

Episode 37: Tough Questions about Mormon Polygamy with Brian and Laura Hales

Special Guest Podcaster Daniel Peterson

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Daniel Peterson: I'm Daniel Peterson of the Interpreter Foundation. I'm sitting down with Brian Hales and Laura Hales to talk about polygamy. What could be more fun than that? I just want to say a word to introduce this. This is a podcast that we are producing jointly. The Interpreter Foundation, which I represent, and Brian and Laura represent *LDS Perspectives Podcast*. Brian is an anesthesiologist who, he tells me, and I love this line, "Charges people to put them to sleep." I thought, "Sometimes, that's really the business I'm in as well as a professor at BYU." He has become over the past I don't know how many years certainly one of the premier authorities on the origins, and to some extent, the development of plural marriage in the LDS Church in Mormonism.

Laura Hales is the editor of *A Reason for Faith*, which is an anthology of articles on various issues that come up, or that cause problems for people, or pose challenges to people.

So, we're going to talk about plural marriage. I guess I'm just going to start off by saying that the establishment of polygamy in the church is a topic that a lot of members, and a lot of outsiders find difficult to understand. Or maybe even worse, I think they find it too easy to understand. Certainly critics do. They know immediately what it's about, or they think they do. It seems obvious. What are some of the reasons you think people struggle with this?

Brian Hales: I think one of the reasons is that they didn't know about Joseph Smith as a polygamist. Many church members were unaware that he practiced plural marriage. Laura and I met a couple of missionaries, and they had learned we had been presenting on this topic, and the senior companion looked at us and said, "So, Joseph was a polygamist?" and he seemed a little concerned. He says, "No, I'm not having a faith crisis," but that was his response. It isn't common knowledge, so people are surprised when they encounter that. The other thing is that anytime you put sex and religion

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together you've got a hot button topic. It's going to require more faith, more study, and more contemplation, I think, than if those things are not included.

Daniel Peterson: Why hasn't the church been more forthright about this? I mean, a lot of people say, "Look, I haven't been told everything I should have been told. The church has been hiding this sort of stuff from me." So, why do you think the church has been so reluctant to talk about it?

Laura Hales: Well, there was an attitude among some of the Brethren, that it was better to keep some aspects of our prophets' lives private. We know this because recent interviews have come forth. One was an interview with Ronald Walker. He said that when Leonard Arrington was writing his biography on Brigham Young, he was asked by one of the Brethren to take out all references to polygamy. They did actually want to protect the prophets. In the case of Brigham Young, I don't personally see the necessity of that because the whole world knows that Brigham Young was a polygamist because by the time he practiced polygamy, the eastern press got a hold of it.

I'll mention that, even though most of us didn't know that Joseph Smith was a polygamist, and we did know that Brigham Young was a polygamist, we didn't get that knowledge from church curriculum. We got that from culture, so some people want to put those two in a different category. "Okay. We were told about Brigham Young, but we weren't told about Joseph." We weren't told about either. They were silent on both. But we know it was practiced. So I can't answer, "Why" questions very well, but I can say that things are changing.

Elder Russell Ballard gave a talk to CES employees. We call this a watershed talk because in this talk he admits that the well-meaning curriculum of the past did not meet the needs of what our youth today need. There needs to be more transparency about our past, so the Brethren are making efforts to change what maybe past leaders thought was important. They have made documents available on the Joseph Smith Papers project, the Mountain Meadows Massacre project was very transparent about what happened in an unfortunate incident. Then they brought forth the Gospel Topics Essays, where they talk about these hot button topics. They are making strides even incorporating these Gospel Topics Essays into our curriculum. So yes, perhaps they should have done

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more, earlier, but they're doing the best they can right now to bring that information out.

Daniel Peterson: Brian, do you have anything to add on that? What is the church doing now to help members better understand the details about Joseph Smith and plural marriage and so on?

Brian Hales: Well, the Gospel Topics Essays are really helpful because they're dealing with controversial topics that we never really talked about, or if you tried to talk about them just a few years ago, people would think that you were a heretic in church. Also, I've had a couple of conversations that have impressed me, that the church is committed to this.

One was with Elder Stephen Snow, as the church historian. I had noticed how much material, scanned documents, the church is now making available, without charge, for download by any researcher on the church history library's website. It's amazing, it's staggering the amount of material that you can now download from that site. I complimented him on that, and he just said simply, "Transparency is important; the internet is allowing the church to do many things it couldn't do before."

I also had a conversation with the church historian, who related how he had asked President Uchtdorf of the first presidency, "How many of these documents should we make available online?" President Uchtdorf reportedly said, "All of it." I'm sure that won't include church discipline and temple items, but what President Uchtdorf is reflecting is that the church can withstand scrutiny. That's why we're willing to put up all these documents and let the critics as well as the believers have access to them.

Daniel Peterson: Now Laura, we don't sanction polygamy today. It's done, I suppose, in a ceremonial way sometimes in certain cases in the temples, but we don't have living polygamist relationships in the church. Not legally anyway. Not sanctioned by the church, but some church members are still uncomfortable with the past practice of polygamy, even though it's not directly relevant today. What about that?

Laura Hales: Well, because our culture is about monogamy, it just seems unnatural. It's difficult to understand why this would be a commandment of this small group of people at this time. We have some reasons given to us in D&C 132, but, in general, the reasons don't seem large enough to fill in the space of how strange of a practice it seems to us. So, of course, it is

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uncomfortable to think of Joseph Smith having 30–40 wives. That’s a perfectly logical reaction to finding out the details of Joseph Smith’s practice of polygamy.

Daniel Peterson: Sometimes when members hear new details about church history, it disturbs them. We often frankly, Americans in particular I suppose, aren’t a very historically minded people. We don’t have the thousand years behind us like they have in Europe and so on. Most people in schools find history boring, but then when they discover certain things about church history, they’re shocked because they haven’t known them, and maybe they should have known them, but they didn’t, and they’re blindsided. Those things sometimes cause questions to arise or doubts about Joseph’s behavior. “Is this really the way a prophet of God should have behaved?” So, if you don’t mind, I’m going to mention some specific issues that I hear pretty regularly, and let you respond with some details or ideas that might help people to understand those issues. The first one is the obvious one. In our culture today, I suspect is the first one that comes to mind. That is, “Did Joseph Smith introduce plural marriage in order to expand his sexual opportunities?”

Brian Hales: Well, it’s a great question, and I’m sure every member has probably thought of it as well. It’s a very legitimate concern. If I were to stand on a street corner in a large city, say Cincinnati, and just say, “Hey, Joseph Smith introduced polygamy among the Mormons. Why do you think he did it?” Virtually every person is going to say, “Well, he probably wanted sex.” They aren’t going to say, “Well you know, I bet he was a prophet restoring Old Testament polygamy.” That just is not going to occur to them. So, when people say this, or think this, or allege this, we’re not surprised at that. But, it is important for us who believe to understand what Joseph taught.

The first was that it was a special trial for the membership, and God has been known to require special trials of other people, at other times, and places upon this earth, and between 1840’s and 1890, this was one of the special trials for the Latter-day Saints. A second one has to do with a restitution of all things. This is found in Acts 3:19–21. We use this sometimes then as the easy answer. Somebody says, “Why did Joseph do it?” You say, “Well, he was a prophet-restorer, and he restored it.” Then you can kind of move on. The other part of this though is that what he really restored, we believe, was eternal marriage. I personally think that eternal marriage was the zenith teaching that Joseph brought back.

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Through it we can become exalted, then of course plural marriage is one of the components or one of the practices that's associated with it—sometimes but not always.

Then the third reason is just to multiply and replenish the earth. That having children with his polygamist wives was one of the reasons. It wasn't the most important one, and we would probably be wise to point out that the evidence does not show that Joseph was having a lot of sexual relations with his plural wives. None of them had children that we know anything about. Recently DNA evidence dismissed the most likely candidate, at least in my research, showing Joseph was not the father. Many other reasons and evidences and observations indicate that sexuality was not a common occurrence.

Laura Hales: I just need to interject. You mentioned that as a culture Americans aren't so much into history because we don't have a deep culture, but as members of the church, as Mormons, we're very much into our history. Probably more than other religious sects, and that's because many of our truth claims hinge on historical events. So when we bring a new bit of that history in there that is unfamiliar and uncomfortable, I think that adds to why it's so disturbing.

Daniel Peterson: Yeah. I think that's a really important point because we on the whole, Mormons, don't do theology really. We don't have theologians. We have historians. That's where our issues are fought out. From questions like, "Was there a First Vision? Is the Book of Mormon historical? Did Moroni really come to Joseph Smith?" Those issues matter. Or, "When Joseph died was there really a transformation of Brigham Young such that we know he's the legitimate successor?"

We don't argue and split hairs over the nature of the Holy Spirit or something like that. We just don't do that. So that's, I think, a really important point. Well, you know, we said that polygamy was not important for exaltation unless you lived in a certain time when maybe you were commanded to do it but at times when polygamy was practiced and so on. That was only in our dispensation during a few decades in the 19th century. But that still doesn't put the issue simply into the past as a matter of antiquarian interest. There's some people today who worry still today that they might have to be polygamists in the life to come. I thought sometimes that would probably concern women more than men, but it might concern men, too. I don't know. So what about that Laura?

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Laura Hales:

Well, I think it's always been the elephant in the room, even before this increased dialogue on polygamy. There was this joke about if we were going to populate worlds on end, we'd want to have some help. But it was a joke to dispel the actual pain. I don't think any of us really want to be polygamists, including men. I've talked to plenty of men who've said, "One's enough, thank you very much." With the heightened dialogue, you have more people researching the topic, bringing up issues. One of them is that they quote mine in the *Journal of Discourses*. Now you know what quote mining is, right. You're looking for something specifically, so you find what you want and you go, "Aha! I've caught it." Well, the Fundamentalist sects of Mormons have done this for years to justify the continued practice of polygamy. The same quotes keep coming up over, and over, and over again. There's a couple by Brigham Young and another one by Joseph F. Smith where it seems like they're saying that polygamy is required for exaltation.

If you read those quotes in context, you will either read from the speaker themselves that they're simply opining on the topic. This is something they personally believe, even though it hasn't been revealed, or is simply being quoted out of context. But these quotes have been exploited as more and more people are learning about polygamy. I think to insight fear. Just to say that this is a really horrible thing and look: these people say we have to do it, so now this really is something we need to worry about, because it is our problem, because our theology teaches this. When actually, our theology does not teach that. No prophet has ever said that polygamy is required for exaltation. Joseph Smith didn't say it and President Thomas S. Monson hasn't said it, either.

Daniel Peterson:

Yeah, there's an ironic parallel that occurs to me, and I've been intrigued over the past several years when I see certain claims about violence in Islam, and how Islam is supposed to treat non-Muslims. What really interests me is that the extremists Muslim, the violent extremists out there, read the Koran in the same way. I think they misread it. That the critics of Islam do. They all point to the same verses and say, "See? This commands us to kill all non-believers." Most Muslims don't read them that way, but the irony is that the critics and the hyper-Fundamentalists share the same reading of the texts. That is true in an odd way here. That you have the real critics of Mormonism, want to show that Mormonism was always committed to polygamy and exploitation of women. Then, certain of the Fundamentalist groups, who actually do believe that. Most of the rest of us read those passages think, "No, that's not what it's saying at all."

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Laura Hales: That is really interesting.

Brian Hales: You mentioned that women are very worried about it, and, I think, we encounter more in our travels that women will come up and be concerned, but I think if men would think about it, they would be absolutely as concerned as the women. It is not an easy dynamic to live here on earth, and I believe that, at the time it was commanded, virtually any man or woman, if they could have just lived monogamously with God's blessing, they would have chosen monogamy over polygamy.

Daniel Peterson: Well, I'm going to raise a difficult question here. This is one that uses an explosive word, but it's one of the charges that's commonly leveled against Joseph Smith. Isn't it true that Joseph Smith married young women because he was a pedophile?

Brian Hales: As you know, the word "pedophile" is something that we would apply to men who are sexually interested in children, usually under 11. So the word does not apply to any of Joseph's wives or anybody that Joseph Smith was involved with. When we hear that word, we know that the person is either terribly uninformed or trying to sensationalize the situation and usually has some agenda they are promoting. It is true that Joseph was sealed to a number of teenagers. There was four. If I can remember: four 19 year olds; I think three 18, 16; and a couple of 14 year olds, and it's true, that a 14 year old was eyebrow raising. That a sealing or a marriage to a 14 year old would have been a little out of the norm, but it wasn't that abnormal.

Marriage has occurred at much younger ages, but, as we study that one, and the one we can learn about was Helen Mar Kimball who was 14. She lived to be very old, so she gave us a lot of information about what happened to her. We investigate that and learned that Dad was the one who actually set it up. It wasn't Joseph was pursuing this 14 year old or anything like that. Joseph did go along, but Heber C. Kimball set it up, and Helen agreed, Joseph agreed, and there was a sealing. I think the evidence is pretty clear that it was not consummated. In Utah then, there was a policy to not consummate marriages to the younger wives until they had hit like 18 years of age or 19. I believe that policy began in Nauvoo with Joseph. I can't prove that, but that's what I believe.

Daniel Peterson: It's the problem, isn't it, of presentism, that we look at these things and we think, "14, that's shocking." As Brian said, "It's eyebrow raising." But,

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maybe it wasn't scandalous then. It would be a little on the young side, but not unheard of.

Laura Hales: The term that I hear used quite often is “underage,” as if that has an absolute definition. What does “underage” mean? It wasn't underage according to the law of that time or even of our time right now if you have a parent's permission. It's not underage in many countries now even without a parent's permission. It was young. It wasn't the average marrying age, but to say “underage,” I think, is a really loaded term that isn't easily defined.

Daniel Peterson: Well, and especially if as you say it was maybe more like a betrothal and it wasn't consummated, then 14 is even less shocking if you view it in that context. It seems to me.

Laura Hales: Of course.

Daniel Peterson: All right now, you know, it was mentioned that Heber C. Kimball set this up, which I think is really interesting because the portrayal of Joseph as a pedophile has him sort of leering, you know, pursuing Heber C. Kimball's daughter, but that's not the way it turns out. It's Heber C. Kimball who sets this up. But that too has its problems. I mean, maybe not for Joseph, but we think, “What in the world is a father doing setting up a marriage like that between Joseph Smith and his 14-year-old daughter?”

Laura Hales: Well, we don't have arranged marriages nowadays, but certainly throughout history arranged marriages are not unheard of. In this case, we don't have to conjecture very much because of all of Joseph's plural wives the one who wrote the most about her life as a plural wife and about her experience with polygamy was Helen Mar Kimball, and her writings have been collected in a book called *A Woman's View*, which is mostly a letter she wrote to her kids, plus articles that were published in the *Women's Exponent* in the 1880's.

Her friend Emmeline Wells was concerned that the younger generation didn't understand polygamy and how it had unfolded in the Nauvoo days because that wasn't part of their collective consciousness. All they remembered is Utah and polygamy always being there, so she approached Helen, who was normally quite private about this relationship and said, “Hey, would you write a series of articles?” And Helen agreed. So in

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Helen's words, she attributed Heber C. Kimball's desire for her to be married to Joseph as a desire to bind their families together for eternity.

We have to realize the doctrine of eternal marriage was unfolding line upon line. By having Helen marry Joseph, we know that they would be bound for eternity, conditional upon righteousness. We don't necessarily know how that would have affected Heber C. Kimball and Vilate and the rest of their family, but Heber loved Joseph, and he wanted this binding link. We may not have made the same choice being in the same situation, but Helen thought about the prospect laid before her. At first, she recoiled, but then she thought, "My father loves me too much to ask anything of me that is not strictly moral." And so she acquiesced. It's very interesting. I've read all of Helen's writings, and I can't find anywhere in there, any suggestion, that she was even alone with Joseph without a chaperone. She went to dances for six months after she married him, so that suggests that she did not consider herself a married woman.

Some people criticize this because they say, "Well, that's evidence that she didn't really realize what she was getting into." Helen herself admitted that she didn't understand what she was getting into, but later in life she didn't have a problem with the sealing. In fact, it's kind of a little poignant little note in her autobiography where she describes her experience to her children. She signs this letter she's written to them, and she goes back and overwrites "Smith" before her last name "Whitney." To me, that's kind of an acceptance of that binding that she did with Joseph. She never blamed her parents. She had plenty of years to do that. She loved her parents her whole life, so Helen didn't judge them. For us to judge them, you need to think twice about that.

Daniel Peterson: That's very interesting. I sometimes wondered, and I'm just going to drop the speculation here and not develop it because I'm not in a position to develop it, but I've wondered sometimes if this egotistic form of family ties might not have been related also to the practice of adoption that was going on in the church in those days. That people would have themselves sealed, not to their great-great-grandparents. We think, "Well, you have to be sealed in your line back as far as you can go." They'd be sealed to a general authority. First of all, they didn't have the resources. They didn't have a genealogical society, or microfilms, or microfiche, let alone computers.

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They thought the end was coming fairly soon, the ideas form these family units, form these links that will continue into the eternities. So, it's not just plural marriage. It's linking up whole families with people with sealed to Brigham Young, and Wilfred Woodruff, and so on. We don't do those things anymore. Wilford Woodruff received a revelation that leads to the founding of the genealogical society saying, "No, you guys have got it wrong. You're supposed to be sealed to your family back as far as you can go." But once you understand that and their conception, it actually makes sense. It's not as crazy as it may seem.

Brian Hales: Brigham Young talked about how there was a conversation with Joseph [Smith] and a woman, and she said, "She'd rather be single in the next life than be married." Joseph said, "You talk very foolishly. You don't know what you're going to want in that next life." And then he looked at Brigham and said, "Brigham, seal her to me." And it was just that unfeeling, unemotional, but the ordinance was seen as being necessary. It was Brigham's sister, Fanny Young, and he did seal Fanny to Joseph. There was no thought of sexuality or anything, at least according to the story, but having that sealing in place—it was important, at least in Joseph's eyes.

Daniel Peterson: That's a fascinating story. Well, I'm going to raise another difficult issue. We know that Joseph was sealed to several plural wives without telling Emma about it before Emma knew. How in the world do you reconcile that kind of behavior with his calling as a Prophet of God? Isn't that a little strange? Does that cast doubt on his integrity and his credibility as a prophet?

Laura Hales: Well, that's the million dollar question, isn't it? I don't know how you reconcile that. I know that we make a lot of guesses. We actually don't know when Emma found out about polygamy. We know for sure that she didn't know about two marriages, and we can make educated guesses by other documents—that she didn't know about some other marriages. But by 1843, May, she knew about plural marriage, and she was temporarily supportive of it. By that time Joseph had been married to quite a few women, most of them for eternity only. We don't know if she knew about those. In D&C 132, there's some phrasing where it says, "Joseph, you have transgressed and Emma needs to forgive you." We don't know what that means, but we can assume that it has to do with the practice of polygamy and perhaps that it was that he hadn't told her.

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We also know that prophets aren't perfect. They make mistakes. It doesn't mean that they can't necessarily lead the church and receive revelation. If we put a prophet on a pedestal and say, "He has to be perfect," I think we'll be disappointed every time. I don't know how to justify it. We can just say, "It happened." And they worked through it because at Joseph's death it's quite evident that they still loved each other deeply. In every letter that Joseph wrote to Emma, he expressed his love to her, and over Joseph's casket, Emma was crying, and a friend came up to comfort her, and she said, "Joseph was my crown." She still adored him.

Daniel Peterson: That's really, really interesting. I try to imagine myself in Joseph's situation, and I think, "Gosh, would I have done better?" I mean, I know it's easy to point the finger and criticize, but suppose you've been given a commandment that you know is going to bring down all sorts of social opprobrium on your head, and the society was far more, if you will, repressed than ours is. It would be far less tolerant to that kind of thing, and also that you're involved in something that you know will hurt someone you care a lot about. I can imagine wanting to sort of hide it, thinking, "I'll tell her at some point, but I just can't do it today. Not today. I'll do it tomorrow. And then, "I'll do it next week." You know? Anyway, it seems really human to me. Even assuming him to be a prophet, I also assume him to be a human prophet, and someone who might have had a really hard time with this, and not have known exactly. Remember, he's dead before he's 39. You know, he's a very young man, and he doesn't always know exactly how to do these things. The Lord says, "All right. Well, you're going to be a prophet." "Well, how do I do that?" "Well, you'll figure it out." It's sometimes a bit of that.

I think one of the things that I learned from Richard Bushman's *Rough Stone Rolling*. I don't know if it was a lesson he intended to teach or something, but it hit me that we assume that he knew how to do what he was doing from the start. Like, he's just born Athena from the forehead of Zeus, and he's fully formed. He knows exactly how to do it all, and he doesn't. I mean, you read the accounts of the coming forth in the Book of Mormon, and he doesn't know how to translate this. How do I do this? He sends the facsimiles off, partly to find somebody who's qualified, who can maybe do the translation because he doesn't know that he's supposed to do it. He's gradually realizing what his role is, but you shouldn't assume that Joseph is this consummate expert on everything; he knows how to do everything exactly from the start. He's human. He's a young man, he's

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trying to figure it out, and if he makes mistakes. Well, I've made a few. I suspect other people have too.

Laura Hales: You know it's funny. We see the prophet in the distant past, but those who knew him at the beginning of the church, it was a small club. They loved Joseph, but they also knew Joseph. I think it was easier for those who were his contemporaries to accept that he was a prophet, and he was a man more than maybe us looking back.

Daniel Peterson: I thought, by the way, that one of the most significant testimonies is that of his brother Hyrum. His older brother Hyrum, that's what really strikes me. If your younger brother came to you and said, "Look, I've had a vision, I've seen God, all this sort of thing." Most older brothers would say, "Yeah, right. You little creep." You know? "I've known you all your life." And Hyrum has known him all his life and follows him, and the family follows him. The people who know him really well. The people who knew him the best tended to love him the most. That's striking to me. Even though they knew that he was human, and he had flaws, they weren't put off by that. This is dangerous. We've raised him to such a high pedestal that if we find out he has a flaw, we're shocked and appalled. That's not fair. That's not fair to him. It seems to me it's doing him an injustice. So I'm still not done with the tough questions. Isn't it true that Joseph Smith stole other men's wives?

Brian Hales: I would say that this is probably the most common question we get asked. It's either that or the question about Emma not knowing, that we just discussed, so one of those two is the most common. It is true that Joseph was sealed to 14 women who had legal husbands or at least the evidence indicates that it could be up to 14. Among these women, though, what we're finding is the research goes on and new things are coming to light. As I mentioned earlier, there's DNA testing showing that Joseph was not the father of the one daughter that I had predicted would be his daughter. Instead, she was fathered by Windsor Lyon. In that, what we are thinking is that the sealings were all what we call, "eternity only." What that means is that the woman is sealed to Joseph just for the next life. She stays with her legal husband for this life, and there's no sexuality or anything. There's no marriage for this life.

While we don't have a lot of information on a lot of these, and there's one that's an exceptional case, it may be that all of the others are just of this type. The other point I would make is that nobody who's been saying,

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“Joseph has been practicing polyandry,” and polyandry is the word for plurality of husbands, but none of these researchers are asking the questions like, “What did the woman believe about the marriages after the second marriage ceremony?” Because if the second ceremony caused the first one to be superseded or annulled, then the woman would only have one husband, and in the gospel the teaching is that the new and everlasting covenant, the sealing, would cause all old covenants to be done away. I’m not sure that dynamic actually ever occurred. I thought it had in that one case, but, if it had, there still is no way in the gospel for a woman to have two actual husbands.

I should also just add that there is this rumor out there—the critics love to repeat it unfortunately—that Joseph would send men on missions and then marry their wives. It goes back to John C. Bennett in 1842. Of the 14 women, we know 10 were not on missions. Three of them, we don’t have dates for the marriage, so there’s no way to know. The only one we can document is Orson Hyde, who went to Palestine. His wife was sealed to Joseph two years almost after he had left, so the idea that he was sent out so that Joseph could quickly marry Marinda, his wife, is just not supported. But we also have two sealing dates for Marinda. One is after Orson comes home, so it’s far from clear even in that one case.

Daniel Peterson: Yeah, that’s a really potent charge that’s been made, you know, the lowest kind of cynicism toward Joseph. I want to shift gears here just a little bit and ask. There’s been a lot of discussion lately about Doctrine & Covenant Section 132, which is, of course, the text that gives us plural marriage as we understand it in LDS history. There’s some people who say, “It’s not even a valid revelation.” Some people would want to criticize or downgrade its status as scripture. What do you think about that?

Laura Hales: Well, I understand where the criticisms come from because if you make D&C 132 go away, then maybe you can make polygamy go away. We can just forget about it. Right?

Daniel Peterson: Right.

Laura Hales: Plus, like I said D&C 132 was a shock to me when I read it for the first, actual 10th time, but the first time for seriousness, when I started studying polygamy. There’s a lot of harsh language in it. Some of it’s really confusing. Some of the metaphors definitely don’t fit with 20th century

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culture. Some of the verbiage such as, “virgins.” We don’t want to be talked about as virgins; we want to be talked about as young women or marriageable women. That’s where the desire comes from. They say, “Okay, I don’t feel great feelings sometimes when I read the scripture so that must not be divine.” But what you have to realize is that these revelations that we have printed in our Doctrine & Covenants have been edited. They didn’t come straight from God and were written down, and they were sent to press. In fact, when they were writing the first Book of Commandments, the elders were meeting together, and they were having an argument. They were criticizing Joseph because when he would dictate a revelation, he would do it in the word of God. Joseph said, “Okay. If you can do it better, go ahead and do it.” Nobody would take up the prospect except for one person.

Brian Hales: Yeah, William McClellan.

Laura Hales: William McClellan, yeah. He came back the next day and he said, “Okay. Let’s go with it,” because he realized it’s hard to make up a revelation, so it must have been divine. What happened was that these revelations were collected and had been circulated among the members. Orson Pratt, who happened to be living with Joseph and Emma at the time, described the process that Joseph used in compiling this Book of Commandments as he worked with W. W. Phelps. He said he would take parts of one revelation and combine them with another. He would delete parts of revelations. He would maybe not even publish a revelation and instead put it in his history. D&C 132 never went through this editing process at all. It was tucked away, and before it could be added to the next edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, unfortunately, the prophet was martyred. It actually was kept secret until 1852 when Brigham Young and the other apostles decided that they needed to make the practice of polygamy known because it was no longer a secret. It was probably the worst kept secret in the Utah territories and even starting to be in the United States.

So at a conference, they released the revelation. They told about how it had been restored, and it became the new practice in the church. The new marriage standard. It actually didn’t go into the Doctrine and Covenants until 1876, unedited. Since that time, it hasn’t been edited. So, the things in it that bother people, like polygamy, which we don’t practice anymore in an earthly sense, and the confusing parts, having to do with Joseph and Emma’s personality, and the very harsh language used in that. I once did a study, and I compared all of the revelations that Joseph dictated for the

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Doctrine and Covenants. I looked for the word “destroy” and by far, out of the whole book, the majority are in that section. It’s very uncomfortable to read that harsh language directed at Emma, so that’s why it’s unpopular. Why no prophet since has wanted to edit it, I don’t know why, but I think it would take a lot of confidence to say, “Hey, I need to edit Joseph’s words when I didn’t get the revelation.” So that’s my kind of take on it.

Daniel Peterson: Yeah. That’s really interesting. Well, all right. You two have spent a great deal of time studying early Mormon polygamy and researching it. You’re really at the cutting edge on this topic. You’ve thought about it a lot. So what advice would you give to church members as they encounter this issue, which they’ll either come across if they read their church history, or if they don’t that, the anti-Mormons will do them the service of thrusting it in their faces. So what would you suggest?

Laura Hales: The most helpful thing for me has been to look at the plural wives as people and not as numbers. That’s why in our small volume, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding*, nearly half is devoted to bios of plural wives. When you read those bios and get to know them as people instead of objects, and you see how they viewed the sealing ceremony, I think you gain some charity. Also, I would say, “If, suppose you’re struggling with these young 14 year old marriages, like many people do.” I’d say, “Read Helen’s words. She wrote more than any other person on the topic.” Like I said earlier, “It’s available free online. Download it. Read it. See what she had to say before you make any decisions. Keep an open mind.”

Daniel Peterson: I think that’s really interesting because one of the ironic aspects of this, it seems to me, is that some critics who accuse Joseph Smith and the Mormon leadership, or the Church, or Mormonism of treating women as objects. Some critics actually do that. They don’t listen to the women themselves. They treat them as just kind of pieces that were being moved around on a chess board. But, they didn’t have personalities, they had no say, they didn’t have any thoughts, or if they had thoughts, they weren’t worth listening to. That’s an interesting irony, it seems to me.

Laura Hales: We get this idea that Joseph went to them and said, “I had a revelation that you need to be my plural wife. You’re commanded. Marry me.” And they said, “Okay, because I believe you’re a prophet.” That did not happen very often to our knowledge. Many of these women struggled for a very long time before they decided, “Yes. This is something I want to do.”

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Brian Hales: Well, several of them also reported having visions. Mary Elizabeth Rollins saw an angel. Scared her to death, but that was the confirmation that Joseph had promised her regarding plural marriage. Dan, I would add regarding those plural wives, by my count, there was 35, and Laura, I think, discounts a couple of them, so maybe 33, but of those, I think, it's important to note that if we follow them out, all but seven of them died in Utah, but even those seven that were out of Utah, none of these women ever criticized Joseph. Even though they'd remarried, they'd had experiences with a family and sexuality. None of them were later saying, "Joseph used me, or beguiled me, or deceived me, or that polygamy was just a sham for Joseph to get sex." I mean, there's none of that. Of the whole 35, and if we look at all the Nauvoo polygamists at the martyrdom, and by my count, there's 115, we don't have any of these people who knew polygamy from the inside. None of these men and women are later saying, "Joseph was immoral or this was some kind of a principle that he was using to expand his sexual opportunities." I think while we may not understand it, these people clearly did. They accepted it right to the end. I think that may be a useful observation.

Daniel Peterson: I think it's interesting that we sometimes don't allow them to have a voice. We just don't listen to them, and we assume that we know something really, really well, and that they didn't. Yet, they were the ones who were in the position to actually see it in operation. They knew Joseph, they knew the other women involved, and so on. Yet their opinions are not worth noting. Of course, many of the critics would say, "Eh, so she claimed to see an angel. Well, we reject that out of hand." So one of the ways you deal with this is ignore the actual words in the testimonies of those who were involved. Discount them in the name of honoring them and saving them from exploitation.

Laura Hales: Yeah, and those who say that, Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightener's autobiography is actually online. They can Google it. I suggest, if they are struggling with that to read her autobiography. She was quite a woman. She endured amazing trials during her lifetime. Though, I can't even fathom having lived through what she lived through during her lifetime as she's struggling. She loved her legal husband, I'm thoroughly convinced it was an eternity-only sealing to Joseph.

Brian Hales: One other thing I'd add, Dan, is that we don't have to like polygamy on earth. It's unfair; it's sexist. There are no leaders who have said that every person in the celestial kingdom is a polygamist. We don't believe that that

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is true. What we're finding though, and this is something that is happening, I think, right now, is that there are voices out there saying to women, "You may end up in some kind of an eternal plural marriage." That they should feel victimized by that, and that they should not trust God is going to be a just God. That somehow they're getting less. The point I would make is that on earth it's unfair. We acknowledge that openly, but we know nothing. As Laura said, I think, earlier about what eternal marriage really represents, and we know nothing about what eternal plural marriage represents, to create fear, or to talk about it in a negative way is to go way beyond what we know.

It's unfortunate when these voices come out and they create this fear for women who may end up in some kind of a relationship. We don't know what that means. There's no usefulness for that fear, and I wish the individuals that are talking about this would just acknowledge they don't know what they're talking about, and let's trust in God and trust that he has a plan of happiness, not a plan of eternal coercion, that will allow all of us if we can live worthily to obtain all of his greatest blessings.

Daniel Peterson: I keep coming back to the promise that Paul gives, that "eye hath not seen, neither heard, nor hath entered into the heart of man what things the Lord hath prepared for them that love him." I think, "Okay, if you have faith in the God of the Bible, if you believe in any of it, then you should believe in that too, which is that, whatever the next life is like, it's going to be so good, that none of the grievances we can imagine will be worth anything compared to the blessings we'll receive." So if you believe that, then you needn't worry. You may not know how it will work out, you may not know what it'll be like, but you needn't worry. It will be just fine. In fact, no, not just fine. It'll be way beyond fine. It will be incomprehensibly wonderful, and that's the divine promise. So it really comes down to a matter of faith, I think. For those who have faith, there's a line from Thomas Aquinas, I think, "[For] those who have faith, no explanation is necessary. For those who lack faith, no explanation is possible." He wasn't, of course, talking about early Mormon plural marriage, but it seems to me that the principle does have some application here.

Any other things that we want to say before closing this discussion?

Laura Hales: No, this has been great. Thanks for having this discussion with us. We appreciate it.

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Brian Hales: Yeah, thanks Dan, really appreciate it.

Daniel Peterson: Well, I've enjoyed it. I certainly have gained new insights myself from not only this discussion but also from your work on plural marriage. I think it's high time that we have serious, honest, informed conversations about this topic, so you've done wonderful things, and I appreciate it. Well, this concludes our little discussion. I'm Daniel Peterson, and I've been talking about early Mormon plural marriage and Joseph Smith with Brian and Laura Hales.

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