

Secret, Not Sacred

Cheryl L. Bruno, ed. *Secret Covenants: New Insights on Early Mormon Polygamy*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2024. 450 pp. Cloth: \$39.95. Ebook: \$9.99. ISBN: 978-1560854715.

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Cheryl Bruno's edited volume, *Secret Covenants: New Insights on Early Mormon Polygamy*, gives us an important resource about Mormonism's early implementation and practice of Joseph Smith's secret practice of polygamy. As Bruno points out in her introduction, "[She] found that the majority of people discussing the topic academically happened to be male identified. For an area that had and still has such impact on women, there is a great need for female points of view" (x). While the large majority of authors in this volume are male—despite Bruno's efforts to incorporate more chapters by women—Bruno hopes that this volume will encourage women writers to tackle this topic. I too hope that the rich variety of voices, approaches, and insights contained in this scholarly volume will inspire further research by women, as well as other scholars whose voices have historically been largely missing from this conversation.

In the first chapter, Clair Barrus shows that the 1843 polygamy revelation (now D&C 132) was not the only revelation on the subject that Joseph Smith received. Barrus provides primary (though often decades later) evidence that themes found in D&C 132 were taught privately and earlier than 1843. For example, Barrus gives a number of examples of teachings about God appointing a plural wife to a husband. These include statements to Sarah Pratt, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, and Marinda Johnson; with Nancy Rigdon being warned against taking an unappointed partner (39).

Next, Mark Tensmeyer's contribution to this volume is important for understanding the polygamy skeptic movement. Tensmeyer explains two of the popular narratives underlying the "Monogamist Model": that Joseph Smith never taught or practiced polygamy, but that it was introduced by others in the last years of Smith's life (47–49). On pages 96–100, Tensmeyer has done pioneering work in placing together contemporary evidence of Joseph Smith's polygamy. This chart has already been utilized and refined by others, with some additions and subtractions, but remains invaluable as a starting point for researchers.

Christopher C. Smith and Don Bradley each contribute chapters that make important contributions to the study of pre-Nauvoo polygamy. Using available sources and historical events, Bradley has definitively dated Joseph Smith's relationship with Fanny Alger as beginning in early spring 1836 (after priesthood keys were delivered to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple) and ending on or about July 22 of the same year (186–89). This dating will be essential in any subsequent work done on Alger. Smith adds to our understanding of Joseph's marital relationships by shedding more light on his primary relationship with Emma, which, Smith says, provides a pattern he followed in his subsequent proposals. Smith connects these marriage practices to treasure quests, secrecy, and mystery, making innovative connections that others have not heretofore realized (119–26, 138–41).

Smith and Bradley, in a coauthored chapter, speculate about possibilities of the early meaning of priesthood sealing. Perhaps, they argue, Fanny Alger was sealed to Joseph Smith in an adoption relationship before "the relationship's transition from filial to marital" (192–94). This is probably the most controversial subject that *Secret Covenants* addresses, with some historians disagreeing with the authors' conclusions, and others reserving judgment for the time being. Regardless, the analysis is tight and well reasoned, making a fascinating new reading into Joseph Smith's sealing system.

Susan Staker and Mary Ann Clements have provided rich feminist insights on Mormon polygamy, a vitally important aspect when studying this theme. Staker does this by analyzing the Book of Abraham, tracing the development of Joseph Smith's thinking on women's sexual and religious power. An interesting section introduces Kahtoumun, a female character in Smith's Egyptian project, on whom he spends "significantly more time . . . than any female in his dictation plot," including Sarah (227). Clements does pioneering work by studying Theodore Turley's Nauvoo plural marriages through close genealogical evaluation of three of the women he married: the Clift sisters. Clements gives an example of how studying the women of Mormon polygamy can provide a more thorough understanding of the motivations and lived experiences of participants (349–50).

Another important contribution set forth in this book is an understanding of the legal environment surrounding marriage in 1840s Illinois. John Dinger has taken a somewhat technical subject and made it interesting and thought-provoking. By telling stories of Mormons and non-Mormons and how the law was applied, Dinger displays a thorough mastery of his subject. For instance, he follows several Illinois couples to demonstrate how laws on adultery and fornication were applied (278–79). He also gives examples of how the laws were applied in Nauvoo (282–90).

Todd Compton's chapter offers an important response to the question of whether there were "eternity-only" marriages in Nauvoo. Some doctrinal shift in the idea of Mormon polygamy has occurred as a result of more writers promoting a view that many or most of Smith's marriage did not have a sexual or temporal component. Compton scrutinizes the available sources on this subject. Pages 299–301 feature a synopsis of some of the historiography on eternity-only marriages, including its use as a defense for Smith's polyandrous marriages.

Joseph Smith's polygamy seems to have differed in many ways from Brigham Young's more authoritarian and patriarchal version. Because

of this, Devery Anderson's investigation of Willard Richards's plural marriages, many of which duplicated the more peculiar aspects of Smith's, is notable. One example is Richards' polyandrous marriage to Susannah Liptrot, who was married to and cohabiting with her husband, John (363).

Cheryl Bruno, relying partially on research begun by the late Johnny Stephenson, gives an important case study of a late and problematic claim of plural marriage by Emily and Eliza Partridge. She connects this with Emma Smith's denials of Joseph's polygamy, and suggests possibilities for understanding discrepancies. Such close analyses of non-contemporaneous polygamy claims are sorely needed.

A final notable contribution to the polygamy discussion is William V. Smith's summation of the influence the plural marriage revelation has had upon the LDS church through the years, up to the modern era. The theological impact alone has been enormous, as he describes on pages 425–427.

I did find a few typos with dates. The first example does include a small error in transcription of an entry in the Wilford Woodruff journal. Chapter 2, p. 73 places Woodruff writing in his diary on August 2, 1846: "had some instruction on the priesthood by Brigham Young." Dan Vogel's "The Wilford Woodruff Journals" records Woodruff writing on August 2, 1846: "President Young deliver[e]d an interesting lecture upon the priesthood And the principal of sealing there being present." Tensmeyer's note 91 states "Woodruff Journal, August 2, 1844," which should be the year 1846, as he noted above. Chapter 3, on page 131, places the date for the Agnes Smith marriage as January 6, 1841, but it should be dated as January 6, 1842 (see Compton, 153). In chapter 4, on page 178, note 113, the author has Smith fleeing Kirtland on December 22, [1837]. However, on page 181, in the second paragraph, the author identifies the correct date of Smith's fleeing Kirtland as January 12, [1838]. In chapter 5, on page 211, the authors have the angel quoting Malachi 3–4 as early as 1824, but Smith's 1839 history has the date as

1823. In chapter 6, on page 242, note 50, the author has the year for the publication as 1844, but it should be 1842. In chapter 8, on page 302, the author places Sarah Ann Whitney's marriage date with Smith as 1843, but the year should be 1842, per her affidavit.

Some would say, and people actually have said to me, that I am being picky about dates. I would argue that dates matter in history. At the same time, none of these errors take away the importance of *Secret Covenants*. Smith and Nauvoo polygamy have been and continue to be a hotly debated subject in the Restoration community. This book tackles many of the issues that are currently being discussed and debated. With this in mind, people can find information and scholarship that can help them formulate an understanding about the past and help them seek out further study. This is a must-read for any student of Joseph Smith's polygamy and Restoration studies.

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