

Review of Brian C. Hales and Laura H. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015, 198 pages + index.

Introduction¹

Brian C. Hales has established himself as an authority on Latter-day Saint plural marriage. Following his initial award-winning work on “fundamentalist” plural marriage,² Hales produced an impressive and exhaustive three-volume history of Joseph Smith’s polygamy and its attendant theology.³ (Throughout the review, when referring to this longer work, I will denominate it *JSP*.)

The study of plural marriage has long been hampered by difficult-to-access primary sources and a secondary literature that of necessity quoted only excerpts, often of the more sensationalistic variety. It [Page 4]is probably safe to say that no author has approached the topic with absolute neutrality or anything like it, and some treatments have been discouragingly partisan.⁴

Hales’ three-volume work addresses this challenge by aiming to cite or quote from every known document discussing Joseph Smith’s plural marriages. As a further gift to the historical community and interested lay readers, Hales has made digital scans of all his primary source material available for free online.⁵ Even if they reject his conclusions, future authors must necessarily confront the data which Hales and his research assistant, Don Bradley, have amassed.

As often happens, efforts to resolve one problem have created another. Rather than being hungry for primary source data, today’s beginners may feel they drown in it. Non-historians, especially interested members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, may find 1500-page tomes filled with footnotes (or thousands of digitally scanned documents) overwhelming. Hales and his wife, Laura H., have together authored a short work (fewer than 200 pages main text) — a primer on Joseph Smith’s plural marriages. (I will label this shorter work by its subtitle, *Toward a Better Understanding — TaBU*.)

Theology First

In *JSP*, Hales wisely treated the history of plural marriage first, reserving his reconstruction of Joseph’s marital theology for the third and final volume. Since we know relatively little about how Joseph understood his plural marriages, this is wise, since conclusions about his theology will necessarily be more speculative and inferential. In *TaBU*, the authors take the opposite approach. I initially found this jarring, since in my own research and teaching, I’ve opted for the “history first” approach. As I proceeded further, however, I began to appreciate their wisdom — in a work targeted at the polygamy novice, this helps ground the reader. Concepts which align with common LDS ideas regarding sealings are [Page 5]introduced, and differences from current practice can also be explained. This has the effect, I think, of easing the reader from familiar territory into the more unfamiliar realm of early LDS marriage and sealing doctrines and practice. Readers should remember that Hales has elsewhere spelled out the *reasons* for his conclusions in *JSP* — *TaBU* is the executive summary.

TaBU’s approach also differs from the standard historical format by interfacing more directly with the reader’s expectations, fears, and experience as they confront the material. The authors write sympathetically

From a mortal standpoint, the practice [of polygamy] does not seem to be fair because polygamy expands a man’s emotional and sexual opportunities as a husband as it simultaneously diminishes a woman’s emotional and sexual opportunities as a wife. We might speculate that in the celestial kingdom plural wives will not feel any different from monogamous wives because Heavenly Father is a just God, but those details have not been revealed (xvi).

I suspect that the insight here derives in good measure from Laura, who has not yet had Brian’s lengthy immersion

in this material (though I heard him express similar ideas prior to their marriage). As a relative newcomer to the historical matter, she can probably better empathize with the reactions of those who encounter such details for the first time, and that dynamic has not been neglected in *TaBU*.

This is not to charge Brian with a lack of sympathy but simply to highlight what I've noticed in myself — prolonged engagement with these ideas can cause us to forget how foreign some of the concepts were and are. Authors are well advised to retain their appreciation for this fact while not erring in the opposite direction to play up sensationalistic, presentist, or voyeuristic elements for polemical purposes. Retaining a sense of the alien culture of plural marriage helps engage modern audiences more effectively and perhaps helps ensure that one is not unwittingly smoothing out the rough edges.

If the past is a foreign country where they do things differently, the plural marriage past is almost guaranteed to provoke some initial culture shock. The Haleses seem to realize this, advising the reader early on:

It is important to maintain a clear perspective, realizing these stories, though outside our realm of experience and maybe understanding, are essentially historical minutia in relation [Page 6]to the significance of the gospel. ... If clarity is lost, rereading or taking a break may be helpful. ...

Doubt is not the enemy of faith any more than faith is the remedy for doubt. The genuine antidote for doubt is more knowledge, which is gained through the continual search for truth no matter its source — spiritual or secular (x–xi).

But, while acknowledging that the material can be challenging, *TaBU* is no neutral recital — the authors approach their task as believers in Joseph Smith and the Church he founded:

Ronald Esplin ... related, “I hope you will understand the point that our work [on the Joseph Smith Papers Project] is not designed to defend Joseph Smith so much as to understand him ... [I]f we will do that, understand him, he will come off just fine. Since he is who he said he was, his life and works can withstand scrutiny. There is no need to distort the historical record, but a great need ... to understand it.” ...

[Haleses continue] Studying the actual history rather than relying on sensational sound bites can be one of the tools to help better contextualize Joseph's actions even if it doesn't completely explain the controversial practice of polygamy (xi)

TaBU also wisely warns of the deficiencies in many previous treatments:

Since Latter-day Saint authors have written little about Joseph Smith's polygamy in the past century, most of the books and articles currently available have been authored by writers who do not believe his revelations and teachings. This absence of belief has unavoidably influenced their assumptions and deductions, and some publications carry overt anti-Mormon messages. Joseph is ultimately portrayed as a fraud, adulterer, and hypocrite, but it is questionable whether that description is due to historical documentation or author bias (xvi–xvii).

Polyandry

One of the more contentious of Hales' conclusions in *JSP* is the claim that sexual polyandry did not occur in Joseph Smith's plural marriages. [Page 7]Here, I sympathize both with Hales' critics and with Hales himself. Let me explain.

I initially believed that sexual polyandry best explained the historical data. The “poster child” for this perspective was Sylvia Sessions Lyon, whose sealing to Joseph in 1842 seemed to clearly precede her separation from her civil husband. Since Sylvia’s daughter is the best candidate for a child conceived by Joseph in plurality, this marriage has consequently been treated as the paradigmatic case for polyandry. If one such marriage included marital intimacy, ran the argument, it was reasonable to presume that the others either did or could have.

This reasoning struck me as sound, and for several years I accepted a model of full sexual polyandry. Over time, however, as I puzzled over the other data, I began (with, I confess, some reluctance) to wonder if non-conjugal relationships weren’t a much better explanation for the other spotty data. I hesitated to draw that conclusion, however, because of the Sylvia Lyon case. Its cogency seemed sufficient to outweigh my other niggling suspicions.

Hales’ and Don Bradley’s discovery of a second affidavit for Sylvia altered the calculus considerably.⁶ Neither affidavit was signed, but crucially the newly discovered document dates their marriage to 1843 — one year later. Significantly, nothing about the documents allows us to privilege one affidavit over the other, and so the later date must be regarded as at least as plausible as the earlier one (*TaBU*, 71–73).

This might seem a small difference of interest only to pedants, but in context it can be revolutionary. Suddenly, Sylvia’s marriage could no longer be regarded as paradigmatic, since it is entirely possible that her sexual relationship with Joseph *followed* her separation/divorce from her husband. Thus, Hales and Bradley succeeded in pushing me (with some foot dragging) to favor a non-sexual polyandrous model, which seemed to explain other data points more parsimoniously. Hales’ later discussion of the Temple Lot testimony, and the telling absence of all three living polyandrous wives from those proceedings, despite their availability, increased my confidence in this historical reconstruction (*JSP*, 1:403–407, 2:298; *TaBU*, xv).

Thus, I share the Haleses’ view that Joseph likely did not practice sexual polyandry. That said, I still prefer to phrase that conclusion a bit more tentatively than they do. I think non-sexuality is the best read of the data — and, I think that many others have so long assumed the truth [Page 8]of sexual polyandry that they are unwilling or unable to truly reassess the matter from scratch. Still, painfully aware of how my own confidence on this point has been shaken by a single document’s discovery, I think it wise to emphasize to interested Church members and others that this conclusion still has some uncertainty to it. There is no question that non-sexual polyandry is less threatening to modern sensibilities (as well as Nauvoo-era ones, as *TaBU*, 26 observes). Apologists must therefore avoid embracing what appears to be an advantage too enthusiastically, lest their premature ardor backfire if sexual polyandry is later shown to be the correct interpretation. (I think the current article available on ChurchofJesusChrist.org strikes the right balance; it cites Hales’ *JSP* repeatedly but does not press the no-sexuality thesis quite as definitively.)⁷

The Haleses’ reading insists heavily upon their conclusion that sexual polyandry would have been adulterous (13, 25–27; compare *JSP* 1:377–390). I strongly suspect that they are right — but if we insist too much upon this point and are wrong, the doubts they hope to alleviate could be worsened. On the other hand, one could argue that there is no reason to soft-pedal one’s conclusions if one is quite confident, and we could play the counterfactual historical game forever — “But what if a document shown to be Joseph’s appeared wherein he confesses nefarious motives for plural marriage?” A historical reconstruction cannot forever remain hostage to hypothetical non-extant documents.

There is, then, no ideal solution to this dilemma — it is simply an area about which readers and teachers should be aware. Perhaps the best solution is to present the evidence and one’s best conclusion, and then use it as a case study for understanding both the practice and limitations of history. My own experience suggests that it nicely illustrates:

- the necessity of reevaluating our opinions when new data appears;
- the degree to which the survival or destruction of a single piece of evidence can radically alter how we reconstruct an historical event;
- the risk of persisting in old conclusions when new data is available (anything written about polyandry prior to 2008 is now hopelessly dated, and Hales strengthened [Page 9]his case in 2013 with *JSP* — yet, old treatments will continue to influence how people see this matter);

- the lack of certainty which we must often tolerate in historical matters;
- the inevitable role of the historian's hopes, biases, and agenda in his or her assessment of evidence.

No student or member would be ill-served by internalizing such lessons.

Emma Smith

Of all the characters in the plural marriage drama, Emma Smith usually stirs the most sympathy. I suspect that modern readers — especially women — readily identify with her pain and experience.

TaBU does not slight Emma's challenges, or the difficulties that her case presents for the modern reader:

Looking back at Joseph's choices in dealing with the introduction of plural marriage to Emma, it is certainly possible that his actions were less than perfect. Given the complexity of what he was commanded to do, it was inevitable that mistakes could be made and feelings could be deeply wounded. And the paucity of evidentiary details allows readers to reconstruct the story in multiple ways depending on their own views on whether or not Joseph believed this was something he was commanded to do. Richard L. Bushman observed: "Polygamy is an interesting thing because it serves as a Rorschach test. People project onto Joseph Smith and polygamists their own sense about human nature."¹³ Those who are willing to accept that Joseph Smith was trying to best fulfill God's commandments could give Joseph the benefit of the doubt in this instance, while cynics of the divine origin of polygamy will likely draw different conclusions.

Most readers, even those who esteem Joseph Smith as a true prophet, may experience some discomfort with these events. Polygamy is difficult to accept. Polygamy behind a wife's back is even harder to understand. The key component — to acknowledge that God commanded Joseph to practice plural marriage — requires faith. For many observers, seeing his [Page 10]conduct as justified and righteous is difficult. For others who do not possess this faith, it may not be possible (*TaBU*, 77).

This frank admission of the difficulties will resonate, I think, with readers troubled by plural marriage. The authors also see Emma's challenge as unique and unprecedented:

doubtless these were incredibly difficult times for Emma who struggled with her personal distaste for the sexual implications of plural marriage and her sincere desires to follow her husband/prophet's counsel. ...

As the first (and for most of their marriage, only) wife of the Prophet, Emma Smith's pathway through polygamy was different from that experienced by other plural wives. Having conceived children with Joseph, she knew of her husband's virility and hormonal drives. Accepting plural marriage as a divine decree, untainted by Joseph's libido, almost certainly demanded a different kind of faith than that required of any other plural wife. All other pluralists could hold the Prophet and his teachings responsible. Another heart-wrenching struggle would likely have been learning that Joseph had secretly married plural wives. Some of Emma's emotions may have resembled the feelings of a woman who just learned her husband was cheating on her. Sentiments of betrayal and distrust may have initially engulfed her. Working past those emotions to see her husband's actions as divinely commanded and therefore honorable and even virtuous would undoubtedly have been difficult. ... Doubtless, Emma Smith's polygamy-related trials were great and unfathomable for most (*TaBU*, 78, 89).

This is, I think, a charitable and historically responsible reading of Emma's experience. Emma's reputation in LDS

circles was long marred by her continued insistence that Joseph had never taught plural marriage, and the perception that she had abandoned the Church founded by her martyred husband. Happily, more recent LDS writing has been more understanding.⁸

[Page 11]At times, some writers have succumbed too readily to their sympathy for Emma (or their own revulsion regarding plural marriage) and treated Joseph unfairly. Richard Lloyd Anderson observed of this error in the opposite direction:

Yet the “poor Emma” theme is overworked, not only in sentimental semi-fiction, but even in the long biography of her, *Mormon Enigma*, wherein Emma is too often ennobled at the expense of Joseph. After all, the great question is *why* she endured 17 years of constant adjustment and danger at the Prophet’s side. The answer is that she obviously shared his spiritual commitments in order to share his persecutions.⁹

TaBU’s approach avoids both extremes.

Biographical Sketches

Following a hundred pages of theology and historical reconstruction, the second hundred pages of *TaBU* provides short biographical essays of each of Joseph’s plural wives. Each runs only a few pages and provides a good thumbnail sketch of the circumstances under which the wife encountered plurality, a short summary of her life following the martyrdom, and an assessment of her attitude toward Joseph and the Church at the end of her life. I particularly like the fact that good-sized chunks of their personal accounts are included — too often in previous works, small snippets were repeatedly quoted (with one secondary source perhaps copying from an earlier) to prove a particular point. The overall thrust of the larger textual unit was thus often not well conveyed.

In this section the authors include further details regarding issues which may trouble some readers. For example, the first section’s historical account includes a brief mention of the age of Joseph’s wives (x, 70–71), but a more detailed examination of marriages to young women is found in the biographical entries for Helen Mar Kimball (130–134) and (briefly) Nancy Winchester (157–158). This has the effect of breaking the information into more digestible chunks. While such a format is an advantage for beginners, readers may be unaware that [Page 12]more information is to follow. I fear, then, that some reading the first section of the book may feel this issue has been shortchanged or that the authors aren’t dealing with their concern in enough detail. Notice that more information was coming might have been helpful.

This is part of a broader dilemma that haunts the book — how much of the vast collection amassed by Hales is adequate to tell the story? When does more information become less, as the reader drowns in footnotes and the clash of various pieces of data? This points to my only significant complaint about the book — I dearly wish that each section included a cross reference to Hales’ *JSP*. That would allow interested readers to be pointed quickly to the more exhaustive treatment already available. The chapter endnotes are well-furnished with citations to the primary literature — but again, I think it would have increased the book’s usefulness as a beginner’s guide if as many of the endnotes as possible concluded with the phrase, *For further detail, see Hales, Joseph Smith’s Polygamy, p. X*. But, for every additional note or cross reference, potential complexity and clutter increases too — readers will likely differ on whether this tradeoff would have been worth it.

Advice to Joseph

The authors conclude their roughly hundred-page review of the theology and history by observing that “[i]f it were possible to return to Joseph Smith’s day and offer him some advice, observers with the benefit of historical hindsight might make at least five recommendations” (*TaBU*, 99). They highlight the decisions which have arguably caused modern readers the most difficulty: the marriage to Fanny Alger without informing Emma,

polyandry, sealings to younger wives, and the sheer number of plural wives. They also recommend to Joseph, “limit ... your involvement in politics. Letting someone else be the mayor of Nauvoo may insulate you from liability in dealing with the *Nauvoo Expositor*” (100).

This is an interesting exercise, and I cannot resist the temptation to play along. I think they are right to point out the difficulties of Joseph’s combination of civil and religious authority — something which bothered nearby non-Mormons enormously.

More than anything, however, I would be inclined to advise Joseph simply to keep better records. Hales’ massive collection of documents serves, in some ways, to underline how much we still lack. So much of what Joseph was attempting remains opaque to us. We have only D&C 132 in his own words, and this was written down relatively late with the [Page 13]express intent of convincing Emma Smith. Polyandry might be a non-issue if we had a clear-cut articulation of Joseph’s understanding of these relationships, especially if it matched the Haleses’ reconstruction. A frank description of the degree to which relationships were consummated with younger brides might allay other concerns.

More than anything, I would like to know precisely what Emma knew and when she knew it. Joseph labored so patiently with men such as Hyrum Smith and the Twelve that I cannot but think that he would have made similar efforts to discuss these ideas with Emma, perhaps even prior to Fanny Alger. (There are some interesting similarities between Fanny and the case of the Partridge sisters. In both cases, the plural wives were well-known to Emma and had provided live-in household help to the Smiths. In both cases, Emma insisted that the girls leave the home after the marriages. We presume that she did not know of Fanny’s involvement with Joseph, but Emma approved the Partridge marriages, only to withdraw her consent later and order the sisters to leave her home. One could speculate that Emma likewise initially gave reluctant consent to Fanny — as she did to the Partridges and Lawrences — only to have a quick change of heart. Emma could well have wielded the secrecy and novelty of plural marriage to persuade Oliver Cowdery that Joseph’s behavior was simply adulterous.) Emma’s later denials that Joseph ever practiced or taught plural marriage blur events even further.

A precise account of the three angelic commands to practice plural marriage might make the type and number of marriages more understandable (*TaBU*, 151). Even a contemporary account of precisely how Joseph introduced, explained, and taught plural marriage to others would be invaluable. In later recitals, we are told *that* Joseph explained the doctrine, but we are rarely told much about *how* he explained it. A transcription of a sermon or two on the subject might solve a host of puzzles. The culture of secrecy so necessary to Joseph’s safety in Nauvoo ironically compromises the safety of his good repute in the modern age.

Conclusion

Most of the problems against which Joseph is warned, then, are problems precisely because we lack adequate information. For the believer, perhaps this should not be surprising. The historical record provides, as the authors demonstrate, ample grounds for both faith and skepticism, but it is to faith and conviction that they ultimately appeal:

[Page 14]Truth seekers may encounter details that are uncomfortable when studying early polygamy, but that discomfort need not displace other truths and beliefs — truths that witness of Joseph’s prophetic mantle. In the arithmetic of eternity, Joseph Smith accomplished extraordinary things. He brought forth the Book of Mormon, recorded remarkable revelations like the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham, received revelations recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants, and preached teachings that revealed the broad expanse of eternity. He also restored ordinances that allow the constant companionship of the Holy Spirit to testify concerning everlasting truth. He had the courage to follow the Lord’s command in the face of great trials, relentless persecution, and constant public scrutiny. In the words of John Taylor: “He lived great, and he died great in the eyes of God and his people” (100).

With this book, such uncomfortable truth seekers are now better equipped with knowledgeable guides who are also allies — rather than antagonists — in the search for truth coupled to faith. My only substantial regret is the lack of cross references to the more detailed *JSP*.

TaBU is warmly recommended for anyone who wants to learn more about Joseph's plural marriages but particularly to those just venturing into its sometimes choppy waters. Were I not vulnerable to the sin of envy, I'd wish I had written it.

1. In the interests of disclosure, readers should know that Brian Hales and I have collaborated on a review of a work on plural marriage (Brian C. Hales and Gregory L. Smith, "A Response to Grant Palmer's 'Sexual Allegations against Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Polygamy in Nauvoo'," 12 [2014]: 183–236, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/a-response-to-grant-palmers-sexual-allegations-against-joseph-smith-and-t-he-beginnings-of-polygamy-in-nauvoo/>). Our shared interest in the topic has led us independently to similar conclusions, and Brian has persuaded me on several points. I also consider him and his wife Laura to be friends.

2. Brian C. Hales and J. Max Anderson, *The Priesthood of Modern Polygamy: A LDS Perspective* (Northwest Publishing, 1992); Brian C. Hales, *Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations after the Manifesto* (Salt Lake City, Utah : Greg Kofford Books, 2006) [winner of the John Whitmer History Association award for Best Book]; *Setting the Record Straight: Mormon Fundamentalism* (Millennial Press, 2012).

3. Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2013).

4. The classic example would be Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945). A more modern incarnation of the same thesis, marred by similar flaws and a poorly-disguised agenda, is George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "...but we called it celestial marriage"* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008). For a review of the latter, see my "George D. Smith's Nauvoo Polygamy," *FARMS Review* 20/2 (2008): 37–123, <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1431&index=4>.

5. Brian C. Hales, "Mormon Polygamy Documents: A Research Database," <http://mormonpolygamymdocuments.org/> (accessed 28 March 2015).

6. Brian C. Hales, "The Joseph Smith-Sylvia Sessions Plural Sealing: Polyandry or Polygyny?," *Mormon Historical Studies* 9/1 (Spring 2008): 41–57.

7. "Gospel Topics: Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo," footnotes 29–33 and accompanying main text, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo> (accessed 29 March 2015).

8. See, for example, Wendy C. Top "'A Deep Sorrow in Her Heart' — Emma Hale Smith," in *Heroines of the Restoration*, edited by Barbara B. Smith and Blythe Darlyn Thatcher (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 17–34 and Gracia N. Jones, "My Great-Great-Grandmother, Emma Hale Smith," *Ensign* (Aug 1992): 30, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/ensign/1992/08/my-great-great-grandmother-emma-hale-smith>.

9. Richard Lloyd Anderson, "The Religious Dimension of Emma's Letters to Joseph," in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, The Man*, edited by Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993), 117, emphasis in original.