



In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith

By Todd M. Compton



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Beginning in the 1830s, at least thirty-three women married Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism. These were passionate relationships which also had some longevity, except in cases such as that of two young sisters, one of whom was discovered by Joseph's first wife, Emma, in a locked bedroom with the prophet. Emma remained a steadfast opponent of polygamy throughout her life.

The majority of Smith's wives were younger than he, and one-third were between fourteen and twenty years of age. Another third were already married, and some of the husbands served as witnesses at their own wife's polyandrous wedding. In addition, some of the wives hinted that they bore Smith children—most notably Sylvia Sessions's daughter Josephine—although the children carried their stepfather's surname.

For all of Smith's wives, the experience of being secretly married was socially isolating, emotionally draining, and sexually frustrating. Despite the spiritual and temporal benefits, which they acknowledged, they found their faith tested to the limit of its endurance. After Smith's death in 1844, their lives became even more "lonely and desolate." One even joined a convent. The majority were appropriated by Smith's successors, based on the Old Testament law of the Levirate, and had children by them, though they considered these guardianships unsatisfying. Others stayed in the Midwest and remarried, while one moved to California. But all considered their lives unhappy, except for the joy they found in their children and grandchildren.



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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Formerly at UCLA and now the editor of *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, Compton has compiled a meticulously researched and masterly study of Mormon Joseph Smith's 33 wives. The women are presented individually, with many of their own documents cited. Compton contends that "Mormon polygamy was characterized by a tragic ambiguity": infinite dominion in the next life vs. a social system that did not work, thus resulting in acute neglect of the wives. These "key women have been comparatively forgotten," surprisingly so considering the reverence Mormons hold for their founding prophet and how important polygamy was to Smith. The "sacred loneliness" refers to Smith's promise of salvation combined with the solitude of the forsaken multiple wives. A plenary reference and bibliography and a collection of the wives' photographs fill out this tome, making it a fascinating work. Valuable for both lay readers and scholars, this is recommended for public and academic libraries with good collections in history and women's studies. ?Kay Meredith Dusheck, Anamosa, IA

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About the Author

Todd M. Compton, Ph.D., classics, UCLA, is the author of *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, editor of *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, a contributor to *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism* and *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, and has been published in the *American Journal of Philology*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, *Classical Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Popular Culture*, among others. He currently plays electric violin in the Mark Davis Group, which performs at coffee houses and music clubs in the Los Angeles area, and is the assistant systems manager for Paul, Hastings, Jaofski, and Walker. He lives in Santa Monica, California.

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INTRODUCTION.

This book had its genesis in a research fellowship I received from the Huntington Library in 1992. My interest, among other things, was Eliza R. Snow's pioneer diaries, housed in the Huntington's impressive document collection. As a leading woman of early Mormonism—a poet, female activist, secret polygamous wife to Latter-day Saint (LDS) church founder Joseph Smith, and later a wife of Brigham Young—Snow seemed significant enough to warrant further attention, even though much had already been written about her. Particularly interesting to me were her oblique allusions to other plural wives, sometimes referred to by given name, sometimes by maiden or married surname only. To identify these women, I knew I would have to consult reliable lists of the marriages of Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Joseph Smith. Jeffery Johnson had published a good list of Brigham Young's wives, and Stanley Kimball had provided a full list of Heber's. Nevertheless, for Smith himself, I could not find any definitive listing of his plural marriage partners.

Andrew Jenson's century-old list of twenty-seven of Smith's plural wives provided a core of basic data. In the 1950s, Stanley S. Ivins compiled an unpublished list of eighty-four women, but many of these were only sealings to Joseph after his death. The first fully annotated, footnoted inventory of Smith's plural wives was the appendix of Fawn Brodies *No Man Knows My History*, published in 1945, with minor updating in the

1971 edition. Although Brodie was a pioneer in documenting Smith's polygamy, fifty years of secondary publications and classification of primary documents have dated her book, and, moreover, scholars have faulted her for relying on antagonistic sources that have since proven unreliable.

Eventually I concluded that a full, complete, up-to-date list of Joseph Smith's wives would be a valuable addition to Mormon studies, and my project on Eliza Snow metamorphosed into an investigation of all of the wives of Joseph Smith, with Snow being one among many. Since early polygamy was secret and not officially documented, there are still many uncertainties in even a conservative, carefully documented description of Smith's extended family. Nevertheless, this book furthers research on these women, provides an update to Brodie, and attempts a more balanced evaluation than her book offered.

Users Review

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