

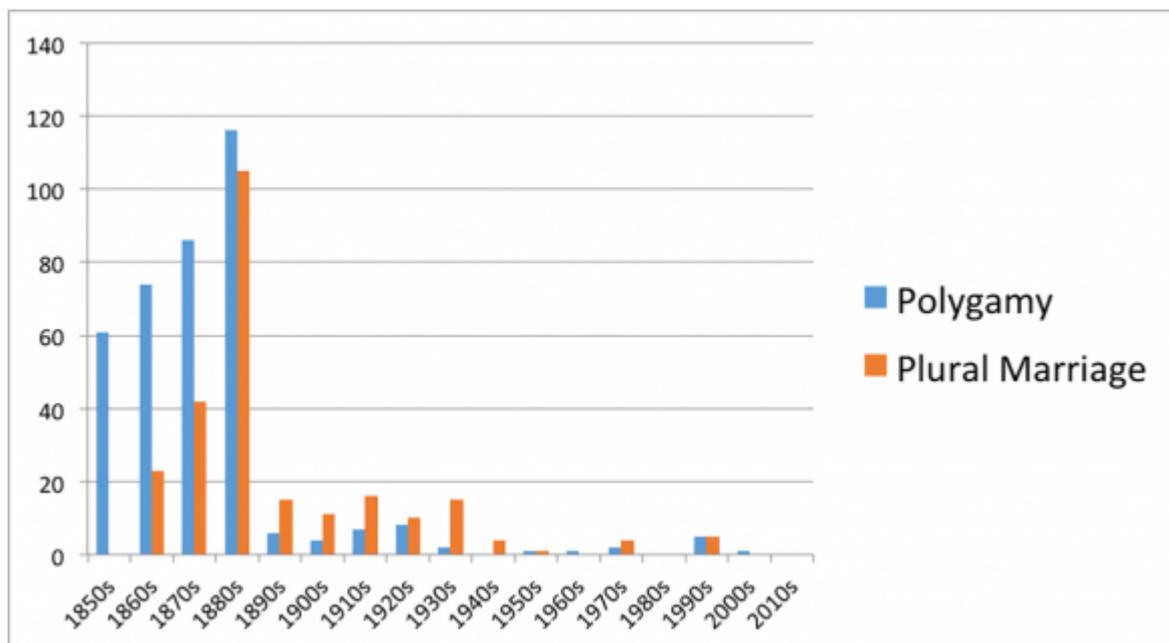
[Page 91]A Review of Carol Lynn Pearson, *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Women and Men*. Pivot Point Books, 2016, 226 pages with endnotes. \$19.95.

Abstract: *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy* boldly declares “that plural marriage never was — is not now — and never will be ordained of God” (21) and that the Mormon religion is guilty of “extraordinary spiritual abuse” (22) due to the practice. Seven distinct problems associated with plural marriage are identified, four of which have merit: polygamy history is often messy; earthly polygamy is unfair to women; widows and widowers are treated differently regarding future sealings; and the cancellation of sealings has not always paralleled the desires of the participants. Three additional issues form the bulk of the discussion and are based upon assumptions about eternity: polygamy is required in the celestial kingdom; child-to-parent sealings may be unfair in eternity; and eternal polygamy will be everlastingly unfair to women. This review addresses these observations, noting that the idea that all exalted beings are polygamists is false, revelation has not defined the exact nature of earthly parent-child relationships in the afterlife, and the dynamics of eternal plural marriage have not been revealed. *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy* seeks to reinforce fears of the unknown while ignoring the abundant messages that God promises eternal joy and happiness to those who live worthily.

Looking at the history of plural marriage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it seems that it was inevitable that someone like Carol Lynn Pearson would write a book similar to *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Women and Men* (hereafter GEP). Joseph Smith introduced plural marriage in Nauvoo in [Page 92]1841 and taught it as a commandment. After his 1844 death, Brigham Young continued the practice, announcing it to the world in 1852. For the next 38 years it was generally taught as an expected practice for worthy members.

In 1890, a manifesto was issued ending the commandment, although some plural unions continued to be solemnized until 1904 when Joseph F. Smith stopped prospectively authorizing new polygamous marriages. Believing plural marriage should be continued, dissenters from the Church coalesced into an organized movement in the late 1920s and actively promoted their teachings among the Latter-day Saints. LDS authorities denounced them as apostates and sought to distance the Church from the practice from that point forward.

The graph below shows how often Church authorities referred to polygamy or plural marriage in General Conferences:



As shown, the subject was common prior to the 1890s, but dropped dramatically in the next several decades. After the 1950s, references to the practice were rare.

It appears that the absence of discussions of plural marriage during the past half-century has created a vacuum of orthodox teachings concerning the subject among Latter-day Saints in the twenty-first century. Two significant consequences have resulted. First, a wide variety of notions have been promulgated, many of which are inaccurate. Second, alternate voices have offered information to fill the void created by the lack of official Church statements on the topic. The author of GEP [Page 93] acknowledges she is not an official representative of the Church, and as such, she qualifies as an *alternate voice* with an emotional message for Latter-day Saints and other audiences. In this review I will discuss LDS doctrines and teachings, also as an alternate voice, and am solely responsible for the views expressed herein.

The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy

The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy comprises twelve chapters and nine “other voices” sections, that each contain nine to fourteen moving testimonials and narrations of personal pain and suffering.

Early in the text, GEP informs its readers how the data supporting the arguments in the book was obtained. The author explains: “In March of 2014, I reached out to Mormons and former Mormons via social media, asking them to take a survey about their opinions and feelings regarding the LDS concept of eternal polygamy” (8). The online database of names who received invitations to take the survey is undisclosed, but over 8000 responses were eventually gathered.

GEP identifies the level of Church activity of the respondents: 91% classified themselves as “current members,” with 51% of them “very active,” and 93% of them holding a temple recommend (8–9). Multiplying those numbers reveals that roughly 43% of those answering the questions identified as Latter-day Saints who were actively attempting to keep sacred covenants.

Apparently, the survey also included a section where respondents could share written accounts of their feelings, suffering, and concerns. Regarding these, “85 percent of the stories expressed sadness, confusion, [and] pain” (10) concerning the policies and practices of plural marriage. An impressive 126 of these individual narratives are interspersed throughout the book to add emphasis to specific points, sometimes interjecting an emotional component to the topic being discussed.

Besides repeatedly quoting the opinions of these respondents, other sources are tapped to explain the primary facets of the book’s message. GEP contains imaginary conversations and descriptions composed by the author (36–39, 79, 116, 149) along with eloquent fictional accounts (119, 122). There are multi-paragraph quotes from *Pride and Prejudice* (155), a blog post (141), the author’s poetry (135), her personal diary (172, 173), and even a quote from the 1882 *Anti-Polygamy Standard* (113). The final chapter is primarily comprised of a “fantasy” composed by the author (204).

[Page 94]The bibliography identifies additional sources, listing 109 references, eleven of which are General Authorities speaking about plural marriage. Statements from other early polygamists are also included, but over half of the references are either from non-Mormon sources or do not discuss polygamy.

Doctrine and Covenants section 132, the revelation on celestial and plural marriage, is mentioned several times in GEP (xvi, 83, 85, 189, 192–94, and 224). Parts of specific verses are quoted verbatim including vv. 52 and 58 (82), v. 61 (68, 190), and vv. 61–62 (169). No verses are quoted in their entirety and none earlier than verse 52 are referenced. These disregarded verses deal with the ordinance of eternal marriage and the blessings promised to worthy individuals who keep their covenants.

GEP is a skillfully crafted vehicle to convey a particular message by weaving specific stories, arguments, and observations together to convince its audience. Judging from online responses and other opinions I have heard, it may be achieving its apparent goal.

The Message

GEP unapologetically describes polygamy as “Joseph’s extravagant reinvention of marriage” (44). “I am,” the author explains, “personally persuaded that The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy exists today from error, that plural marriage never was — is not now — and never will be ordained of God” (21; see also 70). She also accuses the Mormon religion of “extraordinary spiritual abuse” (22) due to its teachings and past practice of plural marriage.

To support and justify this reaction, seven objections are repeatedly mentioned and explored throughout the text.¹ Of these, two state obvious problems with the earthly practice of plural marriage between the 1840s and 1890 and two more are associated with policies that persist:

1. The history of the establishment of polygamy by Joseph Smith is messy.
2. [Page 95]Earthly polygamy is unfair to women.
3. Widows who have been sealed to their deceased husbands are treated differently than widowers who were sealed to their deceased wives.
4. Cancellations of sealings have not always paralleled individual desires or legal marital decrees.

If these were the only complaints found in GEP, it is likely that most readers could have agreed with the overall message. However, three additional concerns seem to dominate the discussion:

1. Polygamy is required in the celestial kingdom.
2. Child-to-parent sealings may be unfair in eternity.
3. Eternal polygamy is unfair to women.

The common theme intrinsic to these last three complaints is *eternity*, which is referred to in the catchy title, *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy*. When dealing with eternity, our beliefs must be based upon revelation or they will merely be speculation. In seeking truth, the opinions and conjectures of well-meaning individuals are generally less useful than clear statements from inspired women and men who are seers and revelators.

This review will examine these seven topics and provide historical and doctrinal context for the practice of plural marriage in the Church. I will also examine and critique the methodology employed by GEP.

The History of the Establishment of Polygamy by Joseph Smith is Messy

There is no getting around the fact that the introduction of plural marriage in the early days of the Church was messy. Joseph Smith faced multiple challenges, including opposition from his wife, leaders, followers, and the legal community after reporting an angelic command to establish the practice.

Hence Joseph sought secrecy, which has greatly hampered attempts to understand the details of those early relationships. Common concerns involve the young ages of a few of Joseph Smith’s wives (151), the number of his wives (81), and his not immediately informing Emma (55). GEP also mentions, “Eleven of his [Joseph Smith’s] plural wives were women who were already married to other men” and correctly observes, “It is likely these marriages were not consummated” (55).

[Page 96]While observers today may detect the messiness of that period and conclude Joseph was in error (as GEP does), a weakness of the GEP text is that there is little attempt to see the practice as the Nauvoo polygamists viewed it. Presentism, the act of viewing historical events with present day biases, is rife throughout GEP.

A second problem is found in the historical inaccuracies that reflect casual research (see especially 44, 55, 61, 81, 83, and 93). GEP declares: “Numerous young women (and some older women) were approached by Joseph and promised the highest exaltation in heaven — along with their entire family — if they accepted him as their husband and were ‘sealed’ to him for eternity” (55). This is simply false.² Also GEP describes the Relief Society as “a service organization that Emma [Smith], as president, soon began to use in her fight against polygamy” in 1842

(81). There is no credible evidence to support that Emma or even a small percentage of the Relief Society members in Nauvoo in 1842 were aware of Joseph Smith's eternal plural marriage teachings.³

It is useful to note that none of Joseph Smith's plural wives recorded any complaints against him including the seven who left the Church. Neither did the other eighty men and women who had entered plural unions prior to the martyrdom. When modern writers who know Joseph the least claim to understand things about him that those who knew him best apparently could not see, there is a serious problem.

Nauvoo polygamy was messy, but it is not clear whether the messiness arose from error or simply because life is often messy. I believe the pressures facing the Prophet as he introduced plural marriage guaranteed that the process would be messy.

Earthly Polygamy is Unfair to Women

Earthly polygamy is unfair to women and GEP repeatedly drives home that point. Plural marriage on earth expands a man's emotional and sexual opportunities as a husband as it simultaneously fragments a woman's emotional and sexual opportunities as a wife. Simply put, it is sexist and unfair.⁴ I am sometimes asked to speak on plural marriage, [Page 97]and while I'm comfortable defending Joseph Smith as a worthy prophet, I never try to defend the earthly practice of polygamy.

It is easy to find emotional stories of suffering and even despair among plural wives sharing a husband. Whether in Nauvoo or later in Utah, hundreds of narratives demonstrate the challenges associated with plural marriage. It appears that virtually none of the women in Nauvoo wanted to participate, but they went along with the practice due to their faith in God and a belief that He had commanded the practice at that time and place.

The usefulness of focusing upon these trials is not apparent. LDS scripture teaches that we are here to be "proven" (Exodus 16:4, D&C 121:12, Abraham 3:25). "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Polygamy was a challenge for the Saints of the 1840s to 1890 period and may have been a tribulation intended to lead them toward exaltation.

GEP rejects this interpretation: "God gave it [polygamy] as a test of faith. I do not believe a God of love works this way" (64). The idea that a loving God would not command difficult things contradicts multiple scriptural accounts of how deity deals with mortals on earth.⁵

To quote Laura Harris Hales: "Early Latter-day Saints believed plural marriage was commanded by God and struggled to practice it. Today, Latter-day Saints do not practice it, but some struggle to believe it was actually from God." GEP makes a judgment that practitioners did not voice.

Widows Who Have Been Sealed To Their Deceased Husbands Are Treated Differently Than Widowers Who Were Sealed To Their Deceased Wives

Church policy beginning with Joseph Smith is that a living man can be sealed to multiple women, but a living woman can only be sealed to one man. Even when polygamy is not practiced, this policy affects widows who may be shunned by men who are looking to be sealed to their desired wife.

GEP repeatedly highlights this disparity by quoting accounts of suffering and apparent injustice. It includes an anecdotal story about [Page 98]counsel, reportedly from a Church leader, given to a man to not marry a sealed widow because he would be single forever and would compromise his own exaltation (102). Another narrative describes a woman who was worried that cancelling her previous sealing would "strip her deceased husband of his eternal exaltation" (99). The author adds: "According to current policy, if that wife [a widow] is sealed to someone else, the man faces an eternity without wife and without children (even those born with his own DNA), unqualified

for the highest blessings of the celestial kingdom” (96).

These accounts are unfortunate because they contain inaccuracies. Under certain circumstances, the Church may allow a woman to cancel a previous sealing to a deceased husband. But to assume that he is eternally compromised demonstrates faulty reasoning. All worthy men and women will receive all their needed ordinances, either in person or by proxy, prior to the final judgment. Worthiness is the key.

While not voicing official Church doctrine, Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith explained: “The Lord has said through his servants that during the millennium those who have passed beyond and have attained the resurrection will reveal in person to those who are still in mortality all the information which is required to complete the work of these who have passed from this life. Then the dead will have the privilege of making known the things they desire and are entitled to receive. In this way no soul will be neglected and the work of the Lord will be perfected.”⁶

GEP explains that the Church will allow a deceased woman to be sealed vicariously to all the men she lived with as a wife during mortality (after the men have also died). For any of those proxy sealings to be valid, the deceased woman must qualify and accept it in the spirit world. Accordingly, she would be positioned to accept the sealing she desired and the other vicarious ordinances would be unrecognized. This policy may not bring complete comfort to men seeking an eternal mate, but it does allow for a woman to be eternally with the man of her choice, even if he is not the first man she was sealed to on earth.

Some alternate voices today seek to equalize Church practices by demanding that a living woman be allowed to be sealed to as many men as she would like, paralleling the policy for men. The revelation, now section 132, does not allow this (see verses 41, 61–63). New revelation could always be received, but unless that occurs, opinion and consensus of even a large number of members or onlookers will be insufficient to effectuate authorized changes.[Page 99]

Cancellations of Sealings Have not Always Paralleled Individual Desires or Legal Marital Decrees

Several stories of men and women who have procured legal divorces but have been unable to secure a cancellation of a sealing are recounted in GEP (see especially 26, 29, 75, 87, 99, and 159). Many Church leaders have taught that the temple wedding ceremony brings additional blessings to each worthy participant independent of the union solemnized. It may be that Church leaders in the past have been reluctant to cancel those additional blessings until the individuals were positioned to remake the covenants that would bring them back into their lives. Recent policy changes allow women to more easily cancel sealings after a legal divorce, so hopefully this concern has been eliminated.

The remaining three concerns deal with eternity and are based upon assumptions about requirements of exaltation, the nature of mortal families in the afterlife, and the dynamics of plural marriage in that realm. Brigham Young cautioned: “Unless a man is full of the visions of eternity he has no business to meddle with matters that pertain to eternity. I wish you to pay particular attention to this, and practice the principle throughout your lives.”⁷ This counsel should apply to anyone purporting to write about eternity.

Polygamy is Required in the Celestial Kingdom

GEP reflects the idea that polygamy is required for exaltation or to live in the celestial kingdom: “Polygamy ... [is] waiting on the other side to greet us in heaven and causing large injury here on earth” (7). “Many women suffer excruciating pain under the long-taught assumption that if they and their husband are sufficiently righteous they will be expected to live polygamy in the celestial kingdom” (8).

The problem is that no presiding Church leader has ever declared that plural marriage is required for exaltation for all people irrespective of when and where they lived on earth. The belief that every man will be required to practice polygamy in the future or that every woman will have to share her husband in eternity is not only doctrinally

unsupported but also mathematically perplexing. It is not — and never has been — a doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

[Page 100]Apostle Joseph F. Smith explained in 1878 that plural marriage was “a law of the Gospel pertaining to the celestial kingdom, applicable to all gospel dispensations, *when commanded* and not otherwise, and neither acceptable to God or binding on man unless given by commandment.”⁸ God told the Nephites that unless He would “command” his people, they should have “one wife” (Jacob 2:30, 27). The righteous Book of Mormon peoples were monogamous.

The practice of plural marriage was commanded between the 1840s and 1890 and obedience was then expected, but not apparently because polygamy has any inherent exalting ability or because it is the only form of marriage in the celestial kingdom. It was commanded during those decades of the nineteenth century because it was God’s will. At no other time in the earth’s past millennia has such a directive been given to God’s followers. Modern prophets have never given a reason for the polygamy mandate.

In LDS theology, requiring all exalted men to be polygamists would necessitate at least twice as many women as men in the celestial kingdom. GEP rejects the idea that women have a greater propensity to embrace spiritual things contending that it is “pretty insulting to men” (58). Yet, Brigham Young taught: “The fact is, let the pure principles of the kingdom of God be taught to men and women, and far more of the latter than the former will receive and obey them.”⁹ But will the ratio be at least two women to each man? Believing that all exalted men are practicing polygamists generates logistical problems that are not easily resolved.

The idea that plural marriage is required for exaltation is popular today with modern polygamists like the FLDS and the Allreds (AUB). The primary problem is that God reveals and revokes His commandments through His living prophets who hold the keys to seal eternal marriages, monogamous and polygamous. God will not acknowledge marriage ceremonies that are not performed by that authority (D&C 132: 8, 10, 18). The commandment was removed in 1890 through Wilford Woodruff, who then held the sealing authority. Despite creative claims by dozens of men over the past century, sealing authority does not exist outside [Page 101]of the Church and personal revelation alone cannot produce sealing authority or authorize a sealing ceremony that is acceptable to God.¹⁰ Today, worthy men and women can only be sealed monogamously and attempts to live plurality will bring eternal condemnation.

Child-to-Parent Sealings may be Unfair in Eternity

GEP repeatedly expresses concern involving child-to-parent sealings and how those could result in eternal injustice: “Children who are born into a marriage between a sealed widow and a new husband, though these children are raised by their biological father, are understood to be destined to live eternally in the spiritual kingdom of a man they have never known” (96; see also 8). This declaration speaks of doctrines that “are understood”; however, the source of this apparent authoritative understanding is not provided. Neither are we told what the “spiritual kingdom” represents or exactly how the described arrangement is an eternal problem.

The author of GEP is not the only person to manifest confusion regarding the dynamics of eternal families. It is true that we sing: “Families can be together forever, in Heavenly Father’s plan” (*Hymns*, 300). What is less known is that the “togetherness” of the husband and wife in eternity is different from the “togetherness” of children and their mortal parents in that realm.

A husband and wife who are sealed by proper authority and live worthily become an eternal couple who can be like our Heavenly Parents, together in eternity. As a resurrected exalted couple, they are promised a “continuation of the seeds” (D&C 132:19), or spirit offspring in the eternities. Those spirit offspring can progress to become exalted couples who can thereafter have spirit offspring. The process creates endless generations of exalted parents and children who can “be together forever” as part of “Heavenly Father’s plan.”

Today, Primary children may sing “Families can be together forever” with full expectation that if the children experience a nuclear family arrangement in their homes, it could somehow exist in heaven with mortal parents

ruling over their offspring. The eternal reality, however, is that the children are more aptly singing about premortal family [Page 102]associations that they have forgotten — each living there as “a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents.”¹¹

Questions exist regarding the relationships of mortal parents and their sealed children in the next life. The confusion apparently traces back to the early days of the Church. Joseph Smith encouraged parents and children to be sealed to one another but did not provide many details concerning the eternal ramifications of those sealings.¹² Brigham Young further explained, “The ordinance of sealing must be performed here ... woman to man, and children to parents, etc., until the chain of generation is made perfect in the sealing ordinances back to father Adam.”¹³ Without question, being part of the chain back to Adam is important. Paul explained: “They without us should not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:40; see also D&C 128:15).

What has been less clear is what happens to specific sealed child to parent relationships in the chain after we die. Some early members and leaders evidently believed that earthly familial relationships in the chain would govern our relationships in heaven. Two ideas soon popped up that cannot be traced to Joseph Smith. A few early Saints assumed that the more offspring they had, either biologically or through adoption ordinances, the greater would be their eternal glory. Another problem involved thinking that being sealed to Joseph Smith or another leader would give them an eternal advantage over being sealed to their biological parents.

In 1846, Apostle George A. Smith seems to have clarified the issue by saying it does not “matter so much where we are sealed provided we form a part of link [of] the Priesthood” chain.¹⁴ Ten years later, Jedediah M. Grant, counselor to Brigham Young in the First Presidency, preached: “What does it matter where you are, if you do your duty? Being in one man’s family or the other man’s family is not going to save you, but doing your duty before your God is what will save you.”¹⁵

[Page 103]After the resurrection where physical age differences do not seem to exist, we’ll rejoin our heavenly family and Heavenly Parents. Brigham Young explained:

When the resurrection takes place and we are glorified and perfected we shall find we are all brothers and sisters of one parentage. Why we now govern our children is because we are fallen, and the Lord Almighty put that affection on us so that they might cling to the earth and we to our children...Every man and woman will find they are brothers and sisters, connected as much as father and son is.”¹⁶

As resurrected beings, memories of the ages and eons of premortality will be joined by the remembrances of the decades we spent on earth. Mortal experiences will never be forgotten and gratitude will always be felt to those spirits who served us in mortality. Precisely how the relationships in the chain will continue to affect us in eternity, if they affect us at all, has not been revealed.

To summarize, we know our positions as children in God’s heavenly family are eternal and we know we must be sealed as part of the genealogical chain back to Adam. It also appears that our precise position in that chain is less important, and perhaps unimportant, in the eternities where exalted beings resume their position as sons and daughters of Heavenly Parents and progress to fulfill their “divine nature and destiny.”

The worries expressed in GEP about children born in the covenant to a father they did not know simply create fears that are unjustified. It is true that if a divorced woman who was sealed to her former husband remarries, the children of her later marriage are born in the covenant of the first marriage. Being born in the covenant entitles children to an eternal parentage, depending on their faithfulness. The idea that specific child-to-parent sealings on earth combine to create eternal “spiritual kingdoms” in heaven is not a doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.[Page 104]

Eternal Polygamy is Unfair to Women

It is clear that early polygamists believed that polygamy in some form would exist in the celestial kingdom. Joseph's revelations declare that sealings performed by proper authority, whether monogamous or polygamous, would persist after death (D&C 132:19).

In reaction to these teachings, it seems that the foundational message of GEP is that eternal polygamy is unfair to women. "Polygamy in the next life seems like a punishment, not eternal glory" (9). GEP also protests about "a God who has prepared an eternity that will break the hearts of women and render them forever subordinate" (202).

GEP assures its readers "that in heaven there will be many happy surprises" (201). Apparently a "surprise" that we will never confront is that wives in eternal plurality might feel the same as wives in eternal monogamy. We admit that on earth, polygamy is unfair and unjust. GEP repeatedly proclaims that to be true: polygamy is unfair and will always be unfair, worlds without end.

What We Think We Know

If we embrace the standard works as authoritative, what do we know about the next life and the eternal state of exalted beings? Paul described that realm: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9; see also Isaiah. 64:4, D&C 133:45). It seems that without divine revelation, mortals who claim to understand specific dynamics of the next life may be in error.

The exalted are promised to "receive all that the Father hath" (D&C 84:38) even to be "equal in power, and in might, and in dominion" with Him (D&C 76:95), to "have a crown of immortality, and eternal life in the mansions which I have prepared in the house of my Father" (D&C 81:6), "to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne" (Revelations. 3:21), and to "inherit all things" (Revelations. 21:7).

Besides inheriting all things, the passage of time as we now know it will be no longer (Revelations. 10:6; D&C 84:100); "Time only is measured unto men" (Alma 40:8). On earth, polygamy fragments the husband's time and resources. Plural wives may have felt diminished, in part, due to the comparatively limited resources available to her. In eternity, endless time and resources could greatly alter these deficits.

Our Heavenly Father is aware of all His creations, even a sparrow "shall not fall on the ground without your Father" knowing it (Matthew 10:29). [Page 105]God told Enoch: "Wherefore, I can stretch forth mine hands and hold all the creations which I have made; and mine eye can pierce them also" (Moses 7:36). So if a friend accepts Christ, is baptized, and creates a new covenant relationship with deity, one that did not exist previously, that relationship does not take away from my own relationship with God. We may not fully understand how this happens, but godhood apparently brings the capacity to share intimate relationships with an infinite number of beings.

In addition, the resurrection could greatly alter physical relations between a husband and wife. Paul and Joseph Smith taught that resurrected bodies do not contain blood (1 Corinthians. 15:50).¹⁷ On earth, sexual relations, gestation, and birth are highly dependent upon blood. With the elimination of blood from resurrected tabernacles, the process of procreation could be very different from what we have on earth.

Similarly, erotic feelings in mortal bodies are closely tied to a hormone, testosterone, and males have greater concentrations than females — creating a disparity in the feelings of attractions felt by men and women, both type and quantity. We simply do not know if hormones exist or function in a resurrected body. The forces that keep exalted couples attracted to each other could be greatly different from the forces mortal spouses experience.

These observations do not help us understand how eternal polygamy might feel to participants, but they do show

that comparing polygamy in the afterlife to earthly polygamy may not be a valid comparison.

Xenophobia and Victimhood

The truth is that we do not know the dynamics of eternal marriage, and we know even less about the dynamics of eternal plural marriage. Any fears associated with eternal polygamy are based upon assumptions that we cannot test for validity. To fear eternal polygamy is fearing future circumstances that we cannot accurately describe or even know to exist.

So the fears (and ghosts) of eternal polygamy are fears of the *unknown*, or xenophobia. In some ways these fears are manifestations of doubt that God is “no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34).

GEP also advances another idea — that women will be forever victimized by eternal polygamy. The correlation is almost automatic. If we accept that eternal polygamy is unfair, then we can usually accept [Page 106]that the unfairness is misogynistic and therefore victimizes females. Overall, the logic involves circular reasoning because it is not based upon verifiable truths but rather assumptions that build upon each other. Also, this line of reasoning undermines the GEP thesis. If God never does or never did condone polygamy, then polygamy will be a non-issue in the eternities.

Opportunity Lost

Instead of fear and victimization, what alternate message might have been the focus of GEP? GEP’s discussion of eternal polygamy could have reached higher, stretched wider, and delved deeper as it sought to depict and understand everlasting ramifications. The discussion would not have ignored the frustrations earthly polygamy has wrought. Neither is there a reason to don rose-colored glasses when reviewing the behavior of polygamous Church leaders in the past.

In the economy of heaven, earthly struggles and suffering are sometimes a price to be paid rather than a victim’s justification to demand change. Religious history teaches that the presence of trials and suffering does not mean God is ignoring His children nor that the associated teachings of His representatives are in error.

Instead of focusing upon what we don’t know and speculating on offenses that may or may not be real, GEP might have pointed out that God’s plan is a “great plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8, 16) and not a plan of eternal coercion or endless submission and suffering. Specific fears about relationships in the next life could be contextualized within promises that exalted beings “shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isaiah 35:10).

Brigham Young emphasized the importance of agency in choosing our eternal mates: “If a woman is sealed to me and she wants to be divorced, she has a right to and I am under no obligation. Is not that agency all round? We have the privilege of being sealed or released.”¹⁸ According to modern revelation, we can presume that during the millennium communication between the spirit world and temples on earth will be [Page 107]greatly facilitated, allowing both releasings and proxy sealings so every worthy being is happy with their eternal marital situation (including, I believe, participating or not participating in plural marriage).

GEP could have explained the rewards of exaltation, even eternal glory: “which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever. Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them” (D&C 132:19–20). It will include: “salvation, and honor, and immortality, and eternal life; kingdoms, principalities, and powers!” (D&C 128:23).

Is it possible that a wife, even a plural wife, could feel abused if she attains this celestial glory? The thought makes reason stare. President Henry B. Eyring explained:

A prophet of God once offered me counsel that gives me peace. I was worried that the choices of others might make it impossible for our family to be together forever. He said, “You are worrying about the wrong problem. You just live worthy of the celestial kingdom, and the family arrangements will be more wonderful than you can imagine.”

To all of those whose personal experience or whose marriage and children — or absence thereof — cast a shadow over their hopes, I offer my witness: Heavenly Father knows and loves you as His spirit child. While you were with Him and His Beloved Son before this life, They placed in your heart the hope you have of eternal life. With the power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ working and with the Holy Spirit guiding, you can feel now and will feel in the world to come the family love your Father and His Beloved Son want so much for you to receive.¹⁹

A More Troubling Message

Besides the fearmongering found in GEP, there is an additional, more troubling message. GEP explains: “I know there are visionaries. I know there are seers. I believe that Joseph Smith was one of them ... Joseph was not unique” (32). He is then classified as just another visionary and [Page 108]then compared to Ellen White, William Blake, Emanuel Swedenborg, and Dame Julian (32).

This evaluation of the Prophet contrasts with John Taylor’s description: “Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it” (D&C 135:3). Joseph restored priesthood authority to baptize (D&C 13:1), which is required for exaltation (D&C 76:51). Baptisms performed without this authority are “dead works” (D&C 22:2). The revelation on celestial marriage describes sealing power and quotes God saying: “I have appointed unto my servant Joseph to hold this power in the last days, and there is never but one on the earth at a time on whom this power and the keys of this priesthood are conferred” (D&C 132:7).

Similarly, the final chapter of GEP portrays the Church established by Joseph Smith as just another religious tradition with some goodness, similar to other churches. In a self-composed fantasy, the author of GEP describes “a parade of religions, all come together to celebrate, to show their very best stuff ... As we come in alphabetically, we’re led by the Amish, and the rear is brought up by the Zoroastrians. We Latter-day Saints are right between the Jews and the Mennonites” (204–05).

In contrast, Joseph taught in 1831 that the Church he organized was “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased” (D&C 1:30). It was to come forth “out of the wilderness — clear as the moon, and fair as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners” (D&C 5:14), “to be a light to the world, and to be a standard for my people, and for the Gentiles to seek to it” (D&C 45:9). Its gospel was “to roll forth unto the ends of the earth, as the stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth” (D&C 65:2).

The incongruities create a paradox. If Joseph was just another visionary, and the Church he formed just another church, then his authority would be just another authority, incapable of creating a genuine *eternal* marriage of any kind. But if Joseph could truly produce eternal polygamy, with all its ghosts, then he must have been more than just another visionary and his authority more than just another authority.

A remarkable disconnect between the teachings of Joseph Smith and the teachings found in the GEP is easily detected, one that goes much deeper than a disagreement about polygamy. The read-between-the-lines message throughout the text seems to say Joseph and the Church are good but no better than other religions and their leaders and that [Page 109]the requirements for salvation could be equally filled by any upright religious tradition. GEP is very squishy concerning the possibility that exaltation and eternal marriage might arise from ordinances and covenant-keeping authorized by the Church’s priesthood. But the author is firm that eternal polygamy is definitely bad and, as a practice in any realm, intolerable.

Conclusion

The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Women and Men is an unfortunate publication because of its many weaknesses outlined above. Concern for an author, who is willing to make such claims, is also probably warranted.

If there is anything spiritually useful here, it might be that GEP could help to open the door to a discussion about things that have likely haunted some LDS women since the 1840s, when plural marriage was first introduced. Through that discussion, comforting clarity where clarity is possible might be shared. Where details remain unknown, we can seek faith to simply trust God and His promises to us.²⁰

1. The following is a listing of the approximate number of specific references to these seven topics: the history of the establishment of polygamy by Joseph Smith is messy (10); earthly polygamy is unfair to women (30); widows who have been sealed to their deceased husbands are treated differently than widowers who were sealed to their deceased wives (18); cancellations of sealings have not always paralleled individual desires or legal marital decrees (19); polygamy is required in the celestial kingdom (14); child-to-parent sealings may be unfair in eternity (21); and eternal polygamy is unfair to women (72).

2. See Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: History and Theology*, 3 vols., Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013, 3:194–203.

3. See Brian C. Hales, “He Had No Other Wife but Me”: Emma Hale Smith and Mormon Polygamy,” *Journal of the John Whitmer Historical Association*, Spring, 2017, forthcoming.

4. In the case of a new plural wife who would have remained unmarried if monogamy was exclusively practiced, her “emotional and sexual opportunities as a wife” are increased from zero to some fraction depending on how many other wives the man has. However, the other wives’ opportunities are diminished as a result of the new plural matrimony.

5. See Alma 1:25, Mosiah 24:15, Alma 14:26, Abraham 1:7, Genesis 6:13–14, 1 Nephi 17:8, Acts 7:59, and 2 Corinthians 11:25.

6. Joseph Fielding Smith Jr., *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:65.

7. Brigham Young, discourse given February 19, 1854, in Richard S. Van Wagoner, ed., *The Complete Discourses of Brigham Young*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Smith–Pettit Foundation, 2009), 2:763.

8. *Journal of Discourses*, 20:26; emphasis added.

9. *Journal of Discourses*, 18:249. Janet Bennion observed: “Past studies of gender dynamics in religion have consistently shown that females tend to be more religious than males.” Janet Bennion, *Desert Patriarchy: Mormon and Mennonite Communities in the Chihuahua Valley* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004), 174.

10. See Brian C. Hales, *Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations after the Manifesto*, Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2006, 6–10, 465–74.

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- [11.](#) The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/family-proclamation>.
- [12.](#) Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 331 (Wilford Woodruff Diary, 10 March 1844).
- [13.](#) Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 12:165 (February 16, 1868); see also Brigham Young, “Discourse,” *Millennial Star* 31, no. 13 (March 27, 1869): 203.
- [14.](#) Charles Kelly, ed., *The Journals of John D. Lee 1846–47 and 1859* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984), 94.
- [15.](#) Jedediah M. Grant, *Journal of Discourses*, 4:128 (October 26, 1856).
- [16.](#) Brigham Young, discourse given September 24, 1850, in Van Wagoner, ed., *Complete Discourses*, 1:404.
- [17.](#) Ehat and Cook, *Words*, 255 (Joseph Smith Diary, 9 October 1843).
- [18.](#) Brigham Young, discourse given March 12, 1848, in Van Wagoner, ed., *Complete Discourses*, 1:276. President Joseph F. Smith agreed in 1915: “If a man and woman should be joined together who are incompatible to each other it would be a mercy to them to be separated that they might have a chance to find other spirits that will be congenial to them. We may bind on earth and it will be bound in Heaven, and loose on earth and it will be loosed in Heaven.” (James R. Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:330–31.)
- [19.](#) Henry B. Eyring, “The Hope of Eternal Family Love,” *Ensign*, August 2016, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/ensign/2016/08/the-hope-of-eternal-family-love?>
- [20.](#) See D&C 109:75–76.