Title The Prophet Joseph Smith and His Plural Wives

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Abstract Review of *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (1997), by Todd Compton.

Todd Compton. *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997. xv + 788 pp., with notes and index. $39.95.

Reviewed by Richard Lloyd Anderson
and Scott H. Faulring

The Prophet Joseph Smith and His Plural Wives

This is a landmark recent publication, an ambitious first book by Todd M. Compton.[1] This informative work of over eight hundred pages compiles individual biographies of the polygamous wives of Joseph Smith, the founding prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For the first time, readers intrigued with the personalities involved in this unique socioreligious practice have an in-depth examination of the women who were sealed to the Prophet, many of whom were the first Latter-day Saint plural wives. The sensitive issue of the introduction of plural marriage by Joseph Smith is best addressed by honest inquiry, as far as we have data. Gathering reliable material is actually fifty percent of the problem, since everyone who writes must remark on how little is known behind the scenes. In most cases, the Prophet's marriage sealing dates are known; in many instances the comments of Joseph Smith's wives describe how they accepted this marriage system and what their feelings were at that time and later.

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[1] Todd Compton earned a bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University and a Ph.D. in classics from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Along with Stephen D. Ricks, he coedited the fourth volume in the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley series, entitled *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987). Compton has also published several informative articles in ancient studies, and in the present study applies his training to earliest Mormonism.

Compton received a research fellowship in 1992 from the prestigious Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California (see p. ix), which gave him the opportunity to study the library's collection of the personal writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow, Joseph Smith's best known plural wife. This research stimulated his interest in the Prophet's other plural wives. Because of a lack of accessible information, Compton expanded his research over the next four and a half years, with a goal of compiling detailed biographies on thirty-three women who he believes married Joseph.

The introduction of polygamy in Ohio and Illinois has been controversial and little understood, both in the Prophet's generation and the current one, even among many of the Mormon faith. A few select Latter-day Saints participated in plural marriage prior to the 1846 exodus from Nauvoo, Illinois, out of religious devotion and open-minded obedience. Compton recognizes that deep spiritual conviction was at the base of reestablishing the marriage system of the ancient patriarchs: "Accepting polygamy was a matter of integrity for both Latter-day Saint men and women, given the restorationist underpinnings of their faith and their acceptance of Smith as a direct conduit of revelation" (p. 312).

As Compton discovered while researching for his book, serious study of Mormon plural marriage has special challenges in the period before its 1852 public announcement. The introduction of latter-day polygamy is obscured by the confidentiality first stressed by the Prophet in teaching polygamy to his most devoted followers. Defensive public statements, in which participants honestly denied that the church believed or practiced an immoral system of *spiritual wifery*, were made in a serious attempt to avert hostilities generated by misunderstandings fed by apostates and anti-Mormons. Certain Mormon dissidents turned into wolves. They attracted others through local and national newspapers and speeches, which distorted the private teachings of the Prophet as being carnal and unrestrained. Political and religious enemies stalked Joseph Smith—the shepherd—and his dedicated flock living in Nauvoo and the surrounding area. Violence in Missouri and the constant threat of its return largely explain the caution with which the Prophet first introduced the principle to those he

trusted. Moreover, the Prophet was legally at risk, since Illinois statutes made bigamy a crime.

General Observations about the Book

Overall, *In Sacred Loneliness* is extremely informative. The book features a high level of research, generally good judgment in the use of source materials, and a fairly comprehensive collection of known data pertaining to the wives of Joseph Smith. No biographer in Mormon history has ever been ambitious enough to write a group biography as extensive as this. Because of the complexity of the subject and an obvious lack of detailed primary sources, the job of compiling full-chapter biographies of Joseph Smith's plural wives could be insurmountable. *In Sacred Loneliness* was recently honored with the annual best book award from the Mormon History Association. This recognition is deserved because it is the most detailed study of the lifetime experiences of the women sealed to Joseph Smith.

There are, of course, limitations in such a massive collection. Compton has done everything possible to reconstruct lives, but even then the narrative mainly reports outward events, with regular observations that little is known of private lives and inner feelings. The typical biography in this collection moves through a family conversion to Mormonism, gathering to Nauvoo, gaining a personal witness of plural marriage, the sacrifices of the exodus, and then pioneer life in Utah. The author stresses deprivation and sorrow, but the factual reality is the remarkable power of faith most of the wives displayed. He tells the stories of a group of impressive women who gave their all to establish a latter-day gospel dispensation and expand family kingdoms of the hereafter.

In Sacred Loneliness synthesizes hundreds, possibly thousands, of primary and secondary pieces of an enormously complex historical reconstruction. Unfortunately, many of these documentary pieces do not fit together well. Some are gross contradictions while others were purposely misrepresented by their creators. Compton's biggest challenge, from which arose one of the book's greatest weaknesses, was evaluating and selecting the most reliable pieces of biographical evidence to use in portraying these women accurately. The book employs a confusing,

nontraditional method of citing supporting information. The main text of the book is devoid of conventional endnote numbers. Instead, *In Sacred Loneliness* furnishes explanatory notes at the back of the book. These references are introduced by a short contextual phrase identifying the issue. In reading this important work, we were often frustrated by the inordinate time it took to find a source—and were on occasion unsuccessful. The contextual phrases in the reference section take up far more space than consecutive numerals. In our opinion, the traditional numbering system would have been more efficient, pinpointing the references immediately. In content, the notes maintain good scholarly standards, avoiding long irrelevancies and generally meeting the author's stated goal of giving readers the texts of main sources, many of which are in manuscript form and would be time-consuming to locate.

It is important to know the viewpoint of anyone who interprets the teachings and activities of the Prophet Joseph Smith, especially when addressing a challenging subject like plural marriage. Compton is forthright about his position: "I am a practicing Mormon who considers himself believing but who rejects absolutist elements of the fundamentalist world view, e.g., the view of Joseph Smith as omniscient or morally perfect or receiving revelation unmixed with human and cultural limitations. However, I do accept non-absolutist incursion of the supernatural into human experience" (p. 629).

This position is applied in a consistent campaign against plural marriage, with repeated editorializing on the subject. For example, after acknowledging the religious integrity of men and women in polygamy, the introduction adds: "Nevertheless, my central thesis is that Mormon polygamy was characterized by a tragic ambiguity. . . . It was the new and everlasting covenant, having eternal significance. . . . On the other hand . . . it was a social system that simply did not work in nineteenth-century America" (p. xiii). The preface argues this point with a few non-Joseph Smith examples. Is Compton claiming that his book proves the failure of polygamy—or that he wrote the book because he holds this premise? The author seems to wear twin hats of historian and social theorist. For instance, Agnes Coolbrith Smith became the widow of Don Carlos Smith in 1841 and was afterward sealed to

him for eternity and married for time, first to her brother-in-law Joseph Smith and later to his cousin George Albert Smith. However, pressures of the exodus blocked this last relationship, and Agnes married William Pickett and moved to California. Later Pickett deserted her. *In Sacred Loneliness* opines it was illogical to return to Utah because "polygamy was almost an institutionalized form of marital neglect" (p. 170). In another case, the author says that Orson Whitney followed his grandfather and father "in accepting the onerous burden of polygamy" (p. 531). Actually, Orson married his second wife with the consent of the first and lived in the normative dual-wife pattern in Utah. In fact, Compton describes how well this two-household system worked through the fairness of Horace Whitney, Orson's father, and the considerate sisterhood of his wives (see p. 513).

The author explains and reexplains his title: "Often plural wives who experienced loneliness also reported feelings of depression, despair, anxiety, helplessness, abandonment, anger, psychosomatic symptoms, and low self-esteem" (p. xiv–xv). If plurality was sacred, "its practical result, for the woman, was solitude" (p. xv). The narrative sustains this dramatic, tragic mood. Compton paints his subjects with an assortment of brushes. At times he uses the brightest colors and lineaments of faith in interpreting these women, while in other instances he employs mostly muted hues and shadows to achieve a dark and foreboding biographical landscape. The attempt at psychohistory too often fails for lack of materials, as the author regularly admits. Obviously, taking more wives meant spending less time with any one of them. On the other hand, the above complex of "desertion reactions" is not an inevitable result of the system. Joseph Smith's situation is atypical, with complicating tensions of a new teaching and the necessity for secrecy, not to speak of his murder, which imposed grief and unforeseen adjustments on his wives. Moreover, the number of Joseph Smith's sealings, as well as those of Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball, is not representative of Mormon polygamy in the nineteenth century. These leaders set examples of willingness to obey the principle, but Stanley Ivins found that 66.3 percent of Utah polygamists had two wives, and another 21.2 percent had

three wives.[2] *In Sacred Loneliness* goes beyond its narrative and anecdotal scope in making subjective judgments on plural marriage.

The Prologue

In Sacred Loneliness opens with a survey chapter: "A Trajectory of Plurality: An Overview of Joseph Smith's Wives."[3] If readers assume that Compton's list of thirty-three "well-documented wives" (p. 1) is grossly exaggerated, they will be surprised to know that his enumeration is actually quite conservative. He singles out the lists of Fawn M. Brodie, D. Michael Quinn, and George D. Smith, which range from forty-three to forty-eight wives in total (see pp. 1, 632). The present reviewers agree with Compton that such numbers are inflated. We know that Joseph Smith had multiple wives. The relevant research questions are: "Precisely how many wives?" and "What was the nature of their marital relationship?" Compton addresses these core issues in his prologue. Historians must weigh what little reliable evidence exists and decide whether sufficient information is available to include a woman as one of the Prophet's wives. Compton's list of thirty-three wives is generally supported by one or two of the following sources: early church journals and records, personal writings or affidavits from the women themselves, and recollections of family or friends. Also, Compton adds a group of "possible wives" (pp. 8–9), who are not included with the thirty-three because solid evidence does not support their marriages to Joseph Smith.

Two decades ago, Danel Bachman was the first to set a higher standard for carefully testing evidence in this matter by producing a historically defensible list of Joseph Smith sealings during his lifetime.[4] Though Compton acknowledges Bachman's research in

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2 See Stanley S. Ivins, "Notes on Mormon Polygamy," *Western Humanities Review* 10 (summer 1956): 229–39.

3 This was originally published as "A Trajectory of Plurality: An Overview of Joseph Smith's Thirty-Three Plural Wives," *Dialogue* 29/2 (1996): 1–38.

4 See Danel W. Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage before the Death of Joseph Smith" (master's thesis, Purdue University, 1975). Copy in the Brigham Young University Harold B. Lee Library. Bachman has also reviewed the Compton book in this issue, pages 105–137.

notes, he categorizes it as one of several general studies (see p. 632). Yet Bachman's master's thesis is a book-length, specialized study of the very area Compton is focusing on. That work is underplayed by classifying it with Richard Van Wagoner's *Dialogue* article as "pioneering treatments" (p. 639). Bachman's thesis remains a necessary reference on the subject of Joseph Smith's wives; he felt reliable evidence existed for thirty-one wives. Our evaluation would reduce the number of proved sealings in Joseph Smith's lifetime to twenty-nine. In our judgment, of the thirty-three wives listed by Compton, the present evidence is not adequate for the following four marriages to the Prophet: Lucinda Morgan Harris, Elizabeth Durfee, Sarah Cleveland, and Nancy Maria Winchester. Since three of these were married at the time of their supposed sealings to Joseph Smith, this more conservative approach modifies Compton's view of "polyandry," which we will address later in this review.

Method of Determining the Number of Wives

As mentioned, scholars disagree on the caliber of evidence required to determine the number of wives sealed to Joseph Smith. On one end of the research spectrum, Fawn Brodie listed forty-eight, while Compton brings the number down to thirty-three by demanding a higher level of verification. Compton points out that since Brodie's investigation in the 1940s, "scholars have faulted her for relying on antagonistic sources that have since proven unreliable" (p. ix). Compton evaluated many of these "antagonistic sources," asserting that "certain lists have proved to be reliable" (p. 1). But this reasoning is the Achilles heel of attempts at objectivity in enumerating the Prophet's wives. A compilation of names does not reveal the source of its information. From the viewpoint of strict history, such lists are secondary, unverified documents, unless the author furnishes detail or annotation. Following are a few of these surveys or inventories of the wives of Joseph Smith, with comments on their use in Todd Compton's work.

1. John C. Bennett left the church in 1842 and soon published his malicious exposé, *The History of the Saints*, which gives initials of seven women married to Joseph Smith, adding stars

equaling the remaining letters in their names.[5] *In Sacred Loneliness* concludes that this list has been "adequately substantiated" (p. 1). No discussion or explanation is given to support how Bennett's grouping was "substantiated" by Compton or anyone else. This is not critical enough. Bennett names the sealers in two out of seven cases, but he may not have had dependable information on the other five women. This literary chameleon used names unreliably in some very tall tales of Nauvoo. T. B. H. Stenhouse, who sought negative but accurate information on the Prophet, gave the following caution: "There is, no doubt, much truth in Bennett's book . . . but no statement that he makes can be received with confidence."[6] This means that historians should not depend only on that source. In fact, *In Sacred Loneliness* does not always take Bennett's list at face value; two women that appear there are named only as Joseph Smith's "possible wives" (p. 8, nos. 3–4).

2. Assistant church historian Andrew Jenson later named twenty-seven women who were sealed to Joseph Smith while the Prophet was alive.[7] Yet Jenson's compilation itself is secondary, without information on why he included a given person. In a majority of cases Jenson gave the date of sealing, adding who performed it. But Jenson's naming of a woman without particulars is really a research clue needing verification. His research was imperfect, for he failed to name several women where adequate evidence shows they were sealed to the Prophet.

3. In the case of a temple sealing to Joseph Smith after his death, most researchers would not consider that by itself evidence of a living marriage, in spite of the fact that most of these 1846 ordinances involved the Prophet's living wives. Compton acknowledges the problematic nature of these "early posthumous marriages" (p. 8)—in several instances he does not use later sealings as proof of marriages to Joseph Smith during his lifetime (see

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5 See John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), 256.

6 T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints* (New York: Appleton, 1873), 184 n.

7 See Andrew Jenson, *The Historical Record* (Salt Lake City: Jenson, 1887), 6:233–34.

p. 2). Other reasons are possible for these postmartyrdom sealings.

Wives Included on Inadequate Evidence

In the following cases, *In Sacred Loneliness* depends too heavily on some secondary compilations. The author is generally discriminating; for instance, he claims that his eight "possible wives" are "supported by limited, problematic, or contradictory evidence, sometimes only one attestation in a late source" (p. 2). The root of the problem here is the criterion of "only one." Compton does not classify a woman as a wife of Joseph if she appears on only one of the above numbered lists, but he may do so if she appears on more than one. However, assembling several flawed diamonds does not produce a perfect stone. The appearance of a woman on more than one list should be verified by early records, by the woman herself, or at least by someone who had personal knowledge. This more careful standard results in a consistent method, and adequate validation is lacking in the case of the following four women.

Lucinda Morgan Harris. Compton's claim that Lucinda was sealed to Joseph Smith is not based on impressive evidence. Compton says that Jenson furnishes a "sympathetic attestation," though Jenson "gives no date for the marriage and his source is not specified" (p. 43). Compton then adds weak support by quoting Sarah Pratt, whose bitter quotations in late years were probably intensified by her interviewer, vitriolic anti-Mormon journalist W. Wyl. This reporter exposed what scandal he could find against Joseph Smith in *Mormon Portraits or the Truth about Mormon Leaders*, published in Salt Lake City in 1886 by the Tribune Press. In Wyl's version, Sarah said that Lucinda Harris admitted she had been Joseph Smith's "mistress" before the Nauvoo period (see p. 650). Compton acknowledges this statement is "antagonistic, third-hand, and late" (p. 650), but claims it carries weight if revised to fit the polygamy format. But such upgrading transforms a smear into a sanitized recollection. Without solid evidence, Lucinda Morgan Harris should not be considered a plural wife of Joseph Smith.

Elizabeth Durfee. Compton overargues the evidence for Mrs. Durfee (see p. 260). Yet his "many" sources boil down to two—her name abbreviated on Bennett's list and an ambiguous statement attributed to Sarah Pratt by the hostile journalist Wyl. The remaining bits of Compton's "strong case" are inferences. As mentioned, no one knows whether Bennett relied on knowledge or rumor, particularly when he provides a name without any supporting information on the supposed marriage. And assuming Sarah Pratt is accurately quoted, we are still in doubt about where she obtained her information. *In Sacred Loneliness* misleads the reader by claiming that "Sarah Pratt mentions that she heard a Mrs. Durfee in Salt Lake City profess to have been one of Smith's wives" (p. 260). But this changes the actual report of Sarah's comments on Mrs. Durfee: "I don't think she was ever sealed to him, though it may have been the case after Joseph's death. . . . At all events, she boasted here in Salt Lake of having been one of Joseph's wives" (p. 701). So the document is not clear on whether Sarah heard Mrs. Durfee's comments firsthand. Since Mrs. Durfee helped the Prophet in contacting prospective wives, her connection with teaching polygamy could easily evolve into an assumption of participation in the practice.

Sarah Cleveland. Compton supplies two reasons for naming Sarah Cleveland as a wife of Joseph Smith (see p. 277). First is her listing by Andrew Jenson without any supporting data—strangely, she appears at the end of his list. Second, Eliza Snow's manuscript affidavit says she was married to the Prophet in the presence of Sarah Cleveland. This suggests to Compton that Sarah was involved with polygamy at that time. However, that is only a guess, since Eliza's marriage to Joseph possibly took place in Mrs. Cleveland's home only because Eliza was living there (see p. 714).

Nancy Maria Winchester. Nancy's chapter is entitled "Outline of a Shadow," which suggests how little is known about a possible sealing to the Prophet. Compton gives two lines of unsupported information (see p. 606). Nancy appears on Jenson's list without additional data, except for an incorrect identification of her father. She is also named by Orson F. Whitney in a group of women Heber C. Kimball later married who had been Joseph Smith's

wives.[8] However, Elder Whitney's list also includes Mary Houston and Sarah Scott, both of whom Compton considers as only "possible wives" (p. 8). Thus the author picks out Nancy Winchester as meeting historical standards but treats Whitney's list as questionable in the case of these other women on that list. Compton claims a difference because Nancy is also named by Jenson, but no one knows where Whitney or Jenson got their information. The *cumulative evidence* argument for such marginal references does not meet historical guidelines: "These two witnesses, taken together, make a good case for Nancy as a plural spouse of Joseph" (p. 606). The logic is lacking—two tanks of ordinary gas do not produce a high-octane mix.

This survey of the above alleged marriages shows that the "solid list" of this book is not solid enough (p. 2). Thus in this review, four women discussed by Compton as wives of Joseph Smith are subtracted for insufficient evidence, which requires adjustment in some conclusions of his book. The table below will aid in the following discussion of categories and several specific marriages.

Status of Women at the Time They Were Sealed to Joseph Smith	#	%
Single with no prior marriage	17	59
Single and widowed	4	14
Married to a husband with good church standing	4	14
Married to a disaffected or non-member husband	4	14

Younger Wives—Two Biographical Corrections

In Sacred Loneliness does not stipulate the age of younger women sealed to Joseph Smith. Its base figure of thirty-three "well documented wives" is divided into three age groups. The youngest group is represented by those twenty and under, the middle group is twenty-one to thirty years of age, and the last

8 See Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Kimball family, 1888; reprint, Stevens & Wallis, 1945, repaginated), 418–19.

compasses women thirty-one and older. However, the youngest group is described as follows: "Eleven (33 percent) were 14 to 20 when they married him" (p. 11). Despite the prior appearance of names and ages, that sentence gives the wrong impression, since age fourteen is a major exception. For reasons given above, we have removed Nancy Winchester from the list of wives. This subtraction means Compton's list will have only one fourteen-year-old girl, Helen Mar Kimball, whom we will discuss shortly. Compton's list has one woman sealed at sixteen, Fanny Alger, but we would revise that age to about eighteen, as discussed below. Compton's tabulation is correct after this: three sealed at seventeen; evidently one at eighteen (Fanny Alger); three sealed at nineteen; and one sealed at twenty (see pp. 4, 6). Several times the book calls Melissa Lott "a teenage wife of the prophet," which is unduly vague (p. 595). Melissa married him three months before her twentieth birthday. In nineteenth-century frontier America, many women married between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. Unlike many teenage mothers of today, these brides were generally trained in what their society knew of homemaking, caring for children, and other domestic responsibilities.

In Sacred Loneliness argues that Fanny Alger was sealed to Joseph Smith at sixteen, but that reasoning is open to question. Compton's analysis of the sources regarding Fanny Alger is generally sound, but he takes Mosiah Hancock (born 1834) as virtually definitive in relating how the Prophet requested permission of Fanny's parents through their relatives, the Hancocks. The family tradition is no doubt correct in general circumstances of Fanny's Kirtland sealing, a term which her parents and brother later used in Utah. But pressing Mosiah's secondhand details for a date of 1833 is asking too much when better evidence suggests a later date. No direct information is currently available about when Joseph and Fanny were married, a fact Compton readily admits (see p. 25). But Benjamin Johnson was a young adult in Kirtland when he heard of Fanny's relationship to the Prophet, and Benjamin's recollections furnish the most reliable chronology available. A relative close to the Prophet told Benjamin that ancient polygamy would be restored. Johnson said this was "in 1835, in Kirtland," and he continued: "There then lived with his family a neighbor's daughter, Fanny Alger, a very nice and

comely young woman about my own age . . . and it was whispered even then that Joseph loved her."[9] Since Fanny moved out of the Smith home soon after the marriage, it evidently took place around 1835, the year when Fanny turned nineteen.

In Sacred Loneliness quotes Johnson on another significant issue but ignores his informed opinion. The book traces Fanny's later marriage and life with Solomon Custer in Indiana, and his obituary reports that a universalist minister delivered his funeral sermon, which, according to Compton, is "the only clue to the family's religion" (p. 41). But a husband's final services may indicate his preference and have no bearing on the wife's convictions. The bare facts of remarriage and a funeral sermon hardly sustain the view that Fanny's later life "involved her rejection of Joseph Smith, plural marriage, and possibly Mormonism" (p. 26). On the other hand, Benjamin Johnson had information that gave him a different understanding. He correctly spoke of Fanny's marriage and life in Indiana and added: "Although she never left the state, she did not turn from the Church nor from her friendship with the Prophet while she lived" (quoted on p. 37).[10] It is important to have the personal testimony of a knowledgeable Kirtland Saint. Johnson said: "Without a doubt in my mind, Fanny Alger was, at Kirtland, the Prophet's first plural wife."[11] This was the first step in applying the doctrine probably revealed during the 1831 revelatory translation of Genesis, as the opening of Doctrine and Covenants 132 suggests.

Though listed as fourteen at the time of her sealing to the Prophet, Helen Mar Kimball was nearly fifteen (see pp. 487, 499). She herself explains that her father took the initiative to arrange the marriage: "Having a great desire to be connected with the Prophet Joseph, he offered me to him; this I afterwards learned from the Prophet's own mouth" (quoted on p. 498). Helen was approaching eligibility, and a vital social life was opening up with possible proposals. Since some young women married at sixteen,

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9 Benjamin F. Johnson to George S. Gibbs, 1903, in E. Dale LeBaron, *Benjamin Franklin Johnson, Friend to the Prophets* (Provo, Utah: Grandin Book, 1997), 225. Quotations in this review are modernized in punctuation and spelling.

10 Ibid., 225–26.

11 Ibid., 227.

Heber C. Kimball and the Prophet evidently arranged an early marriage to insure the desired personal and family relationships. However, Helen continued to live with her parents. Because Helen's circumstances were exceptional, there is every reason not to assume a sexual dimension in her sealing to Joseph Smith. Compton considers the evidence on this question "ambiguous" (p. 14), but writes as though it is likely that Helen's sealing to Joseph Smith included marital relations: "Helen Mar Kimball, a non-polyandrous wife, found her marriage to mean much more, on an earthly plane, than she had expected. . . . In Nauvoo-period theological terminology, there was some ambiguity in the terms 'sealing' and 'marriage,' and it is possible that some men and women did not grasp that 'sealing' also meant 'marriage' and therefore sexual relations" (p. 22). But such an inevitable connection between sealing and sexual relations is not at all proved—and Helen provides the following details of what was unexplained to her.

In Sacred Loneliness walks the reader through Helen's crisis of accepting plural marriage, including the adjustment afterward. The question is adjusting to what? By concentrating mainly on Helen's feelings of shock at a new way of life, Compton leaves it open to assume this was a sexual adjustment (see pp. 498–99), although he does not clearly specify that in the Helen Mar Kimball chapter. There all we learn is that "she initially had a different perception of the meaning of the marriage than the reality turned out to be" (p. 501). This conclusion rests on Helen's autobiography for her descendants, which was specific about being "Bar'd out from social scenes by this thy destiny" (p. 500). Her cross was not a close relationship with Joseph Smith, but the elimination of laughing and dancing with her peers, who now accepted her with reservations. When Helen's explicit complaint is understood, the second line of her poem on the sealing becomes clearer: "The step I now am taking's for eternity alone" (quoted on p. 499). Helen clearly understood nothing would change for the present—she was sure she would be free for social life, and "no one need be the wiser" about the sealing (quoted on p. 499). She, her parents, and the Prophet counseled together before the marriage, and the parties to prospective Nauvoo marriages had far more practical sense than Compton accords them (see p. 22). If a

sexual relationship was expected, she would know that in advance. "Eternity alone" meant her prior understanding that her status would not be altered, either in social or sexual dimensions. Thus historian Stanley B. Kimball interpreted the phrase to mean that the marriage was "unconsummated."[12]

Sexual Relations and Polyandry

The above table shows that about one-fourth of Joseph's wives were married women, which Mormon historians have characterized as "polyandry" in a general sense. *In Sacred Loneliness*, however, uses the term specifically for a woman's marriage to more than one husband, with full physical intimacy. This is also the connotation of the standard definition: "having more than one husband or male mate at one time."[13] However, polyandry applies to Joseph Smith in a more limited sense, for with one exception, there is no reliable information on sexual relations after his being sealed to a married woman. In these cases, we simply know that an eternal marriage to Joseph was performed with the continuation of the temporal marriage to an existing husband. By 1846, most of these husbands accepted the eternal sealing to the Prophet. Compton overinterprets the phrase *time and eternity,* which some married women said was used in their sealings to Joseph Smith. The sealings established an eternal relationship with the Prophet from that point, but *time* did not necessarily imply present marital relations with two men. A verbal argument to that effect lacks substance. Polyandry should indicate a category of Joseph's sealings to some married women, without implying simultaneous sexual partners.

In the discussion of Compton's prologue, we subtracted four wives for lack of documentation. Three of these were married women, which means that Joseph Smith was sealed to eight women with living husbands. *In Sacred Loneliness* debunks the idea that these marriages came about because husbands did not believe or were unworthy of a celestial sealing (see p. 16). But this reflects some tendency of the book toward either-or thinking, since

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12 Stanley B. Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 98.

13 *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary,* 10th ed., s.v. "polyandry."

individualized reasons for plurality probably operate in these married cases. These include two nonmember husbands, plus Presendia Huntington's husband, Norman Buell, whose bitterness against the church is evident, even in Compton's somewhat apologetic treatment. The author is confident that Windsor Lyon, husband of Sylvia Sessions, was in full fellowship at the time of her sealing to the Prophet in early 1842, but his evidence that Lyon was friendly to the Prophet does not establish faith and activity. Windsor was excommunicated in late 1842 and rebaptized in early 1846. His behavior and attitude causing excommunication no doubt preceded the official action. Many "unequally yoked" Mormon women have faith in an eternal relationship with a worthy husband, and several of the Prophet's sealings to married women fit that situation.

That leaves four cases in which the Prophet married women whose husbands were faithful Mormons and remained so afterward. These marriages have been explained by various doctrinal speculations, which Compton surveys. Was there a spiritual basis for Joseph Smith's selection of certain married women? That issue is virtually lost in the historical probings of this long study, though Compton touches on religious roots of polygamy in quoting the Prophet's conversations with Mary Elizabeth Lightner: "Joseph said I was his before I came here" (quoted on pp. 19, 212). The published revelation on plural marriage records that certain women "have been given unto my servant Joseph" (D&C 132:52). After some chapters, readers may wonder, "Did God inspire or lead Joseph to be sealed to women who were already married?" The most direct response is "Yes." As believing Latter-day Saints and research historians, we interpret Joseph Smith's involvement with the introduction of plural (celestial) marriage as being firmly grounded in both moral and inspired eternal principles. This conclusion is based on a consistent picture in early documents, including the faithful lives and personal revelations of the first participants, and their remarkable perseverance in overcoming obstacles to accepting and living this celestial principle of marriage.

What is left to our imaginations, and Compton's speculations, is the nature of these "polyandrous" marriages. Were these unions simply dynastic sealings—the practice of sealing women to

certain senior priesthood leaders for eternity only, with little or no temporal relationship—or were they relationships including intimacy and offspring? Compton points to about a half-dozen marriages to single women where physical intimacy is documented. But arguing parallels does not establish such relationships. There is a logical chasm between single and married sealings, and, for the latter, there is no responsible report of sexual intercourse except for Sylvia Sessions Lyon. In 1915, her daughter, Josephine Lyon Fisher, signed a statement that in 1882 Sylvia "told me that I was the daughter of the Prophet Joseph Smith, she having been sealed to the Prophet at the time that her husband Mr. Lyon was out of fellowship with the Church" (quoted on p. 183). The Fisher document is somewhat supported by Angus Cannon's recollection of hearing that Patty Sessions said the Prophet fathered Sylvia's child (see p. 637). Compton acknowledges Sylvia may have meant that her 1844 child was conceived during Windsor's four years out of the church, from 1842 to 1846 (see p. 183). Though he thinks it "unlikely" that Sylvia denied her husband cohabitation during this period (p. 183), that is a serious possibility. This is implied in the family tradition of her daughter some three decades later.

Reliable evidence indicates that Joseph Smith fathered some children through his plural marriages with single women, but that evidence does not necessarily support intimacy with polyandrous wives. Compton's own discussion of "Sexuality in Joseph Smith's Plural Marriages" (pp. 12–15) is muddled. He generalizes without specifying which category (single, widowed, divorced, separated, married) of plural wives supposedly took part in this most private aspect of plural marriage. For example, Compton concludes this discussion: "Though it is possible that Joseph had some marriages in which there were no sexual relations, there is no explicit or convincing evidence for this. . . . And in a significant number of marriages, there is evidence for sexual relations" (p. 15). Which marriages? Compton does not specify or quantify or document his generalized conclusion that "in a significant number" of these plural marriages Joseph Smith had sexual contact with his partner. If by "significant" Compton implies that a majority of these marriages had what he terms the "sexual dimension," his statement is not supported by the data he presents. But

Compton several times extrapolates with unwarranted confidence, as in the case of Zina Huntington Jacobs: "Nothing specific is known about sexuality in their marriage, though judging from Smith's other marriages, sexuality was probably included" (p. 82). This is an example of many questionable conclusions in this book that are overly broad, nonspecific, or undocumented.

Emma's Knowledge of Joseph's Marriages

The Prophet's confidential letter to the Whitneys in August 1842 has been conveniently available since Dean Jessee published a photocopy and transcription in 1984.[14] The Prophet had been sealed to their daughter a month before, and he asked for a secret meeting "to get the fulness of my blessings sealed upon our heads, etc." (quoted on p. 350). Here Compton accurately observes: "This is not just a meeting of husband and plural wife; it is a meeting with Sarah's family, with a religious aspect" (p. 350). In the letter, Joseph Smith asked the Whitneys to be careful to visit him in exile only if they determined Emma was not coming that night: "But when she is not here, there is the most perfect safety" (quoted on p. 350). Obviously the Prophet sought the right atmosphere for the performance of sacred ceremonies. But as far as keeping the visit secret, Compton jumps to a conclusion: "Clearly, Emma does not know of the marriage to Sarah Ann, so Joseph must meet Sarah only when there is no risk of his first wife finding out" (p. 350). Compton is not the first in drawing this conclusion that ignores other possibilities. Emma was frequently angry when Joseph had contact with wives she knew about. This August 1842 letter simply shows that Joseph sought to avoid conflict, without giving any definite insight into whether Emma knew of his recent sealing to Sarah Ann.

In a sweeping statement Compton gives his overview on this theme: Emma's "anger was probably aggravated when her husband married without informing her, which he apparently generally did" (p. 388). How do we know this? Since information on Emma's consent is missing for most of Joseph Smith's wives, those making generalizations are guessing. To repeat, Emma's

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14 See *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 539–42.

anger after a sealing may logically arise from disclosure at the outset rather than later discovery. *In Sacred Loneliness* discusses Emma's ambivalent mid-1843 permissions for Joseph to marry the Partridge and Lawrence sisters. And the Prophet's revelation of 12 July 1843 directly addresses the problem, recapitulating his interaction with Emma. It was of course given at the height of her resentment against plural marriage, and the Prophet was sealed to but few wives afterward. Thus the main plural marriage revelation is retrospective, and the Prophet dictated it in a form to communicate to Emma in terms of her own experience: "And let mine handmaid, Emma Smith, receive all those that have been given unto my servant Joseph" (D&C 132:52). "All those" does not suggest that she was aware of only a small number. Though the revelation goes on to mention taking "ten virgins" (D&C 132:62), that is probably a biblical symbol (see Matthew 25:1), not the number of marriages the couple had discussed by July 1843. This revelation closes by explaining the Prophet's obligation to seek Emma's permission, explaining she would not have a veto on God's commands to Joseph, who was required to establish the principle even if she rebelled against it (see D&C 132:64–65). This suggests prior attempts on the part of the Prophet to gain Emma's approval and the requirement that he proceed on occasion without it. From the point of view of divine foreknowledge, Joseph was martyred one year from this revelation. If he had waited indefinitely for Emma's full conversion, plural marriage would not have been instituted during his lifetime.

Since Joseph explained his Kirtland relationship with Fanny Alger to the Missouri High Council, those mid-1830s circumstances were public enough that Emma had necessarily discussed them with her husband.[15] It was not until 1841 that we are aware of another plural wife being sealed to the Prophet, which fact tells us that there was an interim of waiting until—as he explained to Lorenzo Snow and others—he was commanded to proceed or be destroyed. Under this kind of pressure, the Prophet surely sought

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15 See Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 168 (entry of 12 April 1838). See 167 for repeated comments of Oliver Cowdery, who named Fanny Alger in his unpublished letter of 21 January 1838 to Warren Cowdery (quoted by *In Sacred Loneliness*, 28).

Emma's consent in taking other wives. According to *In Sacred Loneliness,* "Emma was consistently implacable in her opposition to the 'principle'" (p. 388). It would probably be more accurate to say that she alternately cooperated and rebelled, as Orson Pratt maintained.[16] After the July 1843 crisis that produced Doctrine and Covenants 132, Clayton wrote a journal entry dated 19 October 1843 about a conversation with Joseph Smith, in which he claimed that, in a polygamy and temple-sealing context, Emma "was turned quite friendly and kind."[17] This was a month after Hyrum married Joseph to Melissa Lott in the presence of her parents, and Melissa understood this was done with Emma's permission. In the transcript of Salt Lake City depositions in the 1892 Temple Lot Case, Melissa answered "Yes, sir," when the lawyer asked if Emma gave her consent to Melissa's marriage to Joseph. Asked who told her that Emma had given her consent, Melissa said, "My father and mother." And asked whether they went to Emma for this consent, Melissa answered: "I don't know that they went to her or she came there. I know they were both there at the time with Brother Joseph—father and mother—the whole of them, talking a good many times."[18]

Compton thinks several items of evidence from the Snow family are "impressive"; they report that Emma consented to, or was present at, the marriage of Joseph and Eliza in mid-1842 (see pp. 714–15, 313). Other historical records, including some not mentioned here, indicate Joseph's good faith in trying to persuade Emma that plural marriage was revealed of God, and evidence confirms Emma's consent to a half-dozen wives. This much should make authors more cautious in claiming that the Prophet did not seek or gain Emma's permission in the majority of unknown situations.

Melissa Lott Willes

The Temple Lot Case, just mentioned, was filed by the Reorganized Church in 1891 in an attempt to gain title to the Jackson

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16 See *Journal of Discourses,* 13:194 (1869).

17 George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 122.

18 Temple Lot Case transcript of testimony, LDS Church Archives, 100.

County site Joseph Smith had dedicated in 1831. One legal strategy was trying to prove the Reorganization was the successor church, continuing those doctrines taught by Joseph Smith, though that quest was illogical, partly because the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was not a party to the suit. Defendants were the Independence group known as the Church of Christ, who took formal testimony from a number of early Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City. Three wives of Joseph Smith were called as witnesses, but Melissa Lott's examination is not well handled by Compton's book, which claims that "Melissa recalled the wedding vow: 'You both mutually agree to be each other's companion, husband and wife, observing the legal rights belonging to this condition; that is, keeping yourselves wholly for each other, and from all others, during your lives'" (pp. 597–98). *In Sacred Loneliness* fails to note that these words were put in Melissa's mouth on cross-examination and are taken from the 1835 article on marriage that continued to be published in the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants.

The problem here arises from two different versions of trial testimony—the full transcripts plus a voluminous but ragged synopsis subtitled *Complainant's Abstract of Pleading and Evidence,* which inaccurately suggests that Melissa volunteered the above words as her marriage ceremony to Joseph.[19] But the opposite is true in the full transcript, carbon copies of which are in the LDS Church Archives. Under aggressive interrogation, Melissa insisted a half-dozen times that she could not remember the ceremony, other than that it was "for time and all eternity." Then the RLDS lawyer sought to gain her admission that her Nauvoo ceremony was identical to that first published in the Kirtland Doctrine and Covenants. Her answer was, "To the best of my recollection, I don't think it was." Persisting, he then read the above words that were still in the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants and obtained her weary response, "That is as I understand it, as nearly as I can remember." But the witness obviously did not remember, as she had avowed repeatedly. When the RLDS attorney pressed the point that the 1835 language would restrict Joseph from marital

19 See *The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Complainant, vs. The Church of Christ at Independence, Missouri* (Lamoni, Iowa: Herald Publishing House, 1893), 314.

relations with Emma, Melissa answered: "I don't think that he made any particular promise of that kind." In spite of courtroom manipulation, Melissa reiterated that she did not remember the Nauvoo ceremony beyond its promise of time and eternity.

In 1885 Joseph III visited Melissa's home in Lehi, Utah, to discuss her marriage to his father. *In Sacred Loneliness* shows how differently both parties later reported this conversation, (see pp. 594–95), but the book misses Melissa's other important recollections about this conversation and her marriage. At the end of her testimony in the legal case, the RLDS attorney asked if she did not tell Joseph III that she was sealed to his father, but that the marriage was unconsummated. Her quick reaction: "I didn't tell him anything of the kind. I told him the same as I have answered you here today."[20] But what was said in court on that subject was edited out of the printed *Complainant's Abstract*. The full testimony, partially quoted in a Compton footnote, maintains that she cohabited with Joseph Smith "as his wife" in Room 1 of the Mansion House (p. 765), information relevant to judging whether Emma knew of this marriage. Yet *In Sacred Loneliness* gathers data on sexual relationships and should have added Melissa's recorded testimony in the full transcript . She was asked whether she roomed with Joseph Smith at the Mansion House "more than once." "Yes sir, and more than twice." She was asked whether she roomed with Joseph Smith elsewhere "as his wife." Referring to the farm outside of Nauvoo, she answered, "At my father's house." These are important, firsthand responses, contradicting Joseph III's claim that Melissa answered "no" to his question about his father (see p. 595): "Did you ever live with him as his wife anywhere?" Her 1892 replies were sworn testimony taken down by a court stenographer.

The Partridge and Lawrence Sisters

Emma was at the peak of resentment against plural marriage in July and August of 1843, demanding about this time that Emily and Eliza Partridge leave the Mansion House, though she had earlier given permission for their marriages. From Emma's view-

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20 Temple Lot Case transcript of testimony, 108, also *Complainant's Abstract*, 316.

point, there were several problems, including the proximity of young wives in the family residence that doubled as a hotel. Relying on Emily's candid memoirs, Compton tells how the Partridge sisters were evicted and resettled elsewhere in Nauvoo. And as he suggests, the Clayton journal of 16 August indicates that Emma threatened divorce, which forced Joseph to agree to these sisters leaving the household (see p. 411). *In Sacred Loneliness* gives an ambiguous picture of what this meant to the Prophet, first saying that "Joseph seems to have agreed to separate from his two young wives" (p. 410). This fits Emily's understanding, if it means they were to end a marriage for time in favor of one for eternity. She says that Emma "wanted us immediately divorced . . . but we thought different. We looked upon the covenants we had made as sacred."[21] Emily's statements are informative and introspective, and she always treated her sealing to Joseph Smith as eternally binding (see p. 733). However, *In Sacred Loneliness* further concludes that Joseph "allowed the marriages to lapse" (p. 432). The author explains that Joseph shook hands with the sisters, granting that "the marriage is over" (p. 411). That statement, however, is doctrinally incorrect because nothing says the priesthood sealing was canceled.

The author reasons from Emily's "Autobiography," which tells how Emma confronted Joseph and these sisters: "She insisted that we should promise to break our covenants, that we had made before God. Joseph asked her if we made her the promises she required, if she would cease to trouble us, and not persist in our marrying some one else. She made the promise. Joseph came to us and shook hands with us, and the understanding was that all was ended between us" (quoted on p. 410). So the earthly marriage was suspended, but nothing was said or done to terminate the eternal sealing that had also taken place. Joseph was apparently protecting that—otherwise why would he ask Emma not to insist on the sisters "marrying some one else."

Joseph's intention in these conflicts is given in the 16 August 1843 Clayton journal entry, quoted and paraphrased by Compton (see pp. 411, 732), as the secretary reported the Prophet's frank

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21 E. D. Young, "Incidents of the Life of a Mormon Girl," typescript in LDS Church Archives, 54.

conversation. Since Emma was unyielding, "he had to tell her he would relinquish all for her sake. She said she would give him E[mily] and E[liza] P[artridge], but he knew if he took them she would pitch on him and obtain a divorce and leave him. He, however, told me he should not relinquish anything."[22] One could read this as ambivalence on the part of Joseph Smith, but he was a highly decisive person. He sincerely negotiated to keep Emma, for after her fierce rejection of the polygamy revelation of 12 July 1843, Clayton tells how they spent the next morning in expressing their feelings and working out "an agreement they had mutually entered into." In fact, Joseph showed his willingness to "relinquish all" for Emma, including his earthly relationship with the Partridge sisters. But as just discussed, he also asked Emma not to insist that they marry someone else. This furnishes the clue to consistency in the 16 August Clayton journal entry, ending with his intention, "he should not relinquish anything." This would be true for the life to come, since the sealings for eternity were still in force.

The Lawrence sisters continued to live in the Mansion House after the Partridge sisters moved to other Nauvoo homes. *In Sacred Loneliness* mentions several reliable documents indicating that Emma approved and was present when Maria and Sarah Lawrence were sealed to Joseph Smith (see pp. 743–44). So the author's tentative conclusion is puzzling: "It is entirely possible that she gave her permission for these marriages, as Emily asserts" (p. 475). The Lawrence family was converted in Canada and moved to Illinois before the father died, after which time Joseph Smith was appointed guardian of the children who had not reached legal majority. The Prophet managed the whole estate under court supervision. Ex-Mormon William Law gave exaggerated figures in later accusing Joseph Smith of mismanagement. However, author Compton recognizes that Gordon Madsen discovered new documents (see p. 475) and summarizes part of Madsen's 1996 Mormon History Association paper (see pp. 742–43). Madsen, a senior attorney and meticulous historian, gave expert interpretations on the meaning of the entries preserved in

22 Richard L. Anderson's notes from Clayton journal, also with slight modification in George Smith, ed., 117.

the Illinois probate records and in existing Joseph Smith account books. Compton accepts these new insights in his notes, but straddles the fence by using William Law's incorrect version in the chapter that weaves the Lawrence estate in and out of the narrative.

In Sacred Loneliness quotes Law's interview on the subject, as printed in 1887 in the Salt Lake *Daily Tribune* (see pp. 742–43). Compton says the interview "contains some factual errors," undervaluing Madsen's paper, which showed that most of what Law said about the estate itself was incorrect. Law claimed that its assets were worth $8,000, and that Joseph charged $3,000 for boarding Maria and Sarah Lawrence (quoted on pp. 742–43). Compton correctly rounds off the actual inventory of assets, as recovered by Madsen in court records: "The inheritance was $3,831.54 . . . in a farm in Lima ($1,000) and promissory notes ($3,000)" (p. 743). However, Compton publicizes Law's story that in 1845 Joseph's estate "still owed the young women $5,000" (p. 478). Compton adds: "While this is too large a figure, there was apparently money due them" (p. 478). However, Madsen's paper quoted the will, under which Maria and Sarah would share equal parts of the estate with several siblings, but the distribution was not due during the life of their widowed mother, who was entitled to her share of annual interest on the undivided assets. Compton does not report other important findings of Madsen. Between 1841 and early 1844, Joseph Smith charged nothing for boarding Maria and Sarah, nor did he bill the estate for management fees. Furthermore, in mid-1843, the probate court approved his accounts, including annual interest payments to the widow, as required by the will. Surprisingly, Compton seems to rely somewhat on Law's claim of dishonesty: "Law blamed both Joseph and Emma for fraudulently taking possession of the Lawrence estate, but perhaps Emma was less to blame. Joseph may have already borrowed the funds while alive, and Emma may not have had the money to pay back after his death" (p. 478). However, at Joseph's death, perhaps a third of the Lawrence assets were not in cash, but in unpaid accounts receivable. Gordon Madsen's overall point was that the Prophet met his legal responsibilities in being entrusted with the Lawrence assets. There is no hint of fraud.

Problems in LDS Historical Background

Naturalistic Tendencies

In Sacred Loneliness occasionally suggests environmental influences, once in connection with the Prophet's private view that at least some men and women made premortal covenants with each other. In this context, the book notes some similarities in Swedenborg's views and in a vision of upstate New Yorker Erasmus Stone, who claimed to see male and female spirits seeking their counterparts (see pp. 20, 640). Because this doctrine of kindred spirits appears in the Finger Lakes region, Compton comes close to saying that Joseph Smith borrowed it there: "Perhaps the Mormon doctrine of the pre-existence derived in part from this influence" (p. 212). Yet when his sources are examined on this point, Erasmus Stone turns up near Syracuse, some 60 miles east of Joseph Smith's Palmyra, and that minister is involved in a local movement in the mid-1830s, some years after the Prophet left the area. Many conservative Mormon historians tire of such shadow-chasing in much of Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View.* When one cannot make direct connections, it is too easy to argue cultural borrowing. However, Compton's western New York parallel is taken from a handful of Methodist perfectionists in a restricted neighborhood, and they used "spiritual wife" for the unique soul companion they sought for a more congenial marriage.[23] Polygamy or polyandry was not their program, contrary to Compton's indications. Without noting such significant differences, he writes that the concept of "spiritual wives" was "part of Joseph Smith's *Zeitgeist*" (p. 21). But even if that intellectual apparition hovers a couple of counties away, we need particular evidence from Joseph Smith before assuming it crossed his threshold.

As far as faith in spiritual power is concerned, *In Sacred Loneliness* displays a spectrum, ranging from sympathetic description to psychological explanations and occasional veiled irony. After Helen Mar Kimball had married Horace Whitney, she reached the valley devastated in body and spirit, having lost her baby in a dif-

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23 William H. Dixon, *Spiritual Wives* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1868), 2:8–19, 80–88.

ficult childbirth. Her biographer gets high marks for letting her tell of near-death and miraculous recovery. Yet his narrative is cushioned by the reminder that "in the Kimball family sickness was often interpreted as demonic attack" (pp. 509–10), as though natural and supernatural cannot coexist. Believers in "signs following" (Mark 16:17–18) will be impressed by Helen's incredible faith to gain the victory over evil spirits in a miraculous healing. But the reader, it seems, needs a tour guide: "Acceptance of the demands and ideology of her community allowed Helen to begin immediate convalescence" (p. 511).

Discovering Danites

The discussion of thirty-three women involves as well a discussion of the men in their families, including participation of many in the Mormon resistance in Missouri. Several are listed as Danites, "like most Mormon men" (p. 259). The accuracy of that statement depends on definition. The best early survey of that organization came from ex-Mormon John Corrill, who attended some of their meetings and in 1839 described their loose relationship with the Missouri church during the previous year. He and others give specifics on the Danites as a group of loyalists led by Sampson Avard with secret oaths and military readiness to defend the church against further persecution. They were organized in June 1838, and Corrill concludes: "This society increased, as near as I could learn, to the number of three hundred."[24] *In Sacred Loneliness* relies on Michael Quinn's larger figure of about a thousand Danites, based on the questionable affidavit of otherwise unknown John N. Sapp, who claims he is a former Mormon and sworn Danite. But this number exceeds the total force the Mormons fielded at the final Far West siege. Taking Corrill's informed figure, Missouri specialist Alex Baugh shows that "the majority of Mormon men" were not initiated into the secret organization.[25] For instance, Brigham's brother, Lorenzo D. Young attended some Danite meetings and finally refused to take the oath of

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24 John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints* (St. Louis: Author, 1839), 32.

25 See Alexander L. Baugh, "A Call to Arms: The 1838 Mormon Defense of Northern Missouri" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1996), 96–97.

membership.[26] On the other hand, *Danite* has a broader meaning, for the name finally evolved as a synonym for any Mormon soldier at the close of Missouri hostilities. Jessee and Whittaker highlighted the Albert P. Rockwood journal entry a week before Far West was occupied—units openly drilling were described as both "armies of Israel" and "Danites."[27] *In Sacred Loneliness* consistently uses the narrower, "oath-bound" definition, however, and describes Vinson Knight: "According to some sources, he was associated with the Mormon para-military forces, the Danites, and as a bishop received Danite plunder at 'Diahmon' which he divided among church members" (p. 367). The notes give court testimony of three eyewitnesses, who simply say Mormon squads brought in confiscated property to the bishop's storehouse controlled by Knight. But none of them say Knight was a Danite, even though Quinn uses the same sources to place him on his list of known Danites.[28] However, this is only the loose association that Quinn uses regularly in his historical work. It is disappointing to see Compton follow this method.

Authority of the Twelve in 1843–44

The Twelve returned from England in the summer of 1841 to be the second administrative body in the church, not limited to managing the mission fields. The official *History of the Church* gives the Prophet's words at the 16 August 1841 conference just as they were published afterward in the church newspaper, the *Times and Seasons:* "The time had come when the Twelve should be called upon to stand in their place next to the First Presidency,

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26 See Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Clarifications of Boggs' 'Order' and Joseph Smith's Constitutionalism," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History, Missouri*, ed. Arnold K. Garr and Clark V. Johnson (Provo, Utah: BYU Department of Church History and Doctrine, 1994), 67–68; cf. Baugh, 228 n. 31.

27 Dean C. Jessee and David J. Whittaker, "The Last Months of Mormonism in Missouri: The Albert Perry Rockwood Journal," *BYU Studies* 28/1 (1988): 14, 23.

28 See D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 482; compare 102–3.

and attend to . . . the business of the Church at the stakes."[29] *In Sacred Loneliness* makes some comments at odds with this ongoing Nauvoo reality. William Marks was a Nauvoo stake president when the pretemple endowment group held one of their many meetings on 1 October 1843 and his wife was among some women then endowed.[30] Compton comments: "It should be remembered that local stake leaders had more central authority than apostles at this time, which may explain why the apostles' wives were not found in this group" (p. 254). Besides the administrative inaccuracy, it should be noted that Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Willard Richards were with the First Presidency and President Marks when the original endowments were given the year before.[31] And Hyrum Smith, Brigham, and Willard were sealed to their wives the day after the Prophet was sealed to Emma the previous spring.[32] William Marks was given recognition in the pretemple ordinances, but his counselors were excluded, and the importance of the Twelve is apparent, even though endowments of their wives were at intervals, possibly as a matter of convenience in the gradual initiation of small groups.

In Sacred Loneliness further comments on the Twelve and stake authorities in connection with the Nauvoo high council meeting of 30 November 1844. On that date Josiah Ells, Hannah Ells's brother, was disfellowshipped for supporting Sidney Rigdon's claim to the presidency of the church. Referring to the presence and influence of John Taylor and Orson Hyde, the book comments: "It was a high council session and yet the apostles—technically a traveling high council—were present without

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29 *History of the Church*, 4:403. See Ronald K. Esplin's outline of the practical duties of the Twelve at Nauvoo following this announcement: "Joseph, Brigham and the Twelve: A Succession of Continuity," *BYU Studies* 21/3 (1981): 310–12.

30 See this date in *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, ed. Scott H. Faulring (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 416–17.

31 See Willard Richard's entry of 4 May 1842, as scribe of the Prophet's journal, in *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 2:380. *History of the Church*, 5:1–2, has an expanded entry explaining the event.

32 See the Prophet's journal as kept by Willard Richards, 28–29 May 1843, in Faulring, *An American Prophet's Record*, 381.

formal authority to be there. . . . The apostles were on the ascendent in the church, and the high council, even of the central stake, would gradually become less important" (pp. 539–40). As just indicated, the Twelve assisted the First Presidency in all affairs after mid-1841, and by the time of the martyrdom, the Nauvoo high council did little in church administration, being mainly a judicial body. As far as the authority of apostles to participate in high council meetings is concerned, the precedent was set in Kirtland and Missouri that Joseph Smith and other presidency members attended the high council at will and participated in decisions. Even in Nauvoo, where there was a continuous stake presidency, Hyrum Smith regularly attended and led out in high council sessions. On the afternoon of 8 August 1844, Brigham Young defined the authority of the Twelve, which was then accepted by an overwhelming majority of the assembled conference: "Do the Saints want the Twelve to stand as the head, the First Presidency of the Church and at the head of this kingdom in all the world?"[33] Hyde and Taylor were well within their presiding responsibilities to participate with the high council in general succession issues in Nauvoo. In fact, the most important item before the 30 November meeting was the influence former stake president Marks might have on the whole church by not supporting the Twelve, which differences were temporarily resolved in the council dialogue with him. The executive and financial direction of the Twelve was vigorous immediately after church approval in early August 1844 and by no means developed gradually, as claimed in the above comments.

The Fate of the Plural Wives of Joseph Smith

Some themes of Todd Compton's book are sensationalized on the dust jacket. Eliza Snow and others would hardly accept the characterization that Joseph's wives had to "forfeit their dreams of meeting and falling in love with a man of their choice." The inside front cover adds maltreatment to catastrophe, as we learn of the Prophet's wives after the martyrdom: "Most were claimed by

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33 Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 2:439; compare the very similar wording in the minutes appearing in *History of the Church,* 7:240.

the twelve apostles, who fathered their children but proved unreliable as husbands, resulting in more than one divorce." Here "one size fits all." That simplistic explanation cuts through a complex saga involving multiple personalities and circumstances. In evaluating this cover comment, we find that fifteen of Joseph's twenty-nine proved wives were later sealed to apostles. This figure of about 50% hardly conforms to the jacket description of "most wives." Of this number, a few were sealed to apostles in Nauvoo but disregarded the relationship (e.g., Sylvia Sessions) or did not leave Nauvoo when sent for (e.g., Agnes Smith). But almost all the remaining living wives were supported in coming west, and were taken care of for life, unless they chose to live with relatives (e.g., Rhoda Richards, and Martha McBride part of the time) or with a husband for time (e.g., Mary Elizabeth Lightner). Eliza Partridge divorced Amasa Lyman because of his apostasy and excommunication. In retrospect, Brigham Young gets top marks for consistent support of Louisa Beaman, Zina Huntington, and Eliza Snow, and Heber Kimball the same for Sarah Ann Whitney, Lucy Walker, and Presendia Huntington, who often moved but was settled to her satisfaction. Concerning Sarah Lawrence, Heber supported her until she decided to leave.

The author influenced the tone of the dust jacket, since he claims his negative interpretation of Emily Partridge is the norm. She is "a classic example of the central pattern examined in this book" (p. 432). Yet mood is one of her problems, which Compton recognizes in her chapter and in other insightful material on the trials of pioneer women in fighting depression. In this regard, Emily is not the norm but the extreme, overwhelmed with discouragement one day and afterward relieved that she can cope. But it would take a second book on Brigham's wives to determine whether data will sustain the author's charge concerning Emily: "Brigham evidently viewed her as less than his own eternal wives and demanded that she support herself" (p. 432). But "evidently" here betrays selective evidence. At times Emily did not ask and then blamed Brigham for not being aware of her needs. Instead of showing neglect, Compton's material exposes the innate stresses in the relationship of the pragmatic pioneer and the sensitive idealist. Brigham furnished major support when Emily lived in his homes, and he later deeded her a house. *In Sacred*

Loneliness prefers to keep Emily's complaints in the record and claim she idealized the past in commending Brigham Young. However, intelligent Emily should be the best judge of that total relationship: "I believe President Young has done his whole duty towards Joseph Smith's family. They have sometimes felt that their lot was hard, but no blame or censure rests upon him" (quoted on p. 423).

Those members of the Twelve who married Joseph Smith's widows were partially motivated by love and loyalty to their leader. Independent Lucy Walker gave her understanding of Heber C. Kimball's commitment: "The contract on the part of Mr. Kimball was that he would take care of me during my lifetime" (quoted on p. 467). Compton pictures Heber's plural wives as living together in the early pioneering period, and afterward set up in their own households (see p. 468). Compton also includes Lucy Walker's evaluation of Kimball as "a noble, whole-souled son of God . . . as capable of loving more than one woman as God himself is capable of loving all his creations" (quoted on p. 467). Lucy said that in Heber's last conversation with her, he asked: "What can you tell Joseph when you meet him? Cannot you say that I have been kind to you as it was possible to be under the circumstances?" (quoted on p. 457).

Peripheral Comments on the Church

In Sacred Loneliness relates the conversion of Vinson Knight, first husband of Martha McBride, and quotes an 1835 letter testifying that the foundation of traditional religion is an "abomination" before God. Compton's words follow: "For early Mormons, who were fleeing theological and ecclesiastical pluralism, there was no room for more than one true church in the pre-millennial latter days" (p. 366). In context, this is an example of "the judgmental, tactless fervor of the new convert" (p. 366). Though Compton makes an important point on tolerance, this sentence understates the restoration message, since church periodicals and missionary journals of the Joseph Smith period use similar descriptions. The author seems troubled by the concept of an organization with exclusive divine authority—early members accepted polygamy because they accepted "practically infallible,

authoritative prophets, especially Joseph Smith. This was the reason why missionaries could teach that only Latter-day Saint baptism was recognized by God" (p. 456). Is this the author's own retreat to "theological and ecclesiastical pluralism"? As far as belief in "one true church" today, the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants and the Prophet's first vision (see JS—H 1:18–20) are still basics.

In Sacred Loneliness at times pontificates from "our late-twentieth-century monogamous and feminist perspectives" (pp. 455–56). We are told that "the church has become increasingly less tolerant of women's independent voices," that "alternative voice" periodicals and organizations are "generally viewed with suspicion, if not hostility, by members of the exclusively male Mormon hierarchy" (p. 706). We fail to see the relevance of such opinions in a study of Joseph Smith and his plural wives. If we need to debate that issue, the fact is the church is cautious about *all* alternative voices, not only female alternative voices. The Mormon women's movement in the nineteenth century was doctrinally in harmony with church leaders, as are most Mormon women today.

Conclusion

This large book of biographies of thirty-three women leaves a gap in meaning and interpretation, with about twenty-three pages of introductory explanation and six hundred pages of information and speculation about these individuals. Readers should be forewarned that *In Sacred Loneliness* avoids a detailed discussion of the deeply religious and moral principles undergirding the implementation of Mormon plural marriage. Compton's presentation offers little that could be considered faithful or sympathetic understanding of the doctrinal foundations of the practice. The book's negativism might be balanced by reading the scholarly article "Plural Marriage" in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism.* The major flaw in Todd Compton's work is the unjustified theorizing on what he calls "polyandry," in practice using it in the traditional definition of a woman with full relations with multiple husbands. As the table and discussion above show, Joseph was sealed to twenty-one women who were unmarried or widowed.

Nearly all indications of sexual relations pertain to these marriages. The table and discussion also show that Joseph was sealed to eight women with an existing marriage. In one marriage, that of Sylvia Sessions Lyon, there was a pregnancy, which, according to family tradition, Sylvia related to the time when her husband "was out of fellowship with the Church" (p. 183). As stated in the above discussion on polyandry, even this is not shown to be a concurrent sexual relationship with two husbands. For the remaining seven sealings of Joseph to married women, there is no reliable evidence that these involved sexual relationships. With one known exception, we know only that the ceremony gave these married women the right to be joined to Joseph Smith in the next world. Sources simply do not show a "marital triangulation" in these cases.

In Sacred Loneliness is inconsistent in the standards of judgment applied to polyandry. For woman after woman in this book, the following statement or its equivalent is made: "Absolutely nothing is known of this marriage after the ceremony" (p. 465, regarding Lucy Walker). Good history is characterized by careful interpretation of reliable documents, together with disclosing what cannot be determined. But Compton reverses these responsible methods in discussing sexuality, particularly in regard to the eight sealings to women with living husbands. He begins by probing the relatively small number of statements on physical relations in all marriages. These add up to first-, second-, and thirdhand statements about some eight women, about a fourth of the Prophet's polygamous wives (see pp. 12–13). This uneven mixture is then characterized as "a great deal of evidence that Joseph Smith had sexual relations with his wives" (p. 13). That judgment is next intensified without further information: "In conclusion, though it is possible that Joseph had some marriages in which there were no sexual relations, there is no explicit or convincing evidence for this (except, perhaps, in the cases of the older wives, judging from later Mormon polygamy)" (p. 15). Stripped of verbiage, this deduction moves in three steps: (1) About 28 percent of Joseph's marriages had full physical dimensions; (2) Evidence for the part may be taken for the whole; (3) Therefore, sexual relations characterized most of his marriages. However, the middle span of this

bridge badly sags. *In Sacred Loneliness* does not have a factual basis for its conclusions regarding polyandry.

An undercurrent swirls through Compton's study: dissatisfaction with Joseph Smith's plural marriage revelation. Church leaders and plural wives were "given an impossible task" that they could not avoid because both groups "accepted him as an infallible prophet" (p. 456; compare pp. 22–23, 296). Since this overstated theology permeates the book, it is useful to glance at both sides of the coin as explained by the Prophet in a near-final discourse: "I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught."[34] Joseph bluntly told converts arriving at Nauvoo that he "was but a man," and they could not expect perfection from him.[35] This lack of public intimidation suggests private coercion was not the Prophet's style, though Compton often sees this otherwise. Since Joseph told Emily Partridge the Lord had given her to him, "it was sacrilegious to doubt. It was the woman's duty to comply with the fact that she was already Joseph's possession" (p. 407). But this comment illustrates how sources can be overshadowed by the historical interpreter, who acknowledges that the Prophet was patient while Emily learned and adjusted. She is quoted: "[In] those few months I received a testimony of the words that Joseph would have said to me and their nature before they were told me, and being convinced I received them readily" (quoted on p. 407). Indeed, Compton observes that Emily was "like many of Joseph's wives" in receiving "a conversion to the principle" (p. 407). It was not the Prophet's supposed infallibility, but personal revelation through promptings and visions that induced the men and women around the Prophet to accept plural marriage. Many of their spiritual verifications are quoted by the author, whose industry and honesty are admirable in liberally presenting the words of these early Saints.

If we had the benefit of Joseph Smith's explanation for each of his plural marriages, we would be in a better position to judge the motives and depth of his relationships but, since we do not, wisdom and prudence dictate that we withhold many judgments until we do. Biographers in this area are tempted to create

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34 *History of the Church,* 6:366.

35 Ibid., 5:181.

historical fiction, which purports to read minds and furnish all answers, but serious history cannot run ahead of responsible source materials. This collection of biographies is not a definitive study of Joseph Smith and plural marriage, or of the Prophet's relationship with his plural wives. Yet, much to his credit, Todd Compton has done an amazing amount of research, and for that effort he should be commended. But in certain aspects of the author's presentation—especially the speculative interpretation of data—we disagree with his rendition and find reason to caution unsuspecting readers.

In closing the chapter on Emily Partridge, the author writes an early epilogue, which rejects Joseph Smith's "polygamy revelations" (p. 456). Though this marriage system was a noble failure, he reasons, Joseph Smith's generation too blindly believed to be liberated: "If nineteenth-century Mormons had concluded that Smith had been wrong in what he taught was the crowning revelation of his life, they would have been left with a very different Mormonism than the faith they followed" (p. 456). Though Compton interprets Joseph Smith's wives with tender concern, it is ironic that this advocate really believes in the futility, even stupidity, of their dedication to the Prophet's calling. That generation could not face "polygamy's impracticality and tragic consequences" (p. 456). Of course, the nineteenth century regularly gave women an unfair measure of hardships. Moreover, Mormon women at midcentury faced displacement and harsh pioneering, endured with difficulty by monogamous or plural wives. Compton unfortunately overemphasizes the "tragic ambiguity" that he found in the lives of the women sealed to Joseph Smith (p. xiii). But we need to be mindful that almost all of them remained believers in the Prophet's mission, and most died as faithful Latter-day Saints. Several, as did Lucy Walker Kimball, explained their spiritual growth in response to polygamy's challenges: "You learn self-control, self-denial; it brings out the noble traits of our fallen natures . . . and the lessons learned in a few years, are worth the experience of a lifetime" (quoted on p. 468).

We approach the doctrine of plural marriage (and Compton's book) from our personal and professional perspectives as believers in the Prophet's divinely appointed mission and his inspired revelations. We have a comforting assurance in our minds and

hearts that Joseph Smith told the truth about the first vision, Moroni's appearances, and the restoration of priesthood through the coming of the apostles of Jesus Christ. Accordingly we find no reason to doubt his revelation on the plurality of worlds and how they are populated. There is breathtaking beauty in the concepts of eternal growth and celestial relationships. The Prophet Joseph Smith said similar things about his vision of the degrees of glory, and we deeply agree.[36] Yet, strangely, that vision (D&C 76), given in early 1832, tried the faith of many early Saints who saw God's justice as eroded by allowing eternal rewards in some measure for almost all. Brigham Young was one who struggled, and he put the doctrine on the shelf until he could understand it better, which he came to do: "I was not prepared to say that I believed it, and I had to wait. What did I do? I handed this over to the Lord in my feelings, and said I, 'I will wait until the Spirit of God manifests to me, for or against.' I did not judge the matter, I did not argue against it, not in the least. I never argued the least against anything Joseph proposed, but if I could not see or understand it, I handed it over to the Lord."[37]

We have learned from Todd Compton's work but are disturbed by its dissonances. We advise readers of this book to consider all aspects of Joseph Smith's life to determine for themselves whether he was a living prophet or a religious opportunist. Together we count our serious studies of Joseph Smith by many decades. Having examined virtually all extant manuscript sources documenting the life and teachings of Joseph Smith, we believe he was an honest and moral servant of God. His calling as the Prophet of the restoration is bolstered by the scriptural works he produced—the Book of Mormon, the revelatory revision of the Bible, modern revelations, the book of Abraham, as well as his teachings, and his dedicated ministry punctuated by persecution. Like many religious and moral heroes of history, he was targeted and slandered by the forces of evil. Those who knew Joseph best stood by him most firmly. We discern a purity of soul in the power of his discourses, as recorded by the Nauvoo scribes and in Latter-day Saint journals. We see his constant sacrifices for his

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36 See ibid., 2:252–53.

37 *Journal of Discourses,* 18:247 (1877).

people, including knowingly giving his life at the end to preserve Nauvoo from attack and plundering. Our minds and hearts testify that Joseph Smith is certainly a prophet sent from God.