

LETTERS

George D. Smith Responds

I appreciate the enthusiastic response to *Nauvoo Polygamy*: “. . . but we called it celestial marriage” reviewed in *Dialogue* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2009), by Todd M. Compton, “The Beginnings of Latter-day Plurality,” (235–40) and Brian C. Hales “*Nauvoo Polygamy: The Latest Word*” (213–35). Compton noted how central polygamy was to Joseph Smith’s theology and commented that Richard Lyman Bushman omitted important marriage history in his biography, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), not even naming Joseph’s singular fourteen-year-old wife, Helen Mar Kimball. Bushman’s contribution, however, was to confirm for a broad LDS audience the reality of this sometimes-doubted dimension of Joseph’s life.

My intent in *Nauvoo Polygamy* was to document a practice once buried in coded language. As Emily Partridge explained, “Spiritual wives, as we were then termed, were not very numerous in those days and a spiritual baby was a rarity indeed” (533). Another wife, Zina Huntington (Mrs. Henry Jacobs), reflected on the “principle” as something “we hardly dared speak of . . . the very walls had ears. We spoke of it only in whispers” (78). This was the climate in which Joseph married thirty-seven plural wives, a total for which Compton agrees a “strong case” can be made.

But as the Prophet alerted an inner circle of friends to their “privileges” of more wives, his adversarial surroundings, including his own watchful wife, Emma, and stalking sheriffs, may have made it awkward to conceive babies. Joseph warned Sarah Ann Whitney, his wife of three weeks, to visit him but cautiously—watching out for Emma because, when she was present, “you cannot be safe, but when she is not here, there is the most perfect saf[e]ty: only be careful to escape observation.” Joseph pleaded for “comfort” at “my lonely retreat” in the back room of Carlos Granger’s farmhouse. Telling his new wife “my feelings are so strong for you since what has pas[s]ed lately between us,” he appealed to Sarah Ann to “come and see me” (along with her parents whom Joseph would seal in eternal marriage three days later) because “now is the time to afford me succour” (143). Sarah Ann’s father would marry seven plural wives of his own over the next four years (631).

One of Joseph’s wives, Melissa Lott, confirmed that she had “roomed with him” and was “a wife in all that word implies,” but acknowledged that they had no children. She explained their absence as due to “no fault of either of us, [but] lack of proper conditions on my part probably.” She noted that they had little time together before Joseph was

“martyred nine months after our marriage” (216). Melissa’s experience is mirrored by Lucy Walker Smith’s comments on the difficulty of the “hazardous life [Joseph] lived;” he was “in constant fear of being betrayed,” suggesting for that reason that he found it hard to father children by his plural wives (228).

However, Joseph’s plural wife Sylvia Sessions confided to her daughter Josephine Rosetta Lyon (named after Joseph) that the Prophet had fathered her in 1844, six years after Sylvia married the man accepted as Josephine’s father, Windsor Lyon, in 1838. Sylvia continued to live with Windsor and bore his children for four more years (through 1848).¹ Joseph’s child Josephine was clearly born during Windsor’s marriage to Sylvia and within their nine-year span of childbearing.

While Brian Hales’s hypothesis that Joseph did not have sex with women who were already married to other men is interesting, I found it a rather unpersuasive proof-text. Hales posits Joseph as a “ceremonial husband” and hypothesizes a period when Sylvia was “unmarried” from her legal husband Windsor during the time when she bore Josephine. Hales’s decision to dismiss sexual relationships with married women ignores the only purpose Smith ever presented for engaging in plural marriages in the first place—which was, in Book of Mormon terms—to “raise up seed”² as his millennialist community approached the expected end of the world. Each of Joseph’s marriages was, by definition, predicated upon the expectation that

the couple would produce righteous children to be among the predicted “144,000” who would be saved from the earth’s destruction (Rev. 7:3–8; 14:1, 3–5). In 1835 Joseph predicted that “fifty-six years should wind up the scene” (535).

Besides Emily Partridge, Zina Jacobs, Melissa Lott, and Sylvia Sessions, there is further testimony that Joseph was intimate with, or had children with, his plural wives. Joseph’s sixth known plural wife, Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, the fourth wife who was already married, told an audience at Brigham Young University in 1905 that she “knew” that Joseph had “three children” by his plural wives. “They told me,” she said. “I think two of them are living today, [but] they are not known as his children as they go by other names” (96).

Most of Joseph’s marriages occurred within a little over a year, from winter 1842 through spring 1843—even though he interrupted his weddings during the last half of 1842 after John C. Bennett exposed polygamy to the press. Joseph resumed marrying in 1843 and then issued a revelation that sanctioned the practice. His last known wife, Fanny Young Murray, married him in autumn 1843. Had Joseph wed plural wives over an uninterrupted several-year period, more children might have been born.

As we review Nauvoo Temple records, affidavits, court depositions, eyewitness letters, diaries, and journals, we hear testimony that Joseph was intimate with his wives and had

children by them. It makes sense that there would have been children from at least some of these marriages. However, even if there were no offspring, we could not conclude that there was no intimacy.

Joseph led an inner circle of Nauvoo polygamists in the 1840s, thirty-three men, who by June 1844 had married 124 women, and whose numbers would eventually include 346 women, or 10.5 wives for each man. Although this Nauvoo practice has long been omitted from official Church history, as Compton concludes, this study enhances “our understanding of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young.” These thirty-three Nauvoo men were the pioneers of Mormon polygamy, possibly Joseph’s most important contribution to Mormon culture.

Notes

1. Sylvia gave birth to six children by Windsor between 1839 and 1848; while still Lyon’s wife, she accepted a sealing to Joseph Smith in 1842 and had his child (Josephine) in February 1844; furthermore, she was resealed to Smith for eternity in September 1844 (like many other of Joseph’s wives), a ceremony solemnized for a third time in the Nauvoo Temple in January 1846, with Heber Kimball acting as Smith’s proxy. Sylvia’s last two children were born in Iowa City in 1847 and 1848 after the main body of Mormons had migrated to Utah.

2. The Book of Mormon, which introduced polygamy to the Saints as a conditional prohibition (which would soon change) (Jacob 2:24–30) was said to be inscribed in “reformed Egyptian.” Hales misreads the Napoleon connection by

stating: Smith “also links Nauvoo polygamy’s genesis to the widespread cultural influence of Egypt, drawing an explicit comparison between Joseph and Napoleon,” (*Dialogue*, 218) who wrote “ardent love letter[s]” to *his* Josephine. I do not attribute Joseph Smith’s polygamy to Napoleon. Joseph was born into a world fascinated with the Egyptian hieroglyphics and artifacts that Napoleon brought back to Europe from his campaign in Egypt at the turn of the nineteenth century. Joseph built his community on the Mississippi, upriver from Cairo, Illinois (founded in 1837), Memphis, Tennessee (founded in 1819), and nearby other Egyptian-named towns. Moreover, Joseph translated two scriptural documents from Egyptian writing, a language to which the western world was awakened as a result of the Napoleonic campaigns. Joseph’s actual revelatory explanation for plural marriage (D&C 132) is phrased less directly than the Book of Mormon but has the same message. The righteous are commanded to “do the works of Abraham; enter ye into my law and ye shall be saved” (v. 32); and Abraham’s “works,” which allowed the Lord to bring him the promised blessing of “seed . . . as innumerable as the stars; or, . . . the sand upon the seashore” (v. 30) was to take additional wives.

George D. Smith
San Francisco

Unapproachable Nature

Mark Nielsen’s brilliant article, “‘That Which Surpasses All Understanding’: The Limitations of Human Thought” (42, no. 3 [Fall 2009]: 1–20), reveals the mathematical uni-

verse to be a very strange place, with the numbers in our mathematical vocabulary being a small bucket-dip out of the ocean of real numbers. This idea was new to me, and very arresting.

The same evening that I encountered it, I also read the chapters on the Big Bang and dark matter in *The Whole Shebang, a State-of-the-Universe(s) Report* by Timothy Ferris (New York: Touchstone, 1997). After describing the remarkable way in which the Big Bang theory was conceived of and empirically substantiated, Ferris explains one of its most interesting implications. When matter was created in the moments after the Big Bang, the vast majority of it was in the form of what astrophysicists call dark matter. This dark matter, which is totally undetectable to us, comprises between 90 and 99 percent of the matter in the universe.

So in one evening I learned that most of the matter and most of the numbers in the universe are unknown or *unknowable*. What a startling and humbling realization!

It is a remarkable achievement to be able to prove that numbers which mathematicians have never “seen” actually exist, but even more remarkable are Gödel’s theorems establishing, as Nielsen explains, that “we can never discover all correct mathematical facts” nor can we ever be “certain that the mathematics we are doing is free of contradictions” (13). Given the scientific advances made in the past hundred years, I think it is easy for us to become quite impressed with ourselves

and to begin to believe that, given enough time and funding, we can make the universe give up all of its secrets.

But the Big Bang is a lesson in humility. Its existence begs the question of what came before it, and this is a question that science has no tools to explore. As Francis Collins writes in *The Language of God* (New York: Free Press, 2006): “[This realization] has caused a few agnostic scientists to sound downright theological” (66). Collins quotes the astrophysicist Robert Jastrow: “At this moment it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of creation. For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries” (66).

The theologians didn’t arrive there by reason. They came by faith. I took great pleasure in Nielsen’s idea that the laws of mathematics point to a universe in which much truth is beyond reason, because, like Nielsen, I have sensed that there is more to the universe than meets the eye. My faith gives me hope that knowledge will come in due course and that one day I will see the truths I seek “face to face.”

Emily Parker Updegraff
Evanston, Illinois