

## A Private Revelation

William Victor Smith. *Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants: The Plural Marriage Revelation*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018. x + 274 pp. Footnotes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth: \$59.95. Paper: \$26.95. Kindle: \$23.99. ISBN: 9781589586901.

*Reviewed by Gary James Bergera*

Can there be too many studies of Mormon plural marriage? As one interested in the topic for the better part of the past three-plus decades, and who acknowledges the plethora of works that grapple with it, I hope the answer is no. For me, Mormon plural marriage has not merely survived the efforts of skilled historians and others to explain, but has prevailed as one of the LDS Church's chief doctrines to elude truly satisfactory comprehension (Adam God may be the only other teaching that, like plural marriage, only becomes more confusing with study).

William Victor Smith has taught mathematics at Brigham Young University since 1985 (having previously worked at the University of Mississippi and the University of Pau [France]). However, he is probably best known to the LDS intellectual community for his blog posts, since 2010, at *By Common Consent*; for his hosting since 2009 the *Book of Abraham Project* (BOAP.org); for his work on assembling the texts of the funeral sermons of Joseph Smith; and especially for his recently published textual and historical analysis of section 132 of the LDS edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, commonly referred to as Joseph Smith's July 12, 1843, plural marriage revelation. (To avoid confusion, in this review, Smith refers to William V. Smith, and Joseph to Joseph Smith.)

Smith's treatment of Joseph's plural marriage revelation is a syncretic blend of approaches: textual analysis, historical reconstruction, thematic narrative, and speculation. While his emphasis is a thoughtful,

tightly focused dissection of the text, history, and possible meaning(s) of section 132, Smith also veers into considerations of related topics that, depending on the reader's interests, may or may not be as germane to the study of plural marriage as the reader expects. For example, in addition to an examination of the beginnings of Nauvoo plural marriage, Smith broaches, among other subjects, the early development of priesthood keys, offices, authority, and succession (41–57); the nature of premortal intelligences (96–99); and sexual procreation versus spirit adoption in the next life as well as the role of a mother in heaven (158–72). Each of these, and other similar detours, is intriguing in its own right. Whether they coalesce into a unified consideration of plural marriage depends on the reader.

To give potential readers a taste of Smith's rewarding study, consider the following brief call-outs that both tease and tantalize:

"It is naïve to divorce Joseph Smith from physical desire." (11, n.31)

"The term 'Celestial Marriage' was almost universally synonymous with polygamy in Mormonism until 1890, after which it gradually came to refer exclusively to sealing." (23)

"polygamy is one and the same with 'Celestial Marriage.'" (24)

"Nauvoo where community morals and church law might be ignored under special conditions." (35)

"The LDS Church today frequently advertises the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles as being the collective custodians of the sealing authority between the passing of a Church President and the sustaining and ordination of his successor. Although this has been a part of the succession tradition since the crisis following the death of Joseph Smith, there is nothing in the textual history of restored priesthood authority that establishes this. Rather, that narrative was constructed out of Smith's teachings and the conferral of temple rites before his death." (39)

"The full April [1836] vision [of Elijah in the Kirtland, Ohio, temple] itself (which would be first published . . . in November 1852) makes no explicit reference to sealing and only links Elijah with 'turn[ing] the

hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers' . . . Given the continued emphasis in Mormonism of Elijah's role in restoring the sealing keys, it is somewhat remarkable that the plural marriage revelation makes no mention of that figure [i.e., Elijah]." (44)

"[Brigham] Young had to construct a narrative that put him in place as 'the one' [i.e., Joseph Smith's successor]." (53)

"The plural marriage revelation, however, does not whole-heartedly embrace a rejection of civil or non-priesthood authority, and it acknowledges earlier on that at least some of those contracts would be honored by the spiritual world—even if they 'have an end when men are dead.'" (107)

"in Nauvoo, proto-heavens were *created* by forming networks of sealing in and between families." (129; emphasis in original)

"reproduction seems to be the primary purpose behind polygamy." (156)

"The revelation thus declared that [Joseph] Smith's own salvation was guaranteed." (160)

"While celestial procreation as a sexual analogue of mortal reproduction does not seem to be an intended part of [Joseph] Smith's cosmology, his public remarks, like the [plural] marriage revelation itself, could be interpreted in ways that allowed for procreated souls in heaven." (166)

"Sex in heaven may seem like a validation of the patterns of mortality, but to see it as a necessary component of spirit generation lets the wonderful complexity of human biology invade heavenly precincts with hormone-driven psychology, resulting in a complex theological fruit that still awaits some careful and consistent explanation." (169)

"Simply put, under the law of Sarah the wife can either grant permission for her husband to marry additional wives or she can be damned." (174)

For Smith, the revelation Joseph dictated, according to reports, on July 12, 1843, was instigated by his older brother, Hyrum; was directed at his own civil wife, Emma Hale Smith, in an effort to convince her of the divinity of plural marriage; and may have been written in two sections and at two different times before being given to Emma. The revelation

did not inaugurate Joseph's controversial practice of plural marriage, but presented a theological justification—eternal marital sealings that survive death—for its implementation. It makes explicit to Emma that her husband's practice was a heaven-mandated commandment, that its objective was to maximize procreation, and that all who rejected it would be damned eternally. The revelation, in no uncertain terms, informed Emma and those like her—reluctant to embrace the new teaching—that if they rejected it, they would thereafter never be able to obtain a fullness of celestial glory. Smith argues persuasively that Joseph's revelation was not meant for the Church generally, and should not, at least in its current form, have been included in the Church's canon.

While I may quibble with Smith over a few of his statements, I agree with the gist of his analysis and arguments. I also agree that section 132 should not have been included in the Doctrine and Covenants but go even further: Joseph's revelation, like the Lectures on Faith (which were included in the Doctrine and Covenants until 1921), should be retired from the official canon. There may be some especially meaningful passages in the revelation for believers, but the fact is, as Smith points out, the document itself, in its present iteration, was never intended for the Church. That it was also read to members of the Nauvoo high council and then later explicitly and publicly disavowed as applying to the present underscores its problematic nature. Because we know so little for certain about the facts of the beginnings of plural marriage, and of its implementation and practice during Joseph's lifetime, we should, I believe, seriously consider relegating Joseph's July 12, 1843, revelation to a category of documents requiring further study before bestowing upon it the church's official imprimatur.

Since the publication of Smith's book, some reviewers have raised objections to his use of sources—specifically, Smith's disinclination to engage in debates with other scholars of the topic whose views may differ from Smith's. While I'm certain I would be interested in Smith's engaging with the historians with whom he disagrees, I realize that the

field of Mormon polygamy studies is especially fraught. (The waves of ad hominem assertions and passive aggression that surface during some debates, especially in those in which one is a participant, can be frustrating to navigate.) Thus I tend to interpret Smith's silence as a polite refusal to encourage potentially acrimonious exchanges, and not as an unwillingness to consider or evaluate opposing points of view.

Nor do I fault the book's subtitle *The Plural Marriage Revelation*. Granted, Joseph's revelation addresses more than plural marriage (for example, sealing, contracts, eternal marriage, proper authority, etc.). But there is no question that the document's primary focus is plural marriage and that it is best known as the revelation on plural marriage. All titles/subtitles fall short of the ideal. The title/subtitle of Smith's book is as good as, and arguably more marketable than, say, Smith's own preferred *The Restoration of Hagar: Joseph Smith's July 12, 1843, Revelation*.

I find it very easy to recommend Smith's book. After all, I agree with almost all of it. Smith has produced an important, valuable contribution to the study of early Mormon plural marriage.