

QUEER POLYGAMY

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According to many accounts of LDS theology, polygamy, also called celestial marriage, is a necessary mandate for the highest degree of celestial glory. Doctrine and Covenants sections 131 and 132 tell us that celestial marriage and the continuation of the human family will enable us to become gods because we will have endless, everlasting increase (D&C 132:20). The Doctrine and Covenants gives a direct warning that if we do not abide by the law of polygamy, we cannot attain this glory (D&C 132:21). Likewise, prophets have stated that theosis and plural marriage are intimately intertwined. Brigham Young, the most notable advocate for mandated polygamy, stated, “The only men who become Gods, even the sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy.”¹ However, he also wrote, “if you desire with all your hearts to obtain the blessings which Abraham obtained you will be polygamists at least in your faith.”² It is interesting that he uses the words “at least in your faith.” Was this to suggest that if a man cannot practice polygamy on earth, he will in heaven? Or is this to suggest a man may never enter into a polygamous marriage, but may live the spirit of polygamy in his heart? Later, Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal that “President Young said there would be men saved in the Celestial Kingdom of God with one wife with Many wives & with No wife at all.”³ Woodruff also wrote, “Then

1. Brigham Young, Aug. 19, 1866, *Journal of Discourses*, 11:269.

2. Ibid.

3. “I attended the school of the prophets. Brother John Holeman made a long speech upon the subject of Poligamy [*sic*]. He Contended that no person Could have a Celestial glory unless He had a plurality of wives. Speeches were made By L. E. Harrington O Pratt Erastus Snow, D Evans J. F. Smith Lorenzo

President Young spoke 58 Minutes. He said a Man may Embrace the Law of Celestial Marriage in his heart & not take the Second wife & be justified before the Lord.”⁴ What is to be made of these statements? How can one embrace the spirit of polygamy, the law of celestial marriage, but remain monogamous with one wife or even no wives?

This paper will refer to the sex-focused, androcentric, patriarchal, heteronormative model of polygyny as the Standard Model. At a glance, the Standard Model is highly problematic. Though the Standard Model tends to dominate discourse, a more creative interpretation of what the spirit of polygamy includes may offer new insight into what celestial relationships might look like. I’m suggesting a way to reconcile diverse desires for celestial marriage under a new model I call Queer Polygamy, which encompasses the spirit of polygamy without mandating specific marital relations. I will begin with an expository of the Standard Model of polygamy followed by an expository of the Queer Polygamy Model and demonstrate how plural marriage may be redeemed to accommodate diverse relationships and desires, as Brigham Young suggests. I will then point out five common concerns with the Standard Model of polygamy and how the Queer Polygamy Model address them.

The Standard Model of polygamy is often and reductively described as one man having multiple wives. The man will continue to increase in power and dominion according to the number of wives and children he accumulates. This means he is eternally sealed to all his wives and children as a god, like Heavenly Father, who also must have entered into plural marriage. To attain the highest degree of celestial glory and

Young. President Young said there would be men saved in the Celestial Kingdom of God with one wife with Many wives & with No wife at all” (Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, edited by Scott G. Kenny, 9 vols. [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985], 6:527 [journal entry dated Feb. 12, 1870]).

4. Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 7:31 (journal entry dated Sept. 24, 1871).

have eternal increase, a man must enter into polygamy. The Standard Model focuses exclusively on the man or patriarch with little regard to what others, especially women and children, desire.

This aesthetic of God and godhood is problematic for many reasons. This view paints a rather androcentric and domineering perspective of what polygamy might look like. Additionally, this makes God a patriarchal monarch whose power and glory aren't shared with his family and community but used at the expense of his family and community. If God evolved into godhood as a lone patriarch, his power is not holy but tyrannical. This patriarchal model of God, polygamy, sealings, celestial glory, and heaven are not a vision of glory most of us would aspire to as Saints in Zion. The Standard Model also neglects doctrines concerning the law of consecration, theosis for all, and other communal practices of Zion. The people of Zion live together as one in equality (D&C 38:24–27; 4 Ne. 1:3), having one heart and one mind (Moses 7:8). The Saints of Zion *together* enjoy the highest degree of glory and happiness that can be received in this life and, if they are faithful, in the world to come. Zion can be thought of as a template for how gods become gods. Yet the Standard Model of polygamy doesn't resemble anything Latter-day Saints might want to strive for. The God of the Standard Model sounds more like a venture capitalist accruing wives and children for self-glorification rather than the leader of a collective group of Saints living in pure love with one another. Community, diversity, nuance, and even sometimes consent⁵ are lost in this simplistic narrative.

5. “The revelation on marriage required that a wife give her consent before her husband could enter into plural marriage. Nevertheless, toward the end of the revelation, the Lord said that if the first wife ‘receive not this law’—the command to practice plural marriage—the husband would be ‘exempt from the law of Sarah,’ presumably the requirement that the husband gain the consent of the first wife before marrying additional women” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Plural Marriage in Kirkland and Nauvoo,” Oct. 2014, <https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirkland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>).

I believe queer theology is ripe with possibilities to reconcile our diverse aspirations toward Zion in a model I call Queer Polygamy, a model that can accommodate a potentially infinite number of marital, sexual, romantic, platonic, and celestial relationships. The phrase *Queer Polygamy* almost seems redundant. Polygamy is inherently queer according to contemporary monogamous marital expectations.⁶ It is, by Western standards, a deviation from the norm. The word *queer* may also seem to imply that a person must necessarily be a member of the LGBTQ+ community for these ideas to apply, but this is not the case. Rest assured, heterosexual monogamous couples are an important subset under the umbrella of Queer Polygamy, just as Brigham Young suggested. A person with many, one, or no spouses may be included in this model. The use of the word *queer* in Queer Polygamy is to signify a more thoughtful and thorough interpretation of polygamy that would be inclusive of such diversity, and many of its manifestations would be rightly considered queer. You may initially find this model strangely foreign, but I believe it is in harmony with LDS theology, both logically and practically, as both scripture and past prophets have taught. The word *polygamy* is used to convey the plurality of relationships we engage in and to suggest that celestial marriage and eternal sealings include far more practices than heterosexual monogamy or androcentric polygyny. Eternal sealings among the Saints are inherently plural. Queer Polygamy is not in opposition to LDS theology but rather the fulfillment of the all-inclusive breadth that LDS theology has to offer.

The Standard Model of polygamy is problematic for multiple reasons, as many LDS feminists and queer theologians, like myself, have

6. In this paper I will use the word *queer* according to its broad definition as anything strange, peculiar, odd, or deviating from conventional norms or societal expectations. If I am using the word *queer* as a referent to the LGBTQ+ community, I will use *queer persons* or *queer community*.

pointed out.⁷ I will review five of the most common problems with the Standard Model, then demonstrate how they might be reconciled by adopting the Queer Polygamy Model. The five common concerns are that the Stand Model does not leave room for the following: (1) monogamous couples; (2) women, and other genders, who desire plural marriage; (3) asexuals,⁸ aromantics,⁹ and singles; (4) homosexual relationships; and (5) plural parental sealings.

First, an unnuanced reading of Doctrine and Covenants section 132 appeals to a patriarchal and androcentric model of polygyny built upon a hierarchy of men who will be given women, also called virgins, as if they were property (D&C 132:61–63). This exclusively polygynous model is a major concern for women who do not wish to engage in plural marriage without their consent, such as the case with “the law of Sarah” (D&C 132:64–65). By extension, the Standard Model does not leave room for couples who wish to remain romantically and/or sexually monogamous. However, there is room for monogamy in the Queer Polygamy Model. To demonstrate this, I’d like to refer to queer sexual orientations not as universal orientations or socio-political identity labels but as specific practices in specific relationships. For example, I identify as pansexual; however, in my relationship with my sister I am asexual and aromantic. Though I am pansexual by orientation, I engage in a specific asexual, aromantic, platonic relationship with her. This is not intended to mean that our relationship is void of depth, intimacy, love, commitment, and loyalty—quite the contrary. I feel all those things for my sister and more, but we have no desire for a sexual or romantic connection. This does not mean my sister is any less important to me than my husband, with whom I do desire a sexual and romantic relationship; it simply means

7. Blaire Ostler, “A Feminist’s Defense of Polygamy,” personal blog, Oct. 27, 2017, <https://www.blaireostler.com/journal/2016/10/21/a-feminists-defense-of-polygamy>; Blaire Ostler, “The Problem is Patriarchy, Not Polygamy,” personal blog, Feb. 5, 2018, http://www.blaireostler.com/journal/2018/2/4/1akgw64pw_r3jgl4g0bbe1dg8hdj0wg.

the relationship dynamics are different between my sister and me and my husband and me. In the Queer Polygamy Model, I could be sealed to my sister in a platonic sealing for all eternity while also being sealed to my husband in a relationship that does include sex. I would be sealed to two people plurally, but I would still be practicing sexual monogamy. Thus, for couples who desire to practice heterosexual monogamy with one partner for all eternity, they may still be sealed to other persons they love plurally and engage in those other relationships asexually and aromantically. It is in this way that we can be sealed to our children. I am not only sealed to my husband, but I'm also platonically sealed to our three children. Not all sealings include sex, nor should they. Plural marriages, unions, and sealings among adults could also include plural, platonic sealings among several persons while the core couple still practices exclusive heterosexual monogamy.

Second, the account given in Doctrine and Covenants 132 does not explicitly address women who also wish to engage in plural marriages alongside their husbands. The exclusively polygynous model of polygamy can create a disturbing and problematic power imbalance among the sexes—especially for women in heterosexual relationships. Under the Queer Polygamy Model, plural sealings would be available to all consenting adults, not just men. As stated above, women are sealed to multiple people, such as children and parents, but I suggest that the policy allow women to be sealed to multiple adults whom they are not related to, just as men are afforded that privilege. Though the scriptures do not state that women may have more than one husband, that does not mean they *can't* have more than one husband. In fact, more than one of Joseph Smith's wives was also married to other men.⁸ This shows

8. "Several later documents suggest that several women who were already married to other men were, like Marinda Hyde, married or sealed to Joseph Smith. Available evidence indicates that some of these apparent polygynous/polyandrous marriages took place during the years covered by this journal. At least three of the women reportedly involved in these marriages—Patty Bartlett Sessions,

there is room in our religion for women who desire to be married to multiple men, including heteroromantic, sexual, or asexual relationships. It would be up to the participants to decide the relationship dynamics of their sealing or marriage, just as Joseph Smith engaged in sexual relationships with some, but not all, of his plural wives. There are various reasons for plural marriage and/or sealings that do or don't involve sex. Granted, legitimizing sexual relationships through sealings and/or ritual is important to avoid promiscuity in sexual relationships. Honesty and open communication are key to respecting the autonomy and volition of all participants—though not all past participants of polygamy practiced it in such a manner, namely Joseph Smith.

Third, a traditional interpretation of the doctrine of celestial marriage does not leave room for persons who do not desire marriage or are asexual and/or aromantic. However, there is room for asexual and

Ruth Vose Sayers, and Sylvia Porter Lyon—are mentioned in the journal, though in contexts very much removed from plural marriage. Even fewer sources are extant for these complex relationships than are available for Smith's marriages to unmarried women, and Smith's revelations are silent on them. Having surveyed the available sources, historian Richard L. Bushman concludes that these polyandrous marriages—and perhaps other plural marriages of Joseph Smith—were primarily a means of binding other families to his for the spiritual benefit and mutual salvation of all involved” (“Nauvoo Journals, December 1841–April 1843,” introduction to *Journals: Volume 2*, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/doc/introduction-to-journals-volume-2>). “Another theory is that Joseph married polyandrously when the marriage was unhappy. If this were true, it would have been easy for the woman to divorce her husband, then marry Smith. But none of these women did so; some of them stayed with their ‘first husbands’ until death. In the case of Zina Huntington Jacobs and Henry Jacobs—often used as an example of Smith Marrying a woman whose marriage was unhappy—the Mormon leader married her just seven months after she married Jacobs and then she stayed for years after Smith's death. Then the separation was forced when Brigham Young (who had married Zina polyandrously in the Nauvoo temple) sent Jacobs on a mission to England and began living with Zina himself” (Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997], 15–16).

aromantic sealings under the Queer Polygamy Model. Sealings of kinship, friendship, and love may be offered between persons who wish not to have a sexual or romantic relationship with others. Plural marriage for asexual persons could take the form of an asexual woman married to a heterosexual couple, or three asexual persons who wish to be sealed together in a plural marriage that doesn't include sex. Again, sealing and/or marriage is not tantamount to sex. Asexual persons, or persons who wish to remain single, could be sealed to parents, siblings, friends, and other partners without committing to sexualized or romanticized notions of marriage and sealings.

Fourth, the Standard Model is aesthetically heteronormative—leaving out the experiences and desires for homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, and other queer persons. This may be one of the more difficult huddles to overcome, because the common perception of Mormon theology implies there is no such room for homosexual unions in celestial cosmology. I do not see why this must necessarily be the case. I have written several pieces about how we could reenvision our reductive views of creation to include homosexual relationships, creation, reproduction, procreation, and families.⁹ In my view, homo-interactive creation, which includes homosexuality, is a required aspect of godly creation. If there is anything evolutionary biology has taught us, it's that the creation of life and flourishing of the human species is far greater than heterosexual monogamy. I have no reason to think that God wouldn't use natural

9. Blaire Ostler, "Sexuality and Procreation," personal blog, Feb. 22, 2016, <https://www.blaireostler.com/journal/2016/3/22/broadening-our-understanding-of-sexuality-and-procreation>; Blaire Ostler, "Queer Mormon and Transhuman: Part I," personal blog, Dec. 8, 2016, <https://www.blaireostler.com/journal/2016/12/8/queer-mormon-and-transhuman-part-i>; Blaire Ostler, "Queer Mormon and Transhuman: Part I," personal blog, Jan. 26, 2017, <https://www.blaireostler.com/journal/2017/1/26/queer-mormon-and-transhuman-part-ii>; Blaire Ostler, "Queer Mormon and Transhuman: Part I," personal blog, Aug. 24, 2017, <https://www.blaireostler.com/journal/2017/8/24/queer-mormon-and-transhuman-part-iii>.

means of creation to enable all life, goodness, relationships, parenting, and flourishing. If this is the case, it is possible for plural homosexual relationships to exist under the model of Queer Polygamy.

The Queer Polygamy Model leaves room for same-gender and same-sex sealings, whether they are platonic, such as with my sister and me, or homosexual, such as with two wives. Under the Queer Polygamy Model, plural marriage may include multi-gendered partnerships, such as sealings among sister wives that may or may not allow sexual relations between them. If a man is married to two women and the women are bisexual, they may choose to be sealed to each other and have a romantic and sexual relationship with each other as well as with their common husband. Likewise, a transgender woman might be married to a cisgender man and cisgender woman. If all identify as pansexual, it could be the case that they are all in a romantic and sexual relationship with one another. The takeaway is that gender is irrelevant to whether or not there is sexual activity in plural sealings—assuming there is no abuse, neglect, or harm being done to the participants. The purpose of the sealing isn't to legitimize sexual behavior; the purpose of sealing is to legitimize the eternal and everlasting bonds that people share with one another, be they homosexual or otherwise.

Fifth, the Standard Model doesn't leave room for children to have autonomy to be sealed or unsealed to diverse parents. In the Standard Model, children are property of their fathers and have little say about whether or not they may be sealed or unsealed to other parents. For example, a child born into a heterosexual marriage may be sealed to the parents, but if the father is gay, divorces his wife, and both marry other men, the child of the first marriage would have four parents—one biological father, one biological mother, and two stepfathers—but would only be sealed to the biological father and mother. Under the Queer Polygamy Model, the children could be granted plural sealings to both the biological parents and their husbands. The child would be sealed to three fathers and one mother, though the dynamics of the

relationships are diverse and fluid among the parents. Essentially a child should be able to be sealed to all the parents they love. This is not the case under the Standard Model, which focuses on who the child belongs to in the eternities instead of whom the child desires to be sealed to. A child should not be forced to choose between fathers by mandates of heterosexual monogamy or patriarchal polygyny. Children with plural parents should be granted plural sealings for those who desire them. No child should have to divorce a parent eternally just to be sealed to another, just as no wife should necessarily have to divorce a husband to be sealed to a second. It is to the detriment of the child to assume they are inherently “owned” by their biological father alone when the child has the capacity to love more than one father and mother. Likewise, a child born to a family with three mothers and one father should have the opportunity to be sealed to all her mothers. Heaven isn’t heaven without all the people we love, and I trust God feels the same. If not, heaven becomes hell.

Now that we have a broader understanding of what diverse families and sealings could look like under the Queer Polygamy Model, the words of LDS prophets about families begin to taste sweet again. The family really is central to God’s plan—it is ordained of God. We are all part of one big family—God’s family. The family is far more than just one mom and dad. It is siblings, cousins, spouses, aunts, uncles, friends, grandparents, and the generations of persons who came here before you or me. The family is about creating bonds that extend into eternity as we connect with one another to become something greater than ourselves. Family is everything, yet too often people perceive family to mean something so narrowly defined. It is really a grand and beautiful quilt that envelops us all. Sealings under this broad quilt might include, but are not limited to, spouse-to-spouse sealings, parent-to-child sealings, law of adoption sealings, friendship sealings, and many more. Under the family quilt of Queer Polygamy, we are all interconnected in an infinite number of complex and beautiful relationships.

The spirit of polygamy is love of community. This is the law we must embrace as Saints in Zion if we are to become gods. The spirit of polygamy encompasses the diverse unions of the gods in all their complexity and intricacies. The spirit of polygamy includes, but also reaches beyond, the legitimization of sexual relationships. The spirit of polygamy means I might be sealed to my best friend regardless of whether or not we also share a sexual relationship. It means children may be sealed to all their fathers and mothers, be they biological or adoptive. It means it takes a village to raise our children. It means I may be sealed to a sister wife, not through my husband but with my husband. It means my husband may be sealed to his best friend while they enjoy a platonic, asexual, aromantic relationship. It means an asexual woman may choose to be sealed with a gay couple, independent of sexual activity, but still have a relationship full of meaning, emotional intimacy, and purpose. The spirit of polygamy means heaven isn't heaven without all the people we love. It means infinite possibilities fulfilled by our infinite love—just like the gods, filled with a multiplicity of heavenly mothers, fathers, and parents that we have yet to imagine. I cannot imagine any God more beautifully Mormon than a God of both plurality and unity who welcomes all families into Zion as we strive to join the gods above.