

JOSEPH SMITH, POLYGAMY, AND THE LEVIRATE WIDOW

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Polygamy is, for many Americans, Mormonism's defining feature. Even now, over a century after the main church abandoned the practice, images of Latter-day Saint polygamy persist in the popular and scholarly imagination. Most accounts of Mormon polygamy have either emphasized sexual experimentation and marital reform on the one hand or biblical primitivism on the other.¹ While these accounts are at least partly true—Joseph Smith did believe that he was replacing a failed system of marriage, and he and his colleagues frequently invoked Bible patriarchs to explain their behaviors and doctrines—polygamy was also a solution to a specific set of contemporary cultural problems—remarriage after bereavement—refracted through biblical interpretation.

Understanding polygamy through the lens of Smith's persistent, distinctive exegesis of Luke 20, the story of a hypothetical levirate widow (a childless woman whose brothers-in-law were obligated to marry her in order to assure offspring for their dead brother) both elucidates the

1. See especially Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Knopf, 1945); Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 123–80; and Richard Hughes and Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). While M. Guy Bishop, “Eternal Marriage in Early Mormon Marital Beliefs,” *Historian* 53, no. 1 (Autumn 1990): 77–88 correctly draws attention to the relevance of eternal marriage to the question of polygamy, his treatment is limited and dated.

conceptual matrix from which Mormon polygamy arose and points out the complexity of early Mormon belief about human relationships in the afterlife.² Smith's complex and idiosyncratic exegesis of Luke 20 exemplifies his "marvelously literal" approach to biblical interpretation.³ For Smith, polygamy provided a commonsensical approach to a practical problem: what does it mean to love again after the death of a spouse? As he worked through his interpretation of the thought experiment of Luke 20, Smith demonstrated the intense importance of temporal collapse and metaphysical correspondence in his thought: what was true on earth, briefly, would be true in heaven forever. Time and space were leaky containers for human experience in Smith's hands.⁴

The Sadducean Thought Experiment

Though Smith was a harsh critic of the proto-Victorian marital system, he saw himself as a powerful advocate of family. Where the Bible appeared to argue against the centrality of marriage, Smith took great pains to correct it. Most famously, the synoptic gospels reported that there would be no marriage in the afterlife.⁵ Using the Mosaic practice of levirate marriage to frame the question, the Sadducees asked Jesus what would happen to a woman whose successive husbands/brothers-in-law died after marrying

2. In this essay I expand and further contextualize the brief overview of this topic in my book *In Heaven as it Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 237–38. I originally presented a version of this paper at the American Academy of Religion meeting in San Francisco, November 2011.

3. Brown, *In Heaven*, 11, 124, 245, 260. I'm mindful of Charles L. Cohen's apt observation that I explored insufficiently the question of marvelous literalism in prior work; this essay is a partial attempt to flesh out more of what I mean by marvelous literalism. See his review of *In Heaven* in *Mormon Studies Review* 3 (2016): 170–73.

4. I explore these topics in detail in a book in progress currently titled *Joseph Smith's Metaphysics of Translation*.

5. Luke 20, Matthew 22, Mark 12. Matthew largely follows Mark.

her. In this thought experiment, a total of six husbands tried and failed to raise offspring to their dead brother. The Sadducees, non-believers in resurrection, used levirate marriage to prove the absurdity of Jesus' claim to an afterlife. Jesus dismissed their argument by stating that those who are "worthy to obtain" the "resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage." Instead, "they are equal unto the angels," supernatural beings generally believed to be sexless and probably genderless.⁶ A literal resurrection, the Sadducees teased, threatened bizarre permutations on marital arrangements. Jesus, in response, stressed the reality of resurrection but not the preservation of marriage.

While polyandry was not a known component of Second Temple Judaism, the levirate duty probably was. What happened to prior relationships, though, when a widow remarried? What about a widower? If there were any hint of marital persistence in the afterlife, serial monogamy forced a confrontation with polygamy. Second Temple Jews were not the first to puzzle over this conundrum, and they would not be the last, although early Christians seem to have been comfortable with Jesus' answer that a literal resurrection did not imply the persistence of marriage.

In nineteenth-century America, the once regnant "theocentric" model of heaven was giving way to a different, "domestic" model. Theocentrism, based in Augustinian theology with a recharge by Calvin, maintained that human connections paled in comparison to God's excellencies and would therefore not matter in the afterlife. The competing, domestic model maintained that familial relationships—hallowed by Romantic and Victorian culture—had to persist in the afterlife.⁷ Even though the domestic model was gaining ground in antebellum America,

6. On the nature of angels, see the essays in Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham, eds., *Angels in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For many centuries, a tension persisted between the concept of angels as the holy dead versus angels as a distinct type of creation from humans.

7. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 58, 92, 155, 258 and Brown, *In Heaven*, 205–08.

many centuries of Christian tradition argued against its central claim: the perpetuation of human marital relationships in the afterlife.

In several respects, the domestic heaven represented an attempt to protect a marital system embattled on earth. In the early national period, American family norms were in constant evolution against a backdrop of high mortality and substantial geographical dislocations, particularly for people living outside the eastern population centers.⁸ Median age at death was in the low- to mid-forties; those that lived beyond forty-five years had a high probability of suffering spousal bereavement at least once.⁹ Limited means of communication and travel exacerbated the problem. Many people existed in a state of familial uncertainty between separation and bereavement on a par with Schrödinger's famously liminal cat.¹⁰ Missing husbands might reappear after years away, or more commonly would never be seen again. How to secure divorce when the vital status of the spouse couldn't be ascertained wasn't always clear, and

8. On evolving family structures, see, e.g., Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families, 1600–1900* (New York: Verso, 1988).

9. Although precise estimates are difficult to obtain, as of the 1900 US census for men under fifty-five, there was still one currently widowed man for every ten currently married men, while the rates of widowhood were higher still. My analysis of data presented in David Kertzer and Peter Laslett, eds., *Aging in the Past: Demography, Society, and Old Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 254. Although data aren't available, the numbers from the 1900 census are certainly an underestimate for the early nineteenth century.

10. Schrödinger's Cat is a classic thought experiment meant to exemplify the disquieting disjunction between subatomic and Newtonian events in quantum physics. In it, the prominent physicist, Erwin Schrödinger, wondered over the fate of a cat (a Newtonian object) whose life depended on radioactive decay (a quantum event). Given certain assumptions about quantum probability, the decay event was held to depend on the act of observation, suggesting the bizarre (im)possibility that a cat might be both alive and dead, trapped indeterminately in a field of quantum probability, like a subatomic particle. Erwin Schrödinger, "Die gegenwärtige Situation in der Quantenmechanik," *Die Naturwissenschaften* 23:48 (29 November 1935): 812.

a significant number of early Americans simply didn't know their present marital status.¹¹ These social and demographic contexts are crucial to understanding the conceptual infrastructure of Smith's polygamy.

Jesus' response to the Sadducees' riddle posed no problem for the theocentric afterlife: the levirate widow would be the husband of none of the men, as human marriage vows were meaningless in God's unmediated presence; God was so much greater than any human that it would be sacrilege to attend to human relationships in the divine presence. The domestic model, on the other hand, left open the possibility of complex relationships in the afterlife because it insisted that human marriage could persist beyond the grave. Many Atlantic Protestants downplayed the potential conflict, but it was inherent in the practice of remarriage after bereavement, if mortal marriages were to persist in the afterlife.

Occasionally, probably rarely, Protestants imagined a reassembled family that contained all of their spouses. Methodist itinerant James Rogers (1749–1807) reflected on his own dual bereavement in a prayer that he hoped to pray every week, written in the last decade of the eighteenth century.

O let all my passions and affections burn for thee with unextinguishable blaze! . . . Prepare me . . . to fill a throne and wear a crown of equal magnitude [as his departed second wife] . . . such is thine unparalleled love as to give me the two women which of all other upon earth were every way calculated to make me happy . . . Methinks I can almost distinguish my sweet Martha and Hester Ann, each vying with the other, who shall be the next messenger upon some errand of love to me! . . . Then shall all the twelve, three parents and nine children . . . with rapturous astonishment cry—How strangely at last we are met in the sky!¹²

11. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich explored these themes in her 2015 Mormon History Association Presidential Address, "Runaway Wives 1840–60."

12. Cited and discussed in Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 105–08. I thank Christopher Jones for bringing this source to my attention.

Rogers's remarkable anticipation of afterlife reunion was far from the norm within Protestantism, even among proponents of the domestic heaven, but his poignant aspiration prefigured the rudiments of Smith's theological solution to the problem of eternal human love and serial bereavement.

More typical of Protestantism were the views of John Wesley or Matthew Henry or Adam Clarke, important Bible interpreters for early Americans. When these authors read the story of the levirate widow, they interpreted it in standardly theocentric terms. Angels have no sexual schism to heal and no need to reproduce biologically, and therefore post-mortal human beings shouldn't either.¹³ Joseph Smith disagreed, vehemently.

Smith first articulated his views on the levirate widow in his 1831–1833 New Translation of the Bible.¹⁴ In that New Translation, Smith made only minimal changes to the accounts in Luke and Matthew. The New Translation of Mark did, though, acquire the resurrection emphasis of the Lucan narrative. Where the King James Bible reported that God is not “the God of the dead, but the God of the living,” Smith explained the latter clause in a way that drew attention to the problem of life after death—“for he raiseth them up out of their graves.” While in the King James text the dead serve as a conceptual foil for the living, in Smith's revision the dead are reanimated; their distance from the living is thereby

13. See, e.g., Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* or Henry's one-volume *Commentary* or Clarke's *New Testament*.

14. Stephen Fleming proposes evidence of the levirate practice in the Book of Mormon's sole reference to polygamy in Jacob 2, but the anti-libertine sermon of Jacob 2 is more straightforwardly a reference to the story of Abraham and Hagar, in which God allows Abraham to father children with Hagar because his wife Sariah is barren. See Stephen Joseph Fleming, “The Fulness of the Gospel: Christian Platonism and the Origins of Mormonism” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2014), 368–89, which argues that Genesis 16 is the relevant precedent for Jacob 2, then posits a fanciful connection to John Dee's diary. While I'm sympathetic to the levirate narrative in general, Jacob 2 (expanded at length in D&C 132:30–37) more clearly refers to Hagar and Abraham (see Brown, *In Heaven*, 238).

minimized. The apparent separation between the living and the dead was not real: God was the God of both, and he performed resurrection to assure that he would tend to the living.

This exegetical expansion of Luke 20, tying marriage to resurrection and life to afterlife, persisted in various ways throughout Smith's career. In later preaching, Smith suggested that marriage was intimately connected to resurrection, both in general terms and in the highly specific anointing ritual of the Nauvoo temple liturgy.¹⁵ The intimate interconnection of the living and the dead is a subset of Smith's ongoing practice of what some call metaphysical correspondence, the claim that "as above, so below," an ancient belief now best remembered as the conceptual infrastructure of horoscopic astrology.¹⁶ While twentieth-century physicists have retained mild echoes of the power of correspondence in the non-local interactions of paired electron spins or the similarity across scales of fractal processes, metaphysical correspondence, in essence, understood that ontological similarities could be deeply influential. In Smith's hands, the traditional idea that the structures of the universe influenced the structures of human life came to define in part the persistence of human society—Smith called it "sociality"—across the boundary of death. In other words, earthly relationships had to be reflections of heavenly relationships. Heaven and earth had to be metaphysically connected.

By 1835, Smith had explicitly told his followers that they could marry their spouses forever, what initially seems to be an unremarkable

15. The connection between resurrection and marriage is central to the second temple anointing, and that ritual connection encouraged the flourishing of an early Mormon belief that men would resurrect their wives at Christ's Second Coming. On humans resurrecting each other, see Brown, *In Heaven*, 91–97, 199–200.

16. On metaphysical correspondence, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 132 and Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), 6, 13–16, 26–27, 141, 147, 164.

endorsement of the domestic heaven.¹⁷ Their marriages would last forever because domestic bliss was forever. Smith had also, though, begun to suggest plural marriage to a few followers, leading to intermittently turbulent controversy, especially with his second-in-command Oliver Cowdery. The 1835 *Articles of Marriage*, probably penned by Cowdery but held as binding on the Church, strongly affirmed a Mormon commitment to monogamy. Even that early denunciation of polygamy had to acknowledge, though, the exception to permanent monogamy: “one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband, except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again.”¹⁸ That proviso “in case of death” would prove the undoing of eternal monogamy in Smith’s developing system.

The collapse of afterlife into life posed by remarriage after bereavement and the promise of eternal marriage would be difficult to square with a plain reading of the Bible, though. Jesus’ response to the Sadducean thought experiment seemed pretty clear: there would be no marriage in heaven. Contrary to almost every other exegete and in defense of a social resurrection, Smith found in the thought experiment evidence that marriage, *performed correctly*, could in fact defy death. Reading the Sadducees’ taunt as literally but idiosyncratically true, Smith saw Christ’s answer as stipulating that marriage had to be performed before death in a specific way in order to survive a mortal dissolution.

Whereas other Protestants were often anticipating heavenly reunions with spouses and children, Smith had the audacity to take the Sadducean thought experiment to its hyper-logical conclusion—not even serial remarriage could be abrogated by death. But, as Smith obliterated temporal distance, his solution transformed the very concept of marriage. Smith and his Latter-day Saints reported that all marriages could be saved from the clutches of death, but *only in a radically new*

17. Brown, *In Heaven*, 229, 232–33.

18. *Doctrine and Covenants* [1835], 251.

form. Polygamy provided reassurance that no ties would be severed, even in a society where widows and widowers multiplied seemingly without limit. This solution came at a cost, though: Mormon marriage relationships would differ, radically, from the rising Victorian norm of companionate monogamy.

Most people would not, I suspect, infer from the postmortal polygamy (or something like it) of widows and widowers the idea that mortal polygamy should be normative. But Smith was not most people. Exercising his own version of metaphysical correspondence, Smith consistently collapsed the distance between heaven and earth and among past, present, and future. What mattered in the heavenly there and then had to matter in the earthly here and now. In Smith's hands, earth and heaven—the living and the dead—were separated only by a diaphanous shroud that he and his followers likened to a thin veil. The side effect of this collapse of spatiotemporal distance was a genuinely strange marital pattern in the here and now. Ultimately, this specific chain of logic persuaded more than just Smith himself.

Although the precedent of biblical patriarchs and the sacramental power of temple rites inspired many followers to accept polygamy, in some cases the more familiar problem of remarriage after bereavement proved more persuasive. That specific framing persuaded Smith's brother Hyrum, Mormonism's second-in-command in Nauvoo and erstwhile foe of polygamy. As various commenters have noted, including Hyrum himself, it was the reality of Hyrum's loss of his first wife, Jerusha Barden (1805–1837), and subsequent marriage to Mary Fielding (1801–1852) that made polygamy imaginable.¹⁹ When Hyrum first advocated polygamy semi-publicly in August 1842, he merged the levirate obligation and the domestic heaven to affirm the necessity of polygamy. According to a near-contemporary account, "Hiram said before the High council

19. Andrew F. Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the 1844 Mormon Succession Question" (MA thesis, Brigham Young University, 1982), 126–27. See also Brigham Young, Address, Oct. 8, 1866, CHL.

that. . . The Law that a man shall take his brothers wife and raise up seed unto him as it was in Israel must be again established.”²⁰ In an April 1844 speech shortly before his and his brother’s death, Hyrum reflected that his marriage to his first wife Jerusha came “before God showed us his order,” which meant that Jesus’ response to the Sadducees applied to them, and they would “be as the angels” without Joseph’s new form of marriage. Hyrum brought the concept of celestial polygamy to his second wife, Mary Fielding, and she concurred. Polygamy, in this account, was the straightforward solution to remarriage after bereavement and the domestic heaven. It was a doctrine, Hyrum Smith said, that no “honest man or woman” should “find fault with.” It was a “glad tiding of great joy.”²¹

When Joseph Smith introduced formal eternal marriage rites in 1840s Nauvoo, remarried widowers generally were sealed to their dead wives with their living wife acting as proxy, while also being sealed to their living wives.²² When ritual adoption arrived shortly thereafter, the adoptive children were generally connected to the first, dead wife, rather than the new, living wife.²³ Tying the strands together, Mercy Thompson later testified that her marriage to Hyrum was explicitly levirate, with a clear plan for Hyrum to sire offspring on behalf of her dead husband Robert.²⁴

20. Franklin D. Richards, “Scriptural Items” Notebook, LDS CHL, Aug. 12, 1843. I thank Don Bradley for bringing this source to my attention.

21. Hyrum Smith, [Conference Minutes], April 8, 1844, Richard E. Turley, Jr., *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 1: DVD 1, 6:1985–88.

22. Bishop, “Eternal Marriage,” 87–88. See also Lyndon W. Cook, *Nauvoo Marriages Proxy Sealings 1843–1846* (Provo: Grandin, 2004), 56–57 *et passim*.

23. On adoption in this period, see Jonathan Stapley, “Adoptive Sealing Ritual in Mormonism,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 53–117.

24. “An Important Testimony,” *Deseret News*, Feb. 6, 1886 includes an affidavit dated Jan. 31, 1886, in which she laid out the plan to have Hyrum devote new offspring to her dead husband at the time of resurrection.

Several other women in Nauvoo were apparently sealed under specific conditions as levirates rather than for an eternity with the new husband.²⁵

Only three clear statements from Smith in favor of polygamy remain, one the official revelation that circulated privately among the Mormon inner circle beginning in 1843 (now D&C 132); another, a precursor private revelation to the Whitney family on the occasion of Smith's 1842 marriage to their daughter; and the last, his public defense of the main revelation in the aftermath of an opposition paper's public criticism in 1844.

In the main revelation and his public defense, Smith highlighted the problems of the levirate widow in a clear reuse of Luke 20. The revelation (currently D&C 132:7–18) reiterated the Sadducean thought experiment to argue that civil marriages—as indeed all human contracts or covenants—cannot endure past death. Participation in such lesser marriages put a person at risk of becoming a specific kind of subservient, “ministering” angel in the afterlife. In the endorsement of such an angelic status, Smith combined his exegesis of Luke 20 with his Nauvoo-era divine anthropology (in which gods and humans are explicitly members of the same species). If Christ equated angels with sexlessness (Luke 20:36), then that meant that “angel” in this context referred to a lesser ontological status. Smith's exegesis here is stunning in its idiosyncrasy and remarkable in its consistency, demonstrating the lightly constrained creativity available within Smith's marvelous literalism. By reading the levirate widow's problem in the afterlife as her lack of access to temple marriage rather than her mortality, Smith demonstrated a special kind of esoteric reading that employed extra-textual knowledge (in this case, his temple marriage rituals) alongside a textual puzzle posed by the juxtaposition of the domestic heaven and the plain sense of Luke 20. Rather than ignore the tension inherent in the domestic model of heaven (the chance that it will cause jumbles for those who remarry after bereavement), Smith carved out for himself and

25. Joseph Smith's widows (who chose to remain in polygamy) are the best-known cases of this phenomenon. See, e.g., Cook, *Proxy Sealings*, 55.

his followers a coherent solution between the competing theocentric and domestic models of heaven.

One year after the polygamy revelation began to circulate privately, critics and disaffected followers created the *Nauvoo Expositor*, an opposition newspaper intended to expose Smith's personal flaws and scandalous, esoteric teachings. Smith responded quickly, mobilizing a Nauvoo city effort (he was mayor at the time) to quash the press. In his testimony before the city council, Smith complained that the *Expositor* "make[s] a criminality, for a man to have a wife on the earth, while he has one in heaven, according to the keys of the holy Priesthood." Later in his speech, Smith tied the problem still more explicitly to the levirate widow, explaining the context for the 1843 polygamy revelation that had rocked Nauvoo. "On enquiring concerning the passage in the resurrection concerning 'they neither marry nor are given in marriage,' &c., he received for answer, men in this life must marry in view of eternity, otherwise they must remain as angels, or be single in heaven, which was the amount of the revelation."²⁶ The topic of earthly polygamy was fraught and ultimately led to Smith's murder, so much is left elliptical or subtly allusive in his public remarks. But the plain meaning of his statements was that Smith's marriage rituals would create precisely the complex afterlife marriage patterns with which the Sadducees had taunted Jesus two millennia previously. This is worth emphasizing: contemporary sources suggest that polygamy was Smith's answer to the problem that remarriage after bereavement posed for eternal family relationships.²⁷

Smith's only other statement in favor of polygamy was his revelation to the Whitneys regarding his marriage to their daughter. In this setting, Smith still closely pursued questions of immortality and the conquest

26. *The Nauvoo Neighbor* extra (Jun. 17, 1844), quoted here, contains a reasonable typescript of the manuscript minutes, albeit with minor shufflings and clarifications.

27. In some respects, Smith's use of the precedent of polygamy among Bible patriarchs was a complement to this claim about remarriage after bereavement. See D&C 132:1, 34–39.

of death, although in that context he did not draw explicit attention to the levirate widow. He promised the Whitneys “honor and immortality and eternal life” for their participation in polygamy. He further prayed, “let immortality and eternal life henceforth be sealed upon your heads forever and ever.”²⁸ The marriage he described in the Whitney revelation was precisely the marriage unavailable to the Sadducees, a sociality that could extend into the afterlife. Smith’s statements on polygamy demonstrate his concern that marriage bonds survive the premature death of a spouse.

As Smith began to introduce polygamy, his vision of the afterlife radically diverged from the Victorian domestic model. His exegesis of Luke 20 probably played at least a conceptual role in one of the most notorious and painful elements of early Mormon polygamy: Smith’s practice of marrying some women who were civilly married to other men. This practice, often erroneously termed “polyandry,” played on the contrast between modes of marriage inherent to Smith’s exegesis of the levirate widow.²⁹ Just as the marriage of the Sadducees, certain classes of marriage were lesser, impermanent, non-sacerdotal. These impermanent marriages could be superseded by Smith’s sacerdotal, permanent marriage. The few women placed in the unenviable position of being dual wives had to span the distance between the Sadducean marriage to

28. Revelation dated Jul. 27, 1843 at LDS Church History Library in Salt Lake City.

29. For a review of polyandry generally, see Katherine Starkweather and Raymond Haynes, “A Survey of non-Classical Polyandry,” *Human Nature* 23, no. 3 (June 2012): 149–72. In that account, polyandry is generally a system, mainly in hunter-gatherer societies, in which a primary male spouse recruits other male spouses—often his blood kin—to limit the fracture of agricultural inheritances or to assure protection of offspring during frequent absences. In some instances, polyandry is associated with multiple fatherhood, in which more than one man is simultaneously considered father to a child (recall that older societies did not share our understanding of the biology of human reproduction). In early Mormon polygamy, dual wives had a low-status/civil husband and a high-status/sacerdotal husband, and the first husband generally was the lower status one. When offspring resulted, the children were not considered to have two fathers.

their first husbands and the celestial marriage to the Mormon hierarch. Such an untenable approach, however consistent with Smith's levirate exegesis, soon transitioned into established Mormon polygamy. While a recent proposal to describe the earliest phase of Mormon polygamy as an homage to Platonic "composite" marriage is unpersuasive,³⁰ the dual wives of early Mormonism stand as a reminder of just how disruptive Smith's vision of the afterlife could be.³¹

Conceptual Structures of Mormon Polygamy

There is more in the problem of the levirate widow than just the specter of polygamy in remarriage after bereavement. Smith's exegesis required several assumptions, and his theology employed distinctive readings of the levirate widow story as touchstones for interrelated concepts. Smith's account demonstrated that (a) "angel" could refer to a kind of postmortal human excluded from family relationships, (b) marriage was a sacrament, like baptism, that had to be performed during mortality, and (c) sacramental marriage was intimately associated with the act of resurrection. This complex exegetical network proved crucial to Smith's overall project of negotiating the extremes of the domestic and theocentric models of afterlife and the harsh realities of bereavement in the providentialist world of American religion (where God chose who would die and when, no matter how untimely a death might seem). Smith saw in the scriptural thought experiment the paradoxical solution to the problem of spousal death.

Though Mormon angelology has various minor complexities, Smith made two key claims about angels: in general, what other Christians understood as an entirely different class of sentient beings were actually

30. Fleming, "The Fulness of the Gospel," 351–85. Fleming's notion that Smith was in some way recapitulating the shared wives of Plato's *Republic* strikes me as far-fetched at best.

31. On dual wives, see Brown, *In Heaven*, 242–43.

humans at another stage in their development, and the term “angel” in point of fact could refer to those unfortunate enough to have ended up outside the sacramental marriage system. Essentially all early Mormon references to angel as beings inferior to humans invoked the imagery and language of the Sadducean thought experiment.³² Angels were to minister to those who had entered Smith’s eternal marital system, unable themselves to participate in it. Jesus’s words of marital restriction echoed across eternity.

The doctrine of afterlife family bonds coexisted with Smith’s divine anthropology—the ontological equivalence of humans, angels, and gods—in a way that seemed to derive at least in part from the promise of Luke 20 that some humans would be as “angels” in the afterlife. Smith seems in this sustained exegesis to have been able to keep two superficially incompatible notions at play simultaneously. The word “angel” carried two potential meanings: a divine being of the species (*Ahman* in the primordial language, according to early revelations) that encompassed God and humans, and a kind of curse that might befall such beings in the absence of sacerdotal marriage.

In tandem, early Mormons developed a theology that the Saints would resurrect each other, perhaps in a quiet but startling echo of the role of the trumpet-wielding archangel at Christ’s Second Coming. Specifically, men, whose status was equivalent or even superior to angels, would resurrect their wives as parents resurrected their children when Christ returned to earth, a doctrine disseminated in multiple ways in earliest Mormonism.³³ The close association of marriage with resurrection per se in Luke 20 (and Smith’s revision of the Marcan account in his New Translation) seem to have supported this connection, though the belief drew on multiple parallel antecedents.

32. Brown, *In Heaven*, 260–61.

33. Brown, *In Heaven*, 92–93.

The exegesis of the story of the levirate widow demonstrates the ways Smith diverged from the rising Protestant domestic heaven as he pointed out internal inconsistencies within it. The domestic heaven forced the issue of post-mortal polygamy because spousal bereavement was ubiquitous. In taking the domestic heaven to a hyper-logical conclusion, Smith broke with the popular belief of his peers. He did so in order to reconcile the power of human love, so strong it must surely persist beyond death, with the frequent disruptions to that love which death perpetrated.

Smith's polygamy made a claim that humans could love the way God loved, that their commitment would not flag if the scope of their domestic connections enlarged. For many people, the intensity of love within serial monogamy was proof that precisely such love was a reality. Though bereavement is highly individual and lost love haunts most who remarry, serial monogamy after bereavement provided a kind of laboratory for the type of love Smith saw his Saints acquiring for the eternities. Smith seemed to be making an analogy between Latter-day Saints and God, whose love was boundless. God's love grew with each additional beloved soul.

Theocentrism claimed that the rift between God and humanity was too wide to allow humans to have such a capacity for divine love, while the domestic heaven seemed to suggest that humans would struggle to love deeply those outside their domestic nucleus. Following neither the theocentric nor the domestic model, Smith's afterlife advocated a boundless human love for others. As Latter-day Saints endorsed an eternally expanded hearth, they were trying on the kind of love God and Christ felt toward every human being.³⁴

Formally, the Sadducean thought experiment was a case of possible polyandry. While Smith's exegesis of the thought experiment could have

34. Kate Holbrook and I explore this topic in "Embodiment and Sexuality," in Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 292–305.

endorsed polyandry as well as polygyny, no reliable contemporary evidence suggests that he did. It is not clear why precisely Smith married dual wives early in his career: various hypotheses have been advanced, with little clear evidence in support of any specific explanation.³⁵ Whatever the reason, Smith's message seemed to be that his sacerdotal marriage took precedence over civil marriage: the dual wives had a civil marriage to one man and a sacerdotal marriage to a more powerful man. Just as his new baptism took precedence over Protestant baptism, so did his new marriage take precedence over civil marriage. Marriage in this view was a kind of death-defying sacrament rather than an expression of the rising companionate ideal of Victorian marriage.³⁶

Whatever the precise reasons for the early dual wives, by 1842 Smith had abandoned the practice. The few actual levirate widows in Nauvoo were the women for whom sacerdotal levirate marriage was clearly limited to mortality.³⁷ Polyandry per se was not apparently a component of Mormon polygamy.

This asymmetry, in which men can potentially have multiple post-mortal spouses but women cannot, generally persists to the present day in the LDS Church, with complex exceptions. Why Smith's sustained exegesis of Luke 20 did not embrace frank polyandry is an open question. It may well have been that such *independent* female power was too striking, even for Smith's remarkably open mind. Then-current transitions in family and economic structure were tending to restrict female power

35. The scandalous question of who had sex with whom has activated considerable debate, mostly but not entirely informal and online, but that line of inquiry strikes me as basically orthogonal to the important religious and conceptual questions.

36. On marital sacramentalism, see Kathleen Flake, "The Development of Early Latter-day Saint Marriage Rites, 1831–1853," *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 1 (January 2015): 77–103.

37. In general, this status fell primarily on Joseph Smith's widows, who were remarried sacerdotally for time only with his polygamous heirs, generally the apostles.

outside the Victorian nucleus. Situated between the waning of official female spiritual authority and the slow rise of female political power, Smith's system arrived in a sociocultural context that surely constrained his innovations in some ways.³⁸ While it would be tempting to see the Sadducee denial of polyandry as playing a role in the specific polygynous focus of early Mormon polygamy (in other words, Jesus said the levirate widow would not have multiple postmortal husbands, so polyandry per se wasn't possible), I'm skeptical. Smith subverted the rest of the parable, and he never indicated that the failure of afterlife marriages was related to the sex of the involved parties. The fact that Smith never apparently endorsed post-mortal polyandry does, however, suggest that he was hitting up against the limits of the thinkable in his world.³⁹

For many contemporary Mormons and Mormon observers, the asymmetry between widows and widowers has become increasingly painful in the aftermath of the immense cultural changes brought to a head in the "super-nova" of secular individualism around 1960–2000.⁴⁰ Attempts to map solutions that are both true to Mormon roots and to modern sensibilities about the nature of gender and sexual identity will require careful attention and considerable work. Multiple currents were present within early Mormonism that could be appropriated to many different approaches, both for and against aspects of what is now called the neo-Victorian worldview.

Even within the constraints of his society, Smith made several important proposals that ran contrary to cultural expectations. According to best evidence, Smith at least identified a divine mother (earliest

38. On waning spiritual authority for women, see, e.g., Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998). Seneca Falls would occur in 1848, and female suffrage in the US wasn't fully granted until 1920.

39. On unthinkable things, see, e.g., Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 428–29.

40. The term super-nova in this sense belongs to Charles Taylor. On secularity, see his *Secular Age*, 300, 377, 412, and 423ff.

Mormons initially called her the “queen of heaven”), and he announced that both women and men were greater than angels (again reflecting his distinctive exegesis of Luke 20). In his temple rites, he was ordaining women as priestesses. Even as he rejected polyandry and accommodated to some contemporary gender norms despite his rejection of Victorian marriage, Smith was proposing that women had an ontological status of staggering gravity. He was not envisioning good wives, he was revealing priestesses who were, equivalently, goddesses.⁴¹

Despite Smith’s cultural heritage in early America and the fact that he struggled to elaborate a system in which women were loci of independent authority, his basic system could encompass a broader vision of female authority. In fact, Smith’s connection of polygamy to the basic problem of love in the face of mortality raises a possibility that could be put to use to elaborate a system of durable inter-connection less reliant on neo-Victorian social norms.

Conclusion

In an imaginative, strikingly literal exegesis of Luke 20 that spanned most of his career, Smith envisioned a complex response to death’s ravages on human relationships, a familiar and vexing problem in nineteenth-century America: what does it mean to remarry after bereavement? In so doing, he pointed out unspoken tensions in the domestic heaven and the Victorian family on which it depended. Similar tensions have come to the fore again in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries for some members of the LDS Church. This time rather than just the threat

41. On Mother in Heaven, see Susanna Morrill, “Mormon Women’s Agency and Changing Conceptions of the Mother in Heaven,” in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Kate Holbrook and Matt Bowman (Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 2016), 121–35. On women as priestesses/goddesses within the Mormon temple *cultus*, see Flake, “Early Latter-day Saint Marriage Rites,” 88–94, 102 and Kathleen Flake, “Ordering Antinomy: An Analysis of Early Mormonism’s Priestly Offices, Councils, and Kinship,” *Religion & American Culture* 26, no. 2 (2016): 155–66.

to Victorian monogamy, there are now hard questions to ask about sexual asymmetries and the status of women and men in afterlife pairings.

Following the threads of the story of the levirate widow illuminates the use of biblical exegesis in early Mormonism and fleshes out the conceptual infrastructure of early polygamy. It also points out the reasons why these tensions have never gone away: we human beings continue to love, and we continue to die. And we have never been able to fully come to terms with that conjunction.