

Review of Carol Lynn Pearson, *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men*. Walnut Creek, CA: Pivot Point Books, 2016. 242 pp. \$19.95.

I have always been interested in the topic of polygamy and have, over the past few decades, read just about every book and commentary on the topic that I could find. I have spent many hours in the Church History Library, the L. Tom Perry Special Collections Library at BYU, and various other repositories poring over all of the source documents I could locate. Thus, I looked forward to reading a recent addition to the literary corpus on the subject contributed by Carol Lynn Pearson. Her book, *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men*, isn't a scholarly look at polygamy, but instead lays out her case for expunging polygamy completely from our history and disavowing its possibility in any future realm.

Though I have studied polygamy for decades, I always have trepidation when writing on the topic. This review essay is no exception. It is so easy to miscommunicate and for offense to be taken when none is intended. I have found that addressing the topic of polygamy is like walking through a minefield blindfolded.

My trepidation is compounded by the fact that while I have made my living as a writer, I freely acknowledge that I am nowhere near as gifted or eloquent a writer as Pearson. Though some may consider mine a fool's errand and fault my ineptitude in execution, I believe that Pearson comes up woefully short on her treatment of polygamy and her suggestions for change.

The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy consists of a dozen chapters, separated by a series of user-contributed stories collectively titled "Other Voices." [Page 138] In her chapters Pearson talks about her "awakening" to the reality of polygamy, how she understands the history of polygamy, and what teachings (and scripture) the Church should jettison. She spends more than a little time talking about things she plans to tell historical figures (like Emma and Joseph Smith) in the hereafter about them and about polygamy.

Pearson's gift for writing is evident in this book. Her prose is easy to follow, easily flows, is engaging, and at times is engrossing and moving. It is not a particularly profound book or overly deep, which makes it an easy read; I was able to finish it in a long afternoon.

Once finished, though, I was troubled. The disquiet wasn't so much because of the topic but in the conclusions that Pearson draws from her understanding and treatment of the topic. If I had to synthesize Pearson's thesis as presented in her book, it is the following:

1. Polygamy is always wrong under all circumstances and has never had divine approval.
2. Polygamy in the early LDS church was a mistake attributable to Joseph's imperfections.
3. People have been hurt and continue to be hurt by historical polygamy.
4. Women are harmed when sealing policy allows men to be sealed to other women after divorce or death of an earlier wife.
5. Children are harmed by sealing policies that don't allow them to be sealed to their biological father if they are born in the covenant of their mother's previous sealing.
6. The Church needs to change canonized scripture to remove any mention of polygamy.
7. The Church needs to change sealing policies to address the hurt which Pearson sees occurring.

Pearson argues her case passionately but (to me) unconvincingly. Perhaps it is because I know the same sources as Pearson and, in all likelihood, have studied them as long as she has. I believe that her distaste for polygamy leads her to grave errors in interpretation, and her approach to addressing the topic borders on fear mongering to advance a cause.

The borders of fear mongering are approached when Pearson shares the stories solicited from others before the book was written. Many of the stories are poignant and even heartbreaking, and I'll address a few [Page 139] of them later in this essay. The stories share real pain and anguish, but it is a pain and anguish that is rooted in not fully understanding some of our most basic doctrines. Pearson uses those stories to bolster points 3, 4, and 5 of her thesis. I believe it better (and ultimately more charitable) to instead teach correct doctrine, which has the power to

enlighten and ultimately to change lives.

Even so, Pearson's thesis is worth considering. In this essay I seek to address the thesis in several areas, starting first with considering how polygamy should be approached and how marital systems should be assessed. I then look at how messy marriage can really be, consider how God might view polygamy, and provide some thoughts about plural marriage in heaven. Finally, I look at Pearson's specific ideas about changing the Church.

Approaching the Topic of Polygamy

In our society polygamy is generally (but not universally) abhorred. This extreme repugnance and utter loathing is likely rooted in the Victorian era sensibilities of our societal subconscious. As Pearson notes, the 1860 Republican Party platform included ridding society of the "twin relics of barbarism," meaning slavery and polygamy (195).¹ Abhorrence of polygamy ran deep in American culture, a feeling that has continued to this day. Even though society finally rejected Victorian morality in the sexual revolution of the 1960s, abhorrence of polygamy has survived.²

In reading Pearson's book, I quickly came to the realization that she comfortably falls into the camp that doesn't just dislike polygamy, she abhors it; it is anathema to her concept of all that is right, good, and proper.

There is nothing wrong, per se, with abhorring polygamy; I know many faithful members of the Church who do. However, such strong feelings can color everything that one reads, thinks, does, and says [Page 140]related to a topic. It can affect how one reads original sources. It can affect which original sources one views as credible. It can affect what one says about those sources. And it can affect how one views what others say about those interpretations, selections, and pronouncements.

Should such persons be relied upon for advice in the very area that gives rise to such strong feelings? I'm not sure that they should be, at least not fully. In other areas of life we are quick to say, "She is so against XYZ that she can no longer see clearly" or, "I'm afraid his bias is unduly coloring his judgment."

I believe that this has happened with Pearson — her strong feelings have foreclosed her ability to calmly consider the very subject she seeks to address. For example, despite Pearson's looking at what she terms the "why" of early LDS polygamy and saying that she would do so "as a dispassionate journalist would" (55), she fails to examine all sides of the possible reasons why polygamy was implemented and easily slips into the role of partisan. In other words, she picks a side and argues against possible reasons why polygamy was practiced. Such an approach is anything but dispassionate.

Consider another example, where Pearson flatly states:

... we want to be not only on the right side of history but to be on the side of right, because polygamy bears bad fruit and has failed the test of Joseph's own words, of being "virtuous, lovely, of good report and praiseworthy." It has proved itself to be a destroyer. (200)

Forgetting for the moment that history doesn't have "sides" or take sides, these are clearly the words of one who isn't examining an issue but is arguing for her interpretation of an issue that she clearly and forcefully dislikes. They are also words that are not balanced or fair in their disdainful judgment of history. Joseph Smith, contra Carol Lynn Pearson, clearly saw no disconnect between the 13th Article of Faith and plural marriage, yet Pearson gives no effort to understand why that might be the case.

I know a good man who, like Pearson, detests polygamy. He sees absolutely nothing right and everything wrong when it comes to the topic. It is the chief reason he disbelieves that Joseph was a prophet. Were he half as sensitive and eloquent in his writing, he could have ghostwritten for Pearson in this book. (No pun on the book's title was intended.) Talent aside, he has written long, rambling diatribes against the topic — and against Joseph — over the

decades I have known him.

[Page 141]Recently this good man was asked by a mutual friend, “If God commands you, personally, to marry a second wife, would you obey God and take another wife?” His answer was “Yes, of course, but I would have to see God in front of me declaring such and He would need to ask me directly, not through a supposed representative of His.”

I share this back and forth because, I think, it may be instructive when it comes to dealing with historical polygamy. Ironically, the one condition under which this good man would personally accept polygamy is the one condition under which Joseph Smith accepted it, and yet my friend disparages Joseph for acting in the same way in which he said he would act under the same circumstances.

How might this be instructive? By remembering first and foremost that those who participated in polygamy did so because they believed they were being obedient to God. It doesn't matter whether we believe them or not — the fact remains that *they* believed it, and a charitable reading of history almost demands that we accept that belief at face value.

All authors bring a bias to their writing; it is inevitable. Those biases are more often than not ingrained in us by our experiences and feelings about what we consider right or wrong. When dealing with historical issues — such as polygamy — an author must try as much as possible to recognize the bias and compensate for it. The author must try to charitably and compassionately understand how and why historical people acted the way they did. I have no sense that Pearson writes with that understanding or that compassion at all, as she certainly does not attempt to compensate for her bias.

Assessing Marital Systems

What is socially acceptable in marriage is determined by the prevailing thought of the society in which those marriages exist. One needs only to look at how “normal” marriages today differ from what was considered normal half a century ago. Before one can fairly consider polygamy — as Pearson purports to do — one must come to terms with what marriage means and how it has been experienced historically.

Unfortunately, Pearson has a hard time disentangling polygamy from women's issues and, more broadly, gender issues.³ To my mind, what she misses is that polygamy is not solely a women's issue. It is [Page 142]more accurate to say that polygamy is a relationship issue generally and a marriage issue specifically — both men and women are affected. It should be obvious that polygamy affects all, regardless of gender.

That obviousness is underscored by over 100 personal stories submitted by both men and women at Pearson's request and shared by her in the book.⁴ The vignettes speak, primarily, about polygamy as damaging to relationships. Most echoed a variation on the thoughts that polygamy is “corrosive to my marriage” (49), “has been very destructive to every relationship” (74), or is “destructive ... to marriages” (160).

Even so, it may be technically incorrect even to speak of polygamy as a “relationship issue,” just as it is incorrect to refer to monogamy as a relationship issue. These are not issues about relationships; they are relationship frameworks — they are distinct marital systems, if you will.

Throughout recorded history, these marital systems have functioned as societal constructs. At different places and times both systems — monogamy *and* polygamy — have been practiced. Even then, that is a simplistic view. At various times societies have taken widely divergent approaches to marriage. For millennia families arranged marriages to solidify power, enhance status, or increase wealth. Only in relatively recent history have marriages been entered into in the warm light of romantic love.

Pearson makes it very clear where she stands when it comes to marriage: “I believe in romantic love” (149). Her utter disdain for polygamy is evidenced in her juxtaposition of it against her concept of romantic love:

Polygamous romantic love is an oxymoron for both man and woman. Polygamy does not increase a man's emotional opportunities — it halves them, or quarters them, or eighths them. No man has an endless supply of intimate giving. The beauty of romantic love is its depth, not its breadth. And for a woman polygamy is giving all and receiving part. To “adulterate” is to “render something poorer in quality by adding another substance, typically an inferior one, to make impure, degrade, spoil, taint.” “Adulterate” and “adultery” are [Page 143]sister words, and in this sense polygamy functions precisely as adultery does, adding something that taints to something that was pure. (153)

That sounds plausible, but it doesn't bear up under consideration in a historical context. Pearson passionately argues for a vision of love, romance, and marriage that very few societies in history have adopted — which is another way to saying that “all who came before are inferior to where we are now.” Such an attitude seems, to me, ignorant bias at best and cultural imperialism at worst. It is steeped in the cultural narcissism of the present and oblivious to the many ways that other marital systems have benefitted both men and women throughout history.

It is human tendency, when in the all-encompassing grip of romantic love that Pearson extols, to blindly assume that nobody else in all of history has loved as deeply, as fully, or as passionately as we then love. Perhaps our feelings of exclusivity overwhelm our better (and more charitable) selves when we assume that nobody in history has benefitted to the degree that we have in the marital system we lately find preferable and even ideal.

The Messiness of Marriage

Marriage is (or can be) a “messy thing.” Throughout history there have been minor offenses and terrible injustices perpetrated in whatever marital system was being practiced. For every injustice and horror one can point to in a polygamous paradigm, one can find equally unjust or horrific behavior in a monogamous paradigm.⁵ We should not expect anything different because regardless of the marital system, it is still people — imperfect and sometimes deeply flawed people — who are involved.

The interesting thing, though, is that with our romantic sensibilities rooted in Victorian morality and sharpened through the lens of feminist individualism, we abhor polygamous relationships and seek to embrace [Page 144]the ideals of monogamous relationships.⁶ That is, unfortunately, a double standard — one of which we may not even be aware.

How, then, does the messiness of marriage translate into the uniquely LDS concept of eternal marriage? Would it be fair to characterize eternal marriage as “an eternally messy thing?” Probably not; one can hope that with time, learning, knowledge, wisdom, change, and the oversight of a loving Father, it is possible for any mess to be sorted out — including marriages.

Perhaps not tangentially, there is at least indirect evidence that Pearson believes in the concept of eternal marriage. The story of Pearson's marriage to her husband Gerald is well known — how they met, were sealed, how Gerald gave into same-sex attraction⁷ and pursued the gay lifestyle, how Pearson stood by his side and cared for him as he contracted AIDS and finally died from AIDS-related complications. Of that marriage she states:

He and I are still sealed, you know, but Mormon authority is the least of it. We are sealed as friends forever by the matter of love and grief and loss and learning, that eternal learning that moves us ever toward God” (209).

Whether this is a head-nod toward a belief that eternal marriage (sealing) is possible without priesthood authority is debatable.⁸ What is not debatable is that LDS doctrine explicitly states that marriage by [Page 145]proper authority is necessary for a sealing to have efficacy in the hereafter. This is a staple of our theological distinctiveness when compared to other faith traditions.

Recognizing that marriage is messy, then, impels that one consider how that messiness is dealt with by a loving and just God. If marriage can, in fact, extend into the next life, how is that messiness carried forward into the hereafter? Toward consideration of this messiness, I would like to examine two major scenarios: Remarriage after divorce and remarriage after the death of a spouse.

Divorce and Remarriage

In our society divorce can happen for any number of causes. In fact, it can happen for absolutely no reason at all.⁹ In Pearson's book, though, there are many poignant stories of spouse betraying spouse, resulting in divorce. This is just a part of one representative example:

My current husband and his first wife were married in the temple and were active Latter-day Saints for years. His wife slept with another man and got pregnant. They divorced before the baby was born. This ex-wife then slept with a different man and got pregnant again. Both of these children are sealed to my husband, even though they are not his children. They were "born in the covenant," with him and that's the way it will stay.

When he and I got married, we talked about getting sealed to each other. As I looked into it, I realized that if I got sealed to my husband, I would be signing on to live in plural marriage in the eternities, since he would then be sealed to two women.

So now, on this earth, I need to make a terrible decision. Do I want to give up my husband in the eternities, or do I want to keep him and live in eternal polygamy? As of today I am not willing to commit to eternal polygamy, so we remain "unsealed." It is very sad for me, because my husband is my other half. He is a wonderful, delightful, kind, loving, and caring man. But according to church doctrine, unless I [Page 146]choose to be sealed into polygamy, he will be with his first wife forever (just like the songs say!) instead of me. (48)

I have no idea of the name of the person sharing this story, but for clarity's sake I will refer to her as Sister Johnson. The sorrow and grief portrayed in Sister Johnson's story makes the heart ache. Pearson uses the story as evidence of how the Church and its teachings have caused pain and suffering.

But is that really what is at work here? What is actually causing the pain and suffering? I believe that Pearson lays the blame at the wrong feet and, thereby, offers no true solace for Sister Johnson's pain and suffering. Sister Johnson and, presumably, Brother Johnson have made decisions based upon faulty understandings. Pearson does nothing to help them.

Consider the belief that if Sister Johnson was sealed to her husband, she "would be signing on to live in plural marriage in the eternities, since he would then be sealed to two women." This is a false understanding, as it does not take into account agency or the effects of exercising that agency.

It is a basic tenet of our religion that in the pre-mortal realm we fought what has traditionally been called the "war in heaven." The basis of that war was the exercise of moral agency. God's plan, presented and championed by Christ, was for each of us to be able to choose whether to return to God by exercising our agency righteously. Satan's plan was that "one soul shall not be lost," thereby "destroy[ing] the agency of man" (Moses 4:1, 3).

Why would one presume that God would jettison the core principle of His plan (agency, or the right to choose) by forcing His children to be married in the hereafter when they refuse to be married in the here-and-now? The thought makes reason stare.

According to multiple recitations in D&C 132, the entire basis of establishing an eternal marriage is based upon three things:

1. A willing man and woman
2. Performance of the sealing ordinance by one holding the proper keys
3. Confirmation of the ordinance by the Holy Spirit of Promise

In the case of Brother Johnson and his first wife, only one of these conditions remains satisfied — the performance of the sealing ordinance by one holding the proper keys. The other two conditions have not been satisfied. Neither party is any longer willing to participate in an eternal [Page 147]marriage with each other, nor has the Holy Spirit of Promise confirmed the ordinance.

What is the Holy Spirit of Promise? According to the study materials provided with our scriptures, the Holy Ghost is the Holy Spirit of Promise.

He confirms as acceptable to God the righteous acts, ordinances, and covenants of men. The Holy Spirit of Promise witnesses to the Father that the saving ordinances have been performed properly and that the covenants associated with them have been kept.¹⁰

Does anyone wonder whether Brother Johnson's first wife was keeping "the covenants associated with" eternal marriage when she lacked the personal fidelity required for that marriage?

Consider, as well, the words of Elder Bednar in a General Conference address:

The Holy Spirit of Promise is the ratifying power of the Holy Ghost. When sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise, an ordinance, vow, or covenant is binding on earth and in heaven. (See D&C 132:7.) Receiving this "stamp of approval" from the Holy Ghost is the result of faithfulness, integrity, and steadfastness in honoring gospel covenants "in [the] process of time" (Moses 7:21). However, this sealing can be forfeited through unrighteousness and transgression.¹¹

Note the final sentence and its application to Brother Johnson's first marriage — his sealing to his first wife was "forfeited through unrighteousness and transgression."

With a proper understanding of how eternal marriages and sealings work, Sister Johnson's heartache could have been avoided. She could reasonably and safely enter into a sealing with Brother Johnson and build an eternal marriage that met all three requirements without fear that Brother Johnson's first wife would somehow intrude during the eternities. The same could be said for the experiences of others whose stories Pearson highlighted in her book.

I believe that Pearson does her audience a disservice when she fails to express fully and adequately the real doctrine of the Church when it [Page 148]comes to eternal marriages. Yet, she assures her readership that she has fully and completely studied polygamy (and related topics, such as the sealing ordinances) over the course of years. Perhaps her understanding of the topics is colored by her bias, and that coloring affects her incomplete advice. Perhaps most sadly, Pearson allows wounds to continue festering that could be salved and healed if she, instead, taught pure doctrine.

Death and Remarriage

Many of the stories Pearson shares are of the abiding heartache experienced by adult children who had a parent who died and then the surviving parent remarried and was sealed to the subsequent spouse. Here is one story I found particularly poignant:

As a new bishop I had a woman in our congregation who was trying to make her way back to church

after years of not being active. The ward and I welcomed her and her children with open arms and warmth of spirit. It wasn't long before she requested an interview with me. When she came in to the bishop's office I could tell that she was troubled.

She told me that when she was in her early twenties her mother passed away of a sudden heart attack. She teared up as she remembered the moment she found out her mother had died. A few years later her father married another woman in the temple and she was sealed to him. Hesitantly she asked, "Is it true that my father will have two wives in the next life?"

I found myself struggling to share what I knew was the case. "Yes," I said, "according to current church practice, a man can be sealed for eternity to more than one woman."

The words seemed to fall from my lips like daggers to her heart. Her voice shook as she said, "I thought we didn't believe in or practice polygamy anymore."

At that moment, I found myself inadequately prepared and a little resentful that I had to be the one to answer these questions. What can a local leader say to ease the pain of this woman who now saw herself as part of an eternal polygamous family? I did my best but the wound was too great and the words of comfort felt hollow even to me.

A few weeks later, she stopped coming to church. Despite our continued efforts to reach out to her, she and her children [Page 149]never returned. Polygamy drove this sister away from a ward family that loved her. (77)

Again, not knowing the name of the storyteller, I'll assign a fictitious name for ease of reference. In this case, I'll call the storyteller Bishop Carter.

Perhaps one reason Bishop Carter's story was so poignant to me was that I could very easily identify with it. Not only did I serve for a time as a bishop who had people suffering real pain sitting across the desk but the story was also very similar to one in our family.

My mother-in-law was an amazing woman whom I love and revere. She raised an amazing daughter (my wife) and showed throughout her life how to weather whatever life might toss her way. One thing she was required to weather was never being sealed to her father, who died in a coal mine accident when she was in her teens. Her mother later remarried a non-member who converted to the Church. Both were later sealed in the temple, but my mother-in-law refused to be sealed to them because she wanted to be sealed to her "real father."

How would I have reacted had I been in Bishop Carter's position and, similarly, how would I have counseled my mother-in-law had she sought my counsel? I probably would have started with a short little exercise in imagination.¹² I would have asked them to consider a deceptively simple question: How do you envision life in the hereafter?

After talking about what we would do with our time, what prophets have said on the matter, and what personal desires would be, I would ask another question: How do you envision that eternal families will be organized in the hereafter?

At a young age we learn that we will live with our mother and father in a family unit. It didn't take me long to conclude that such a concept is incomplete and (dare I say it!) wrong. Our ward's annual Primary program recently featured a popular children's song that reinforces such an immature understanding:

I have a fam'ly here on earth,
They are so good to me.

I want to share my life with them through all eternity.

[Page 150]Fam'lies can be together forever

Through Heav'nly Father's plan.

I always want to be with my own family,

And the Lord has shown me how I can.

The Lord has shown me how I can.¹³

While such an arrangement would be wonderful if we are young — and wonderfully understandable to a young mind — what about when we are old? Do we expect that when we are 30, 40, or 50 that we will still live with our parents in whatever heavenly mansion awaits us? What, then, of our own spouse and our own children? If we expect to live with our parents, shouldn't our spouses expect to live with their parents? Would we expect our married adult children to abandon their families to live with us in our eternal family?

The fact is, we don't know what arrangements will be made in the hereafter for the eternal families we form here on earth. If Bishop Carter's congregant was worried that she might have to live with her father and two mothers, that seems (to me) to be creating an expectation of the hereafter that is based on such a limited understanding as to make it vanishingly improbable. It seems much more likely that one would live with one's eternal spouse, in one's own family unit, and not with parents and their spouses. It is likely, too, that our children will live with their own eternal family units upon which they have worked.

What, then, of my mother-in-law's situation? After she died, and consistent with Church policy, we had her father sealed to her mother (so her mother was now sealed to two husbands) and had her sealed to her father and mother, as she desired. What will be the living arrangements for such a sealed, eternal family in the hereafter?

Again, we don't know, and it is possible for us to drive ourselves crazy with speculations as to what *must* be or what *must not* be. What we do know for sure is what Joseph Smith himself stated, now canonized in the Doctrine & Covenants:

And that same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy. (D&C 130:2)

What does sociality mean, in this context? According to Webster's 1828 dictionary (which reflects language meaning at the time that Joseph used the term), it means the quality of how people live in society or the [Page 151]public in aggregate. In other words, we will live there as we live here, only amidst eternal glory.

Does that mean we will live in families there? Of course, if one defines a family as a husband and wife and provided those eternal, glorified families have been created according to the way that God has defined. (See, again, the three requirements mentioned in the previous section.)

Further in my discussion with Bishop Carter's congregant or with my mother-in-law, I have no doubt that the objection would be raised, "what about eternal polygamy, though? Won't my father or mother (in the case of my mother-in-law) be married to two spouses?"

The correct answer is, "yes, possibly." I say possibly because the only way that such a marital arrangement could persist is consistent with the foundational principle of agency, as already discussed. Such a relationship cannot exist without the willful agreement of all those involved.

Beyond that, we don't have the slightest idea of how things will work. Will all spouses live in the same home? Will they live in separate homes? Will they live in separate cities? Will there even *be* homes or cities in heaven? We just don't know.

What About the Children?

Similar to the situations addressed in the previous section are the seemingly thorny situations of children of the current spouse being sealed to a previous spouse. Here is how one person related her story in Pearson's book:

As a single mother I raised my children in the church and supported my two sons on missions. My oldest son, who all of his life has been an active, worthy member of the church, is married to a wonderful woman who was widowed (while pregnant) at age twenty-one. They now have two children together, who are not sealed to their own father but to a man they don't know. My son's heart aches to be a part of the eternal family that he was always promised by the church he believes in.

He now feels his mission was wasted by teaching people they could be with their families forever. He can't, and for no fault of his own (99).

[Page 152]Pearson shares other stories similar to this one, told from the vantage point of the adult children, realizing they are sealed to a man long deceased who wasn't even their biological father.

Will such children need to spend the eternities in the company of a stranger because they are sealed to that person? Will they forever be precluded from being with or around the man who actually is their father? For reasons already discussed in the previous section, it is doubtful that the adult children of such families — who are, hopefully, working on building their own eternal families — will live in the hereafter with either the first-deceased man (to whom they were sealed) or their biological father.

What those children do have, however, is the blessing and benefit of the sealing itself. The act of sealing children to parents represents an eternal linkage into the covenant relationship between God and His children. I still remember the overwhelming feelings of having my youngest son, adopted as an infant, sealed to our family very shortly after the adoption was pronounced legal. In my imperfect understanding at the time, I took solace that he was “eternally ours.”

I missed the words of the sealing, however. While it is improper to discuss those words outside of the temple, I have since been to many sealing ordinances. The words say nothing specific about the child “belonging” to the parents. What they do say has to do with blessings the child receives through the sealing. The words talk about coming forth in the resurrection. They talk about being an heir to a covenant that started with the ancient patriarchs.

Once a child has received those blessings, they are not cavalierly taken away, and they certainly cannot be taken away by anything the parents do or don't do. The sealing isn't about who one will live with or who one “belongs to.” It is not really about the parents at all — it is about individual blessings and possibilities for the child.

Thus, my youngest son, when he was sealed to me and my wife, was the recipient of the blessings in that sealing. If my wife and I had subsequently divorced, remarried, died, or even left the Church and thereby renounced our own sealing, those individual blessings granted in my son's sealing would have continued and been his, independent of us as parents and our choices or state. His sealing blessings, once pronounced, were then contingent upon the same three conditions of any other sealing ordinance, as already discussed.

Elder Robert E. Wells, of the Seventy, once addressed how the sealing of children to parents “works” when marital situations change. [Page 153]He specifically addressed it in relation to blended families, where both parents brought children to a new marriage:

Family members need not worry about the sealing situation of blended families as it might be in the next life. Our concern is to live the gospel now and to love others, especially those in our family. If

we live the gospel to the best of our ability, the Lord in His love and mercy will bless us in the next life and all things will be right.

I have seen some new blended families become torn apart by worrying about who will belong to whom and who will be with whom in the next life. My mother, who is sealed to my deceased father, is married to a widower who is sealed to his first wife, who died childless. My mother and her second husband have a son, who is my brother. We are not concerned about who will be sealed to whom. We simply trust in the Lord's wisdom and love and try to live righteously.¹⁴

God takes care of all His children if we let Him. A child who has been sealed to parents is the recipient of untold blessings. If we understand what sealings provide and promise, having the child subsequently sealed to a different parent wouldn't provide anything to the child that he or she didn't already have by virtue of the existing sealing. We can choose to be sorrowful over whom a child is sealed to, or we can take comfort in knowing that the child has eternal claim on blessings unspeakable. Pearson and some whose stories she shared obviously choose the former over the latter and thereby miss an opportunity to choose peace over heartache.

God and Polygamy

I cannot justify historical polygamy. Fortunately, I don't have to justify it. Likewise, I don't have to justify any possible future (heavenly) polygamy, nor would I try. What I try to do, instead, is accept others who were acting according to their beliefs, to the best of their ability. I have read and studied most — if not all — of the same original sources that Pearson has studied, but I've come to very different conclusions from that process.¹⁵ [Page 154] I accept that early LDS who entered into polygamous relationships were doing what they understood that God wanted, just as I accept the same in Old Testament peoples. I also believe that God counted their obedience to their understanding of His will as righteousness. It is not my place to say that they were wrong (in other words, unrighteous) because my present-day sensibilities may be offended.

When it comes to God and polygamy, I believe that God is rather agnostic.¹⁶ Earlier I mentioned that marriage systems can vary and, indeed, they have varied over the course of recorded history. Through it all, God has watched and generally accepted His people regardless of what marital system was practiced by the societies in which those people lived. As long as His people have done as He has commanded and expected, their works are acceptable to Him.

Pearson apparently disagrees, asserting at one point, "There is no documentation anywhere in the Bible that God commanded polygamy" (57). This appears to be nothing more than a carefully worded sentence seeming to claim divine approbation for Pearson's own rejection of polygamy. Truth be told, I agree with the precise words that Pearson used: We have no documentary evidence, in either the Old or New Testaments, of God's *commanding* polygamy. But even if God did not command polygamy, He certainly did not forbid it, either.¹⁷ In fact, in at least one place He clearly condones it. Speaking to David through the prophet Nathan, the Lord said:

And I gave thee thy master's house, and *thy master's wives into thy bosom*, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things. (2 Samuel 12:8, emphasis added)

This is consistent with the LDS understanding that God can, if God decides, allow or even require His people to enter into marital arrangements that may not match our sensibilities:

[Page 155] Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none;

For I, the Lord God, delight in the chastity of women. And whoredoms are an abomination before me; thus saith the Lord of Hosts.

Wherefore, this people shall keep my commandments, saith the Lord of Hosts, or cursed be the land for their sakes.

For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things. (Jacob 2:27–30)

The command is clear to the Nephites that they are to be monogamous, but the final verse recognizes the fact that God can command otherwise, if He so chooses. If God could command his people to use or allow a marital system other than monogamy, we do nothing but impose our own limitations on God if we say that God would never do such a thing. In other words, we fashion God according to the dictates of our own abhorrence.

The point is not to justify polygamy; again, polygamy doesn't need to be justified. The point is that if God has at different times and in different places allowed, forbidden, condoned, or even commanded polygamy, what right or place do we have to universally reject it if, as we profess, we seek to become like Him?

Plural Marriage in Heaven

Pearson advocates the understanding that polygamy is required in heaven; that all marriages there will, eventually, be plural in nature. She asserts — and uses the feelings of her chosen story-sharers as support — that this is the Church's doctrine on the matter. This shows a profound misunderstanding of our doctrine.¹⁸

The supposed *prima facie* evidence for asserting that polygamy is required in heaven is D&C 132. And, the fact that this section of the D&C is canonized means it is Church doctrine. But what if D&C 132 doesn't say what some assume that it says?

[Page 156]Wait. What? Doesn't D&C 132 say that God expects us to form polygamous unions, if not here then in the hereafter? The simple answer is no, it doesn't. Yes, the section was given at a time when the principle was being introduced to the Church. Yes, it was given at the urging of Hyrum Smith who mistakenly thought it would go far to convince Emma Smith.¹⁹

But it wasn't compulsory for everyone. Nowhere in the revelation does it say that God expected (or expects) everyone to practice the principle. Nowhere in the revelation does it say that practicing the principle was required for exaltation.

Did God expect that some should enter into polygamous marriages? Yes, He did. But He didn't require everyone to do so. Even at the height of early LDS polygamy, the majority of marriages were still monogamous. Pearson paraphrases the Church's Gospel Topics page about plural marriage: "Probably half of those living in Utah Territory in 1857 experienced life in a polygamous family as a husband, wife, or child at some time during their lives" (114).²⁰ This tidbit is made without consideration or explanation of what this really means. If one assumes an equal split between parents and children (which is a very conservative split in the times well before contraception), that means that only a quarter of all LDS adults lived in polygamous marriages.²¹

What about the other three quarters? Were these non-polygamous unions eternally condemned because those involved didn't "live the principle?" No, they were not, neither here on earth nor in heaven where, according to Joseph, the same "sociality" will exist. Those individuals — provided they were sealed in the temple in their monogamous relationships — were considered recipients of the same blessings as those choosing polygamous unions.

God does not require that all who enter heaven do so as polygamists nor will He require that they, at some point, become polygamists. He [Page 157]will do nothing to force His children's behavior in this or any other area,

thereby removing their agency.

Banishment of the Ghost

In Pearson's view, nothing short of a disavowal of the "doctrine of plural marriage" as it pertains "to history, the present, or the eternal future" will do (194). She cites as precedent the 1978 revelation that extended the priesthood to all worthy males. In other words, if deep institutional changes can (and have) been made in one area, we can certainly make them in this one.

To some, that may sound reasonable. "When the Ghost is finally banished," Pearson effuses,

each young and tender girl will learn at church and at home that if she marries she will become the singular and full partner of a husband of her choice and that her divine nature and individual worth are such that she will never be "one of," here or in heaven. (201)

Idyllic prose aside, I don't think that Pearson's proposals will really help those whom Pearson purports to champion — unless the Church entirely rejects the God-given authority to seal marriages.

Consider, for example, a hypothetical young couple who get married and sealed in the temple. One must recognize that there is at least a chance of their getting divorced or one of the couple dying at a young age. (Many stories shared in Pearson's book deal with at least one of these very real possibilities.)

In such a situation, how does such a reality square with Pearson's vision as just expressed? If the young woman's husband dies and she remarries, wouldn't her second husband become "one of" in heaven? How about if the imaginary tables are turned, and it is the wife who dies first? Should the surviving husband be barred from being married or sealed again, or if he chooses to do so, should the first sealing be entirely canceled and have no efficacy in the hereafter?

Pearson doesn't address such possibilities; she simply asserts that, somehow, things will be better. Her suggestions on how to "banish the ghost" present more potential pitfalls and conflicts than the system she seeks to replace. It is reasonable to conclude that implementing the changes Pearson proposes would also banish the meaning of "eternal marriages" and result in far more marital chaos than what she currently [Page 158]senses. Marriage (even eternal marriages) can indeed be messy, but Pearson's suggestions do nothing to make them any less messy.

Conclusion

Pearson feels that love and feelings are at the apex of everything we do. Her Facebook page, for instance, features on its masthead the statement "let LOVE rule always."²² Further, she states:

I recall those wise and piercing words of Maya Angelou: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." That is the indisputable test of all our teachings, our doctrines, our policies. (112)

I agree that we should teach with love and that our policies should be implemented with love. I agree that both should be formulated and passed on with consideration of the feelings of others. However, I strongly disagree that the "indisputable test" of our doctrines — the measure by which they should be judged — is how they make us feel. Such an approach would make doctrine subservient to the changing vagaries of the heart — a position untenable with the concepts of absolute truths and an unchanging God. The logical extension of Pearson's standard is that we should discard any doctrine that gives us discomfort. One wonders whether any doctrine would be able to stand.

Toward the end of her book, Pearson makes this very interesting comment, phrased as what she would like to tell Joseph Smith, were she to go back in time and meet him before his death:

Joseph ... Brother Joseph ... the large and godly impulse you welcomed and embodied lives on ... it has touched millions and it brings light ... we are brothers and sisters and we hold a vision of Zion ... we bring our light, brightened by your light ... and we hold it high (208–209, ellipses in original).

This is actually a very good summary of Pearson's treatise, as presented in her book — it reflects her vision of Zion.²³ The problem is that we, as Latter-day Saints, aren't called to envision Zion. We seek for Zion, but it is not a Zion according to our desires or our blueprint. We [Page 159]aren't the ones to draw up the plans of Zion; that would be tantamount to creating God in our own image.

Joseph understood this. He wasn't building his own vision of Zion; he sought for God to reveal His plans for Zion. That difference may be too subtle for some, but it should not be too subtle for Pearson. When she says that “we hold a vision of Zion,” that is a non sequitur; it really doesn't matter if we hold a vision of Zion. What matters is if we understand God's vision for Zion.

Does God's vision for Zion require polygamy? I don't believe so, though it may allow it. Even in saying that, I'm willing to admit that we just don't fully know — which seems more than Pearson is willing to admit. During this time of limited understanding what we can say, along with Nephi, is that God “loveth his children” despite the fact that we don't “know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:17). We can also take comfort in the counsel that President Henry B. Eyring received:

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.”²⁴

Those family arrangements are provided by a God who loves each of His children.[Page 160]

1. This platform plan was actually adopted four years earlier, at the birth of the Republican Party in 1856. A good overview is provided at ushistory.org, “GOP Convention of 1856 in Philadelphia,”

http://www.ushistory.org/gop/convention_1856.htm.

2. It is ironic that other sexual dynamics entirely inconsistent with Victorian morals are, today, culturally acceptable and even celebrated. Dynamics such as free love, pre-marital sex, open marriages, unwed mothers, living together without formal marriage, and same-sex unions barely turn a head, but the anathema of polygamy remains in Western culture. One reasonably wonders what it is about polygamy that makes it so different.

3. Pearson has long championed women's issues and been viewed by many as a voice for women's rights — a view she has personally fostered. For instance, the “About” section on her Facebook page simply states “Carol Lynn Pearson is well known for her work for women and for the LGBT community, as well as for her more general inspirational writing.” See <https://www.facebook.com/clpauthor/about/>.

4. Pearson actually has thousands of stories she solicited from people, over 8,000 as of the writing of her book (8).

There are presumably many more stories to date, as Pearson actively solicits such stories at the end of the book and on her website (<http://carolynnperson.com>).

5. In a weak head-nod toward the possibility of at least marginal happiness in a polygamous paradigm, Pearson notes “It is possible to find occasional stories of polygamous families who lived in some contentment. Making the best of a difficult situation is a Mormon characteristic” (111). The dismissive approach to such “occasional stories” — bordering on being a backhanded compliment — is consistent with an overtly biased approach to polygamy that colors all that one considers on the topic.

6. Academics, for some time, have recognized that the Western practice of marriage, divorce, and marriage again is simply another form of having multiple spouses. In the view of many, this practice is considered “serial polygamy.” In the larger Christian world, some have questioned why “the same church that sanctions serial polygamy has serious problems with the simultaneous one.” See, for example, Satoshi Kanazawa, “The paradox of polygamy I: Why most Americans are polygamous,” *Psychology Today* (February 2008), at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-scientific-fundamentalist/200802/the-paradox-polygamy-i-why-most-americans-are-polygamous>; and Moses Mlenga, *Polygamy in Northern Malawi: A Christian Reassessment* (Luwinga, Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2016), 112–13.

7. I fully understand that Pearson would not agree with my choice of words stating that her husband “gave into same-sex attraction.” I have no problem with that disagreement.

8. Some members of my family, who are not LDS, believe that they will be with their spouses after this life because of the depth of love they experienced and strength of marriage they established in this life. In their view, a merciful God would not nullify their marriage and thereby cause them eternal pain. Such belief is, of course, at odds with LDS doctrine, which states that marriage without proper authority is “not of force when they are dead” (D&C 132:15).

9. No-fault divorce has been adopted by all states over the past 47 years. California was the first state to enact no-fault divorce in 1969 and New York the last in 2010. See www.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2010/july/new-york-to-adopt-no-fault-divorce-bill.

10. <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/scriptures/gs/holy-spirit-of-promise>

11. David A. Bednar, “Ye Must Be Born Again,” *Ensign* (May 2007), 22. See also <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/general-conference/2007/04/ye-must-be-born-again>.

12. I would hope that Pearson would approve of such an approach. She favorably cites a quote attributed to Einstein that “imagination is everything. It is the preview of life’s coming attractions” (187).

13. “Families Can Be Together Forever,” *Children’s Songbook*, 188.

14. Robert E. Wells, “Uniting Blended Families,” *Ensign* (August 1997); <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/ensign/1997/08/uniting-blended-families>.

15. Pearson concludes that all participants — including Joseph — were mistaken, misguided, and therefore wrong

in their actions. This is a common (and understandable) conclusion of those who have an innate revulsion toward polygamy. Contra Pearson, I do not conclude that they acted wrongly and I believe that they were neither misguided nor mistaken.

16. One is said to be agnostic on a subject — such as polygamy — if he or she holds none of the opposing positions on the subject. I consider myself agnostic on the topic, as well.

17. Multiple non-LDS resources agree with such an assessment. A representative source can be found at <https://bible.org/question/why-did-godly-men-ot-have-more-one-wife>.

18. It is easy to create and subsequently destroy an argument based upon a misunderstanding of a foundational doctrine. There is also a formal name for such an argument: a straw man. For a quick overview, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Straw_man.

19. Pearson takes broad literary license with the historical record on this fact (83-84) and recounts a formal “healing blessing” she gave repudiating D&C 132 (85).

20. For the non-paraphrased quote see “Plural Marriage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-the-church-of-jesus-christ-of-latter-day-saints>.

21. The percentage is diluted even more if one considers that the Gospel Topics page, cited by Pearson, indicates that their figures represent those living in Utah Territory. Obviously, not all LDS lived in Utah Territory, but one should expect that percentages were higher within the territory.

22. See <https://www.facebook.com/clpauthor/>.

23. Pearson clearly states this earlier, as well: “I must not end before I articulate as clearly as I can the vision I hold, and that I believe many of you [her readers] hold” (187).

24. Henry B. Eyring, “The Hope of Eternal Family Love,” *Ensign* (August 2016), 5. See also <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/ensign/2016/08/the-hope-of-eternal-family-love>.