, had an especially unique view of the purposes of plural marriage. Her often scathing review of the world's opinion of "polygamy" pointed out the hypocrisy of immoral, adulterous, and worldly people who passed judgment upon God's laws when they themselves were not acquainted with nor obedient to them. She believed that plural marriage elevated the spirituality of women, fostered independence in women, and emboldened the voice of women. Helen Mar Kimball, another of Joseph Smith's plural wives, also noted the significance of the sacrifice of plural marriage in that it prepared her and her sister wife, Sarah Ann Whitney, for receiving "everlasting glory and exaltation."⁶

I believe that these women understood better than most the primary purposes of such an imposing and overbearing practice. For me, plural marriage stands as a symbol of our early separation from a corrupt and immoral world that made no attempt to know God or his will for his creations. Surely the aphorism "I can do hard things" carried them through the challenges of plural marriage as much as it propelled them across the plains.

A History of Paradoxes

Since the beginning of time God has asked humans to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of humanity. Our whole purpose is to align our will with the will of God. Adam and Eve were set in a beautiful garden with the conflicting commandments to multiply and replenish the earth and not eat the fruit that would allow them to do that. They had to sacrifice one commandment to fulfill the other.

Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his only child — a miracle child — unto the Lord. We can imagine not only the anguish Abraham would have felt but the confusion at being asked to do something that was A) contrary to the commandment not to murder and B) counterintuitive to the blessings and sacrosanctity of family. Yet, most Christian faiths see in Abraham and Isaac's story a direct correlation with Christ's

eliza-r-snow/1870s/1878/10/1878-10-26; Eliza R. Snow (discourse, Goshen Primary, 17 November 1879), *The Discourses of Eliza R. Snow*, <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/eliza-r-snow/1870s/1879/11/1879-11-17-a>.

6. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, "Scenes in Nauvoo after the Martyrdom," *Woman's Exponent*, 1 March 1883, 11:146, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/WomansExp/id/10292/rec/261>.

relationship with His Father in that it represents a type of the Atonement and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

When the children of Israel finally reached the promised land, they were commanded to commit genocide, killing every man, woman, child, ox, and ass from the land of Canaan. They showed no mercy to *children* because God commanded it. Never mind that “of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). The premortal Jesus taught the children of Israel to separate themselves from Gentile nations and abstain from sharing the Gospel with them. The earthly Jesus taught the children of Israel to share the gospel with people of all nations. The former establishing a rule that was reasonably challenged by the latter. And of course, who could forget God’s commandment to Nephi to remove Laban’s head from his body in order to fulfill God’s purposes?

What each of these stories shares is that they challenge the reason and intuition humans develop through earthly experience. But we are fallible creatures with a very limited view of eternity (if we have any view of eternity at all), and earthly experience does not always speak to the truths of eternity. God reminds us that our thoughts are not His thoughts, neither are our ways His ways (Isaiah 55:8).

What Plural Marriage Teaches

Personal revelation is crucial to living the commandments of God. Are there not now, in the twenty-first century, doctrines or policies that challenge the logic and hearts of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

In the nineteenth century, Emily Partridge heard rumors about the practice of plural marriage while living in Nauvoo. The idea of it worried her, even more so when Joseph Smith asked to speak to her privately. In anticipation of the conversation, Emily went to her knees and not to any other source. After *months* of prayer and contemplation, Emily finally received “divine confirmation that she should listen to what Joseph had to say to her — even if it had to do with plural marriage.”⁷ In other words, her Father in Heaven confirmed to Emily that He endorsed the practice.

We sometimes forget that divine confirmation of a doctrine or practice does not preclude the loyal or humble practitioner from intense opposition or affliction while involved in the practice. In other words, entering into a plural marriage with Joseph Smith did not guarantee Emily a house full of beautiful children, a stable home, or a long,

7. Grow, *Saints*, 1:483.

uncontentious marriage. Emily did not bear any of Joseph Smith's children. Emma Smith clearly didn't support the relationship given that "she often made things very unpleasant" for Emily.⁸ And, eventually, Emily became a widow with no legal right to any of Joseph's property. The outcome does not necessarily define the purpose.

Entrusting our lives into God's hands is vital to trusting God's commandments. This world wants us to feel the way it thinks we should feel. It wants us to find offense where it tells us to find offense. It wants to define us with its arbitrary and fluid standards.

Eliza R. Snow often shared her story of conversion to plural marriage. When she entered the practice, she thought she "never would be looked upon as a decent woman again."⁹ Her culture's rejection of plural marriage would require Snow to use a different set of standards to recognize and define the value of her contributions to her own community, which was then for her as it is now for us a significant part of God's Kingdom. She would need to realign her principles away from the culture of her time and place and towards God's desire for her. She would have to ignore those that would label her "oppressed" and "subjugated," just as today we must "'heed not' the many ... taunts, and diversions in our fallen world."¹⁰ She was not immoral and unchaste, nor are we modern Saints intolerant and hateful as some of the taunts might suggest. She was just as many of us Latter-day Saints are today — devoted and humble, living according to the doctrine as we understand it and in the best way we can.

Flipping the Binary

Snow understood that the doctrine of man couldn't compare to that of God. She was able to separate herself so completely from the world's expectations that she could turn on its head the anti-feminism label placed upon plural marriage. She taught the young women that they were blessed in that they never needed to compromise their standards for a worthy husband because one righteous man could support and bless "seven or eight" righteous women.¹¹ She went on to say that the young

8. Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 145.

9. Eliza R. Snow (discourse, Smithfield Relief Society, 28 October 1877), *The Discourses of Eliza R. Snow*, <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/eliza-r-snow/1870s/1877/10/1877-10-28-b>.

10. David A. Bednar, "But We Heeded Them Not," *Liahona* 46, no. 5 (May 2022): 14, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2022/05/14bednar>.

11. Eliza R. Snow (discourse, Richmond Young Ladies, 11 May 1878), *The Discourses of Eliza R. Snow*, <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/>

men had better get themselves right with the Lord or else no righteous woman would ever marry them, and they would be relegated to the corrupt and evil world to find female companionship. She flipped the binary. She moved plural marriage from a station of diminished women's rights to a platform for women's choices. To the people of the world who bemoaned Eliza's and her contemporaries' "plight," who labeled them oppressed, degraded, heartbroken, and stupid, she said, "[If] love and respect for those who are pure, upright, and honorable — if the privilege for choosing husbands — if to be loved, honored, and respected as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters by good men, is degrading them, then the women of Utah are degraded."¹²

Immovable

The world should not and cannot truly define us. Only God has that privilege. It is up to us to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ enough that we can keep His commandments with confidence. It's up to us to flip the binary of double talk that rules social media and political conversations. The world will not always understand the laws of God and will not often respect them, but we can. We are called upon in this day as much as in Eliza's to shun the world's version of righteousness and kindness, to lay aside what we think we know, to faithfully follow the commandments of God. To find within ourselves the courage to pursue and understand the why. To set aside the standards the world uses to define kindness, love, and righteousness and redefine those virtues according to the teachings of the prophets who have preached of such since our first parents left the Garden until Christ's Second Coming. There will likely be times when we may not understand in this life, but we must press forward anyway, believing that we will be blessed for our willingness to obey God's instruction. And when we lean into that faith, trusting that God's cause is just, we should "never [have] cause to regret" our obedience.¹³

Vilate Kimball, Heber C. Kimball's first wife, knew that plural marriage was a true doctrine that God ordained. Nevertheless, she

eliza-r-snow/1870s/1878/05/1878-05-11.

12. Eliza R. Snow, "Degradation of Woman in Utah," *Deseret News* 19, no. 12 (27 April 1870): 140, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=2605413>.

13. Eliza R. Snow, "Sketch of My Life," quoted in Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, ed., *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxey Snow* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2000), 16–17, https://josephsmithspolygamy.org/plural-wives-overview/eliza-r-snow/#link_ajs-fn-id_2-5614.

struggled “emotionally with polygamy for the rest of her life.”¹⁴ In this day, we yearn for the kind of life where we can define our struggles — where our struggles begin and end in a timely manner, within a defined space and with a defined lesson at the end. In reality, our struggles aren’t so finite nor are their lessons always so clear. And for some of us, like living out the rest of our days in polygamy, our own challenges can last a lifetime.

As further evidence of the need for adversity, consider the great heroes of scripture: the Apostle Paul, the father and son duo Mormon and Moroni, John the Revelator, and Moses. Their stories teach of unending struggle; it *never* ended. But “behold, we count them happy which endure” (James 5:11). Giving our lives over to God’s will requires an emotional resilience that is found only in the faithful yoking of the human soul to Christ and his atoning power and in the hope that however long the journey and however tiring the battle, after a time, we will be counted among the happy — a “happy” that will endure through eternity. Clearly, Vilate took upon her Christ’s yoke, and we can be sure that she is counted among the happy.

The plural wives of the nineteenth century are heroes to me not because they endured an undesirable marital status, but because through faith they found refinement in it. They willingly put aside self to do what God asked them to do, to be who God wanted them to be. They taught us the importance of sacrificing acceptance and conformity and of enduring worldly pressures and ridicule and persecution. They taught us that faith in Christ must drive our actions, even when we can’t use our own reason and logic to explain the “why” behind them. They showed us what it looks like to draw closer to God, to bear one’s cross, and to find one’s self through the process of losing one’s self. They are a reminder to me that I can find hope and peace in keeping all of God’s commandments, that though the world may mock me, stone me (and don’t they stone us daily on social media?), and decry my “oppressed” and “sad” state, I have an obligation to the Kingdom of God to remain immovable, to take up “the cross Jesus said we would have to ... in order to follow Him.”¹⁵ I can willingly sacrifice the “gifts” this world tries to give me — acceptance, popularity, fame — in order to stand united and

14. Brian C. Hales, “Other Church Leaders Practice Polygamy,” *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, <https://josephsmithspolygamy.org/history/mormon-leaders-polygamy/>.

15. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Fear Not: Believe Only!” *Liahona* 46, no. 5 (May 2022): 35, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2022/05/23holland>.

speak with the other Saints “not only ... because we have the right, but justice and humanity demand that we should.”¹⁶

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16. Eliza R. Snow, “Minutes of ‘Great Indignation Meeting,’” 13 January 1870, *The Fifty First Years of Relief Society*, <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/the-first-fifty-years-of-relief-society/part-3/3-13>.