

# Polygamy's Genesis: Examining Claims of an Early 1830s Polygamy Revelation

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The nearly two-century struggle to establish a definitive history of Doctrine and Covenants Section 132 is reflected in the evolution of its section headings. When Section 132 was first added to the scriptures of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1876, it was described as “Revelation on the Eternity of the Marriage Covenant, including Plurality of Wives. Given through Joseph, the Seer, in Nauvoo, Hancock County, Illinois, July 12th, 1843.”<sup>1</sup> The 1921 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants added more detail to the summary of the revelation and changed the historical description slightly, implicitly placing polygamy’s beginnings in the Church earlier than 1843 by noting that the revelation was “recorded July 12, 1843” rather than “given,” as it was previously described.<sup>2</sup> This implication was plainly expressed in the 1981 edition’s section heading, which made a new historical assertion: “Although the revelation was recorded in 1843, it is evident from the historical records that the doctrines and principles involved in this revelation had been known by the Prophet since 1831.”<sup>3</sup> Speaking about the 1981 updates, Robert J. Matthews noted:

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<sup>1</sup> *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Deseret News Office, 1876), 423-432.

<sup>2</sup> *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1921), 239, [LINK](#). In 1930, the Church published *Latter-day Revelation: Selections from the Book of Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, which included selections of the Doctrine and Covenants “of general and enduring value.” Because Section 132 was omitted from *Latter-day Revelation*, this edition is not included in the overview of changes in Section 132’s heading.

<sup>3</sup> *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981).

Among the historical evidence for the earlier time period is a signed report written by Elder Orson Pratt in 1878 and published in the *Millennial Star*. In it he affirms his personal knowledge that the Prophet received a revelation on the matter in the fall of 1831. A second piece of evidence comes from an address by Elder Joseph F. Smith, delivered in Salt Lake City on 7 July 1878, in which he gives 1832 as the time of the revelation.”<sup>4</sup>

By the time the 1981 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (hereafter D&C) was published, a historical narrative explaining Joseph Smith’s 1831 knowledge of divinely-sanctioned polygamy was widely acknowledged. B.H. Roberts’ *The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* stated that Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible, begun in 1830 and concluded in 1833, was “doubtless” the inspiration for the question that initiated the polygamy revelation in Section 132.<sup>5</sup>

In 2001, the Church began the Joseph Smith Papers Project in an effort to make all documents created by or related to Joseph Smith publicly available. By 2013, findings from this still-underway project prompted the Church to make a number of adjustments and corrections to the section headings of the Doctrine and Covenants, including the introduction to Section 132.<sup>6</sup> The new heading to Section 132 softened the 1831 claim slightly, stating, “Although the revelation was recorded in 1843, evidence indicates that some of the principles involved in this revelation were known by the Prophet as early as 1831.”<sup>7</sup> By 2025, further research primarily from the body of evidence available in the Joseph Smith Papers (hereafter JSP)—

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<sup>4</sup>Robert J. Matthews, “The New Publications of the Standard Works—1979, 1981,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 22, no. 4 (1982): 387–424, [LINK](#). Citations for the historical evidence Matthews’ notes are as follows: “Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith,” *Millennial Star* 40 (Dec. 9, 1878): 788, [LINK](#); Discourse by Joseph F. Smith, 7 July 1878, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1880), 20:29, [LINK](#).

<sup>5</sup>B.H. Roberts, *The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Period 1. History of Joseph Smith the Prophet, By Himself, Volume V* (Deseret News, 1909), xxix–xxx, [LINK](#).

<sup>6</sup>Summary of Approved Adjustments for the 2013 Edition of the Scriptures, 10, [LINK](#).

<sup>7</sup>Explanations for the Doctrine and Covenants Section Headings (Section 132), *The Joseph Smith Papers*, hereafter JSP, [LINK](#). This paper will address the sources listed in the Historical Introduction to Section 132 which support the 1831 narrative. Historical Introduction, Revelation, 12 July 1843 [D&C 132], JSP, [LINK](#).

which now includes the recently-acquired manuscripts to Smith's translation of the Bible—prompted the Church to adjust Section 132's introduction again, removing the speculative date of 1831. This heading now reads, "Although the revelation was recorded in 1843, evidence indicates that some of the principles involved in this revelation were known by the Prophet earlier."<sup>8</sup> This change was made "to indicate that some ambiguity exists about when principles in this revelation were revealed to Joseph Smith."<sup>9</sup>

Although the Joseph Smith Papers do not give further details as to why Section 132's heading was changed, removing the speculative date of 1831 was appropriate and necessary. An examination of the historical record, including the statements and scriptures Smith produced in the early 1830s, reveals his marital theology actively condemned polygamy and its practitioners, and consistently upheld monogamy as the sole standard for the Church. This paper proposes that the narrative that Joseph Smith received a polygamy revelation in 1831, or while translating the Bible, is based upon a sparse documentary record, appearing to originate from a retrospective misinterpretation of one of Smith's earliest revelations regarding Native Americans. Over time, recollections were adapted to provide theological and legal precedent for a practice Smith's own early 1830s works—notably his translation of the Bible—explicitly rejected.

## History of the 1831 Narrative

To understand what may have prompted the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to remove the 1831 reference in the 2025 revision of Section 132's heading, this paper will examine the historical evidence used to support Joseph Smith knowing about "the principle and doctrine of . . . many wives and concubines" (D&C 132:1) as early as 1831, prompted by his translation of the Bible. Consideration will also be given to contextual events that may have led some to later associate polygamy with Smith's earliest revelations.

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<sup>8</sup>Doctrine and Covenants 132, Section Heading (2025), [LINK](#). Note, unless otherwise stated, all D&C scriptures quoted in this paper come from the 2025 version.

<sup>9</sup>Explanations for the Doctrine and Covenants Section Headings, JSP.

From the organizing days of the Church, Smith's theology was regularly scrutinized for marital innovations, as suspicions of sexual experimentation among new religious groups were often well-founded.<sup>10</sup> As will be discussed later in the paper, Smith's revelations and publications consistently answered questions and accusations about marriage with affirmations of strict monogamy. However, one rumored marital recommendation that was neither denied nor condemned by Church leaders would have likely been unsettling to the sensibilities of early America: a supposed Joseph Smith revelation that elders of the Church form a matrimonial alliance with Native American women.

### **Ezra Booth Contemporary Account (1831)**

Prophecies in the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's revelations ambitiously encouraged preaching to the "Lamanites," who were considered to be Native Americans who Church members anticipated would help build a temple of God in the "New Jerusalem."<sup>11</sup> Toward the end of 1830, Oliver Cowdery and others announced their determination by covenant "to go forth unto the Lamanites, to proclaim glad tidings of great joy unto them, by presenting unto them the fulness of the Gospel, of the only begotten son of God."<sup>12</sup> In 1831, disaffected member Ezra Booth reported that several methods were encouraged to facilitate this objective, including outfitting the Lord's storehouse with goods useful to the Natives, and inter-cultural marriage: "it has been made known by revelation, that it will be pleasing to the Lord, should they form a matrimonial alliance with the natives; and by this means the Elders . . . gain a residence in the Indian territory."<sup>13</sup> Monogamy was assumed, as Booth's report included information of a man who found the idea "perfectly suited to his desires," but first needed to divorce his current wife, who was "violently opposed to Mormonism," to carry it out.<sup>14</sup> This and other ideas to make inroads with the Native Americans were not successful; the

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<sup>10</sup>Sarah M. Pearsall, *Polygamy and Bigamy* (Oxford University Press, 2013), [LINK](#).

<sup>11</sup>Introduction to Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>12</sup>Covenant of Oliver Cowdery and Others, Oct. 17, 1830, 1, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>13</sup>Ezra Booth, "Mormonism—Nos. VIII–IX," *Ohio Star* (Ravenna) 2, no. 49 (Dec. 8, 1831): 1, col. 1, [LINK](#). Reproduced in E.D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Self-published, 1834), 220.

<sup>14</sup>Booth, "Mormonism—Nos. VIII–IX," 1.

elders' missionary efforts not only sparked a Protestant missionary response to prevent them from proselyting, but also led to charges that members of the Church and Native Americans were in league to destroy other whites on the frontier.<sup>15</sup>

## Nauvoo and the *Expositor* (1840s)

By the Nauvoo period (early 1840s), suspicions of Latter Day Saint alliances with Native Americans had been thoroughly displaced by allegations that Joseph Smith himself secretly approved and taught polygamy. These claims culminated in the printing of the *Nauvoo Expositor* in June of 1844. The *Expositor* provided affidavits testifying that Smith's 1843 marriage revelation taught a doctrine of polygamy, to which Smith responded, "the truth of God was transformed into a lie concerning this thing," and that "he had never preached the revelation in private, as he had in public—had not taught it to the anointed in the church in private, which statement many present confirmed."<sup>16</sup> These and other purported falsehoods prompted the Nauvoo City Council to declare the *Expositor* a public nuisance and order the destruction of its press, which precipitated Smith's imprisonment and assassination soon after.<sup>17</sup>

## Joseph Smith's Bible Translation

Joseph Smith had begun his new translation of the Bible in June of 1830, "intending to restore some of the plain and precious parts which had been lost," and he completed the formal effort of his translation in June of 1833.<sup>18</sup> However, despite continued efforts to have his Bible translation published, competing priorities and financial constraints left Smith unable to see it in print before his death in 1844. As Robert J. Matthews explained, although Smith continued to go over his translation and make additional refinements

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<sup>15</sup>David J. Whittaker, "Mormons and Native Americans: A Historical and Bibliographical Introduction," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 4 (1985): 35, [LINK](#).

<sup>16</sup>Revised Minutes, Jun. 17, 1844, 1, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>17</sup>Revised Minutes, Jun. 17, 1844, 1.

<sup>18</sup>Kent P. Jackson, "New Discoveries in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible," *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 6, no. 3 (2005): 156-57, [LINK](#).

and corrections, “the *work* of translation was acceptable as far as the Lord required it of the Prophet at that time, but the *manuscript* was not fully prepared for the press.”<sup>19</sup>

After Joseph Smith was killed, Apostle Willard Richards visited Smith’s widow, Emma, requesting to take custody of Smith’s Bible manuscripts. Emma, however, “said she did not feel disposed to give it up at present.”<sup>20</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which thereafter established in Utah under the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, thus relocated without Smith’s Bible manuscript or any scribe of the translation, effectively severing contact between the LDS Church and the Bible translation for more than a century.<sup>21</sup>

In 1866, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) in Illinois received Joseph Smith’s Bible translation manuscripts from Emma Smith, and the next year published them as *The Holy Scriptures, Translated and Corrected by the Spirit of Revelation by Joseph Smith, Jr., The Seer*.<sup>22</sup> Joseph Smith III, President of the RLDS Church, sent a copy to Orson Pratt, which was later used to produce the 1878 LDS *Pearl of Great Price*.<sup>23</sup> RLDS missionaries also began a widespread distribution of *The Holy Scriptures*, causing concern among some Latter-day Saints.<sup>24</sup> After hearing Orson Pratt publicly remark upon the new publication, Brigham Young arose to ward off interest in the scripture by “[bearing] testimony in strong terms that Joseph did not finish the New Translation of the old & New Testament which young Joseph had lately published.”<sup>25</sup> Others recollected that Young

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<sup>19</sup>Robert J. Matthews, “Joseph Smith’s Efforts to Publish His Bible Translation,” *Ensign* 13, no. 1 (Jan. 1983), 57–64 (emphasis in original), [LINK](#).

<sup>20</sup>Roberts, *History of the Church*, Vol. VII, xxvii, [LINK](#). The scribes for Smith’s Bible translation were Oliver Cowdery, John Whitmer, Emma Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Jesse Gause, and Frederick G. Williams.

<sup>21</sup>Jackson, “New Discoveries,” 149-150.

<sup>22</sup>The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints officially changed its name to Community of Christ in 2001.

<sup>23</sup>Reid L. Neilson and Mitchell K. Schaefer, “Excavating Early Mormon History: The 1878 History Fact-Finding Mission of Apostles Joseph F. Smith and Orson Pratt,” in *Joseph F. Smith: Reflections on the Man and His Times*, ed. Craig K. Manscill, Brian D. Reeves, Guy L. Dorius, and J. B. Haws (Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2013), 369, [LINK](#).

<sup>24</sup>Reed C. Durham, “A History of Joseph Smith’s Revision of the Bible,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1965, 210.

<sup>25</sup>Wilford Woodruff journal, Jun. 20, 1868, 136, MS 1352, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, hereafter CHL, [LINK](#).

stated “that the Prophet, before his death, had spoken to him about going through the translation of the scriptures again and perfecting it upon points of doctrine which the Lord had restrained him from giving in plainness and fullness at the time of which we write.”<sup>26</sup>

In the 1893 cross-examination of his testimony in the Temple Lot Suit, Joseph Smith III referred to his father’s “Inspired Translation of the Bible” as well as “this volume called the Inspired Translation of the Holy Scriptures,” and in 1936 the RLDS Church adopted this term as the publication’s subtitle, *Inspired Version* (IV).<sup>27</sup> In 1944 the RLDS Church published a “Corrected Edition” of the IV, which brought the text into greater harmony with the original manuscripts.<sup>28</sup> By that time, however, lack of scholarly access to the manuscripts had taken its toll and LDS suspicions of the IV had developed into accusations, as demonstrated in LDS Apostle Mark E. Petersen’s 1966 book, *As Translated Correctly*:

Not satisfied with [the LDS-published segments of Smith’s Bible translation of Genesis and Matthew], the Reorganized Church decided to publish the “inspired version” including what changes the Prophet had made. But, not happy with all of his changes, THEY ALTERED THE BIBLE TO SUIT THEIR OWN DESIRES, and actually changed some of the corrections made by the Prophet Joseph himself . . . Such changes of course make the work of questionable value.<sup>29</sup>

In 1968, concerns such as those expressed above began to resolve as LDS scholar Robert Matthews was granted access to inspect whether Smith’s Bible manuscripts were accurately published in the IV.<sup>30</sup> Verification of the IV led the LDS Church to adopt portions of what they then designated the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) in the footnotes and appendix of the 1979 edition of the

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<sup>26</sup>George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Deseret Book Co., 1958), 142 n.\*, [LINK](#).

<sup>27</sup>Abstract of Evidence, Temple Lot Case, U.S.C.C. 491, [LINK](#).

<sup>28</sup>*The Holy Scriptures: Inspired Version, Translated and Corrected by the Spirit of Revelation by Joseph Smith, Jr., The Seer* (Herald Publishing House, 1944), Foreword.

<sup>29</sup>Mark E. Petersen, *As Translated Correctly* (Deseret Book, 1966), 29-30, [LINK](#), emphasis in original.

<sup>30</sup>Thomas E. Sherry, “Robert J. Matthews and the RLDS Church’s Inspired Version of the Bible,” *BYU Studies* 49, no. 2 (2010): 112-113, [LINK](#).

LDS Church's Bible. While the JST contains only about one-third (1,200 of 3,410) of the verses Smith changed, LDS leaders since this adoption have clearly encouraged the study and use of Smith's entire work, facilitating access to it through its inclusion in the JSP and effectuating the 2024 acquisition of the original Bible manuscripts from the Community of Christ.<sup>31</sup>

## 1852 Polygamy Revelation Announcement

Within a few years of Joseph Smith's martyrdom, members of the Church who elected to follow the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles began arriving in Utah. By 1852, it was "well known... that [they had] embraced the doctrine of plurality of wives as part of their religious faith," but church members had yet to see evidence that this "essential" doctrine came from Joseph Smith.<sup>32</sup> Brigham Young, then president of the Church, called a special conference at which today's Section 132 was presented to the members.<sup>33</sup> In preaching the doctrine before the revelation was read, Orson Pratt asked, "But, says one, how have you obtained this information? By new revelation. When was it given, and to whom? It was given to the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, Joseph Smith, on the 12th day of July, 1843; only about eleven months before he was martyred for the testimony of Jesus."<sup>34</sup>

Elder Thomas Bullock read the revelation "given to Joseph Smith, Nauvoo, July 12th, 1843," which asserted that Smith had prayerfully inquired how the Lord justified "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as also Moses, David and Solomon... as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines" (D&C 132:1).<sup>35</sup> The revelation explained that the promises

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<sup>31</sup>Historical reasons, space limitations, and instructions from the First Presidency influenced which changes were noted in the LDS scriptures beginning in 1979. See Thomas E. Sherry and W. Jeffrey Marsh, "Precious Truths Restored: Joseph Smith Translation Changes Not Included in Our Bible," *Religious Educator* 5, no. 2 (2004): 57-74, [LINK](#).

<sup>32</sup>Orson Pratt, Discourse, Aug. 29, 1852, Church History Department Pitman Shorthand transcriptions, 2013-2025, 1-2, CR 100 317, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>33</sup>"Minutes of conference: a special conference of the elders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints assembled in the Tabernacle, Great Salt Lake City, August 28th, 1852, 10 o'clock, a.m., pursuant to public notice," *Deseret News-Extra* (Sep. 14, 1852): 14-28, [LINK](#).

<sup>34</sup>Minutes of conference, 1852, 21.

<sup>35</sup>Minutes of conference, 1852, 26, emphasis in original.

Abraham received concerning his posterity were fulfilled by Sarah when she gave Hagar to Abraham as a wife, and it commands, "Go ye, therefore, and do the works of Abraham" (D&C 132:32). Between 1852 and 1890, this revelation was used to publicly promote polygamy to the Latter-day Saints as "necessary to a man's highest exaltation in the life to come," and as evidence that polygamy was "commanded by God through Joseph Smith."<sup>36</sup>

### *The Seer* and Anti-Polygamy Sentiment

Following the announcement of the polygamy revelation, Brigham Young tasked Apostle Orson Pratt to go to Washington, D.C. and publish an apologetic magazine targeted at non-Mormons.<sup>37</sup> *The Seer* launched in January 1853, predominantly focused on explaining and defending polygamous doctrine with an ambitious goal:

It is hoped that the President elect, the Hon. Members of Congress, the Heads of the various Departments of the National Government, the high-minded Governors and Legislative Assemblies of the several States and Territories, the Ministers of every Religious denomination, and all inhabitants of this great Republic, will patronize this Periodical, that through the medium of our own writings they may be more correctly and fully informed in regard to the peculiar doctrines, views, practices, and expectations of the Saints.<sup>38</sup>

*The Seer* failed to persuade U.S. leaders, however, and in May, 1854, the first legislative attempt to discourage Utah polygamy was debated. A bill to extend the federal land system to the Utah territory was introduced with the stipulation that it not apply to any man with more than one wife.<sup>39</sup> While the bill was ultimately

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<sup>36</sup>“Proceedings before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate: in the matter of the protests against the right of Hon. Reed Smoot, a senator from the state of Utah, to hold his seat” (Government Printing Office, 1904), 1:18, [LINK](#).

<sup>37</sup>Orson Pratt, *The Seer*, M205.1 S453 vols. 1-2 (1853-1854), CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>38</sup>Pratt, *The Seer* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1853): 1.

<sup>39</sup>Orma Linford, “The Mormons and the Law: The Polygamy Cases,” *Utah Law Review* 9, no. 3, article 3 (1965): 313, [LINK](#).

set aside, Latter-day Saint polygamy was in the government's sights; soon thereafter, the Republican party platform attacked it as one of the "twin relics of barbarism."<sup>40</sup>

## First Account of an 1831 Polygamy Revelation (1857)

In response to such external hostility, Utah leaders had a mounting incentive to prove that polygamy was not a recent innovation, but a foundational doctrine of the Church. While compiling Smith's history in 1857, as U.S. Army troops were amassing to depart for Utah and forcibly remove Brigham Young from his position as governor of the territory, Wilford Woodruff recorded a remark by Young that pushed the timeline back further than the 1843 date the polygamy revelation was said to have been revealed: "The revelation upon a plurality of wives was given to Joseph Smith in 1831. He revealed it to Oliver Cowdery alone upon the solem[n] pledge that he would not reveal it or act upon it but He did act upon it in a secret manner & that was the cause of his overthrow."<sup>41</sup> Young retold versions of this story throughout his life, and he appeared to have been drawing from recollections of the same revelation Ezra Booth reported Smith giving in 1831. Because Smith's 1831 revelation was not understood at the time to promote polygamy, these later recollections seem to have been influenced by, and misinterpreted to conform to, the contemporary Latter-day Saint doctrine of polygamy and the institutional needs of the Church.

Ezra Booth's 1831 report stated that Joseph Smith told one man "who has left his wife in the state of N.Y. that he is entirely free from his wife, and he is at liberty to take him a wife from among the Lamanites," provided he first "return to the state of N.Y. and settle his business [legally divorce his wife]."<sup>42</sup> This man appears to have been Martin Harris, who was separated from his wife at the

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<sup>40</sup>"Jeffersonian Roots, Republican Party Platform, June 18, 1856," *The Republican Party: Documents Decoded*, ed. Douglas B. Harris and Lonce H. Bailey (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2014), 4, [LINK](#).

<sup>41</sup>Wilford Woodruff journal, 1854 January-1859 December, 239, entry for Aug. 26, 1857, MS 1352, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>42</sup>Booth, "Mormonism—Nos. VIII–IX," *Ohio Star* 11, no. 49 (Dec. 8, 1831): 1, col. 4, [LINK](#).

time of the alleged revelation.<sup>43</sup> The minutes of an 1845 Council of Fifty meeting indicate this, with W.W. Phelps recounting when “6 or 8 [elders] went over the boundaries of the U.S. to preach— Jos. went to prayer—he then commenced a revelation that Martin [Harris] was to marry among the Laminites [sic]—& that I was to preach that day—&c &c it was a long revelation.”<sup>44</sup>

### W.W. Phelps Letter (1861)

In 1861, W.W. Phelps wrote Brigham Young a letter detailing “the substance” of that long revelation, which now included a justification for men having many wives. According to Phelps’ 1861 letter, Smith had said that it was the Lord’s will that:

in time, ye should take unto you wives of the Lamanites and Nephites . . . About three years after this was given, I [Phelps] asked brother Joseph privately, how “we,” that were mentioned in the revelation could take wives from the “natives”—as we were all married men? He replied, instantly “In the same manner that Abraham took Hagar and Katurah [Keturah]; and Jacob took Rachel Bilhah and Zilpah; by revelation.”<sup>45</sup>

As part of the mission to the Lamanites, Smith had arrived in Missouri in July 1831 with a company consisting of most of the named men in Phelps’ letter, and their first Sunday there Phelps “preached to a mixed audience of white pioneers, negroes, and Indians,” two of whom were baptized that same day.<sup>46</sup> While this would have been a natural bridge to such a topic as inter-cultural marriage, the lack of contemporary documentation for any such polygamous revelation shows Phelps almost certainly misremembered Smith later speaking favorably of polygamy as a way to accomplish the revelation. As LDS researcher Clair Barrus

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<sup>43</sup>Dennis A. Wright, “Caroline Young Harris: The Kirtland Wife of Martin Harris,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Ohio and Upper Canada*, ed. Guy L. Dorius, Craig K. Manscill, and Craig James Ostler (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2006), 112, [LINK](#).

<sup>44</sup>Appendix 2: Council of Fifty, Minutes, Feb. 27, 1845, 5, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>45</sup>W. W. Phelps, letter to Brigham Young, Aug. 12, 1861, [3-4], Revelations collection, circa 1829-1876, MS 4583, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>46</sup>*History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Herald House, 1952), 1:204, [LINK](#).

observes, “Anachronisms in the text of the revelation . . . suggest events were not correctly recalled thirty years after the fact,” and that “the most likely scenario explaining the [1831] revelation . . . is that Martin Harris, who was estranged from his wife, was to take an Indigenous wife to obtain legal access to Indian territory. Other accompanying Elders may have also been invited to participate in the alliance.”<sup>47</sup>

Supporting this conclusion is the lack of evidence from Phelps’ named companions Oliver Cowdery,<sup>48</sup> Martin Harris,<sup>49</sup> Joseph Coe,<sup>50</sup> and Ziba Peterson.<sup>51</sup> While all except Martin Harris were deceased when Phelps wrote his 1861 account and could thus not corroborate nor deny whether the revelation implied or instructed polygamy,<sup>52</sup> all of the men had been excommunicated from the Church in the late 1830s, yet in statements of complaint against Joseph Smith none of them insinuated that polygamy was part of his theological framework. Such a complaint would have been worth voicing for anyone disaffected from Smith, as polygamy was at odds with Smith’s public theology. Additionally, no Latter-day Saint elder ever did “take . . . wives of the Lamanites and Nephites.”<sup>53</sup> Martin Harris, who appears to be the one Booth recounted was “entirely free from his wife” provided he first obtain a legal divorce, ultimately remarried Brigham Young’s niece Caroline Young in 1836 after his first wife, Lucy, died.<sup>54</sup>

Martin Harris in fact expressed doctrinal skepticism when he later heard that the Utah Church was teaching polygamy. A year after Section 132 was publicly announced and not long before his second wife Caroline would leave him to join the Latter-day Saints in Utah, Harris reportedly pressed an LDS elder to “reconcile

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<sup>47</sup> Clair Barrus, “Prologues to Plurality: A Study of Joseph Smith’s Revelations on Marriage,” in Cheryl L. Bruno, *Secret Covenants: New Insights on Early Mormon Polygamy*, (Signature Books 2024), 7-8.

<sup>48</sup> Oliver Cowdery, Biography, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>49</sup> Martin Harris, Biography, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>50</sup> Joseph Coe, Biography, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>51</sup> Ziba Peterson, Biography, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>52</sup> Oliver Cowdery died in 1850, Joseph Coe in 1854, Ziba Peterson in 1849, and Joshua Lewis in 1835.

<sup>53</sup> Revelation, 1831 July 17, Revelations collection, circa 1829-1876, MS 4583, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>54</sup> Wright, “Caroline Young Harris,” 113.

polygamy with the doctrine taught by one of the old prophets.”<sup>55</sup> Had polygamy been spoken of favorably by Smith in the early 1830s, Harris would have already had the opportunity to object and ask Smith himself for such an explanation, and would thus not be likely to express confusion at the doctrine.

Most challenging to Phelps' assertion of polygamous teachings following this 1831 revelation are his own 1835 letters on the subject of eternal marriage. “MY ONLY ONE:” Phelps began a letter to his wife, Sally, later referencing Jesus's teachings on marriage in Luke 20 and explaining, “This—is the reason why I have called you at the commencement of this letter, my only one, because I have no right to any other woman in this world nor in the world to come, according to the law of the celestial kingdom.”<sup>56</sup> As Richard Van Wagoner observed, Phelps' own letters demonstrate he had no knowledge of church-sanctioned polygamy in 1835, making this later claim problematic.<sup>57</sup>

## External Pressures and Heber C. Kimball Sermon (1866)

Following the passage of the 1862 Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act<sup>58</sup> and the arrival of the first RLDS missionaries in 1863, Utah leaders were under increasing pressure to defend polygamy legally and theologically, which included establishing its prophetic provenance through Joseph Smith. This heightened scrutiny may have prompted some leaders to begin publicly anchoring the practice as a foundational doctrine revealed in the early 1830s. Heber C. Kimball's 1866 sermon to a Salt Lake City congregation exemplifies this effort; he directly challenged the skepticism surrounding polygamy's

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<sup>55</sup>Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, “Rest Assured, Martin Harris Will Be Here in Time,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 1 (2011): 6, [LINK](#).

<sup>56</sup>W. W. Phelps letter, Kirtland, Ohio to Sally Phelps, Liberty, Missouri, Sep. 16, 1835, MS 4587, CHL, [LINK](#): see typescript: Bruce A. Van Orden, “Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters (1835–1836),” *BYU Studies* 33, no. 3 (1993): 563–64, [LINK](#).

<sup>57</sup>Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Signature Books, 1992), 17–18, n. 2, [LINK](#).

<sup>58</sup>The first federal law to criminalized polygamy in all U.S. territories, the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act of 1862 also disincorporated the Church. However, due to the Civil War it was largely unenforced.

origins by insisting Joseph Smith first received a revelation on polygamy in Kirtland:

Now I am going to tell it right out as people do not believe that polygamy started with ~~prophet~~ [sic] the prophet it was thus saith the Lord for my servant Willard and Brigham and Heber to take more wives for this is pleasing in my God's sight and now they [say?] we established polygamy . . . Joseph Smith had the revelation on polygamy and there is no power in earth or in hell that can dispute it that revelation Joseph received in Kirtland and hid it up and it came forth in Nauvoo and Sister Emma burned the original but we was very cautious and took a copy and it is not out of existence and never will be through time nor all eternity.<sup>59</sup>

Kimball's 1866 claim does not include any further details but does align with the timing suggested in Brigham Young's 1857 account. However, it is similarly not supported by any documents or sources from the Kirtland era. Kimball did not join the body of the Church in Kirtland until the fall of 1833 and was not in leadership until 1835. In this same 1866 sermon, Kimball says that "the first time we knew of" the revelation to take more wives was when he and his fellow elders came home from their mission to England in 1841, and yet he does not explain how he knew that Smith received the revelation in Kirtland.<sup>60</sup> Kimball's claim may be unique in that it seems to suggest that the polygamy revelation was a written document received in Kirtland and then hidden until Nauvoo. This claim did not gain traction, and little other than a seemingly erroneous 1883 journal entry of George Richards can be found to defend a Kirtland-era polygamy document.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Heber C. Kimball, Discourse, Sep. 2, 1866, Church History Department Pitman Shorthand transcriptions, 2013-2025, CR 100 912, 5, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>60</sup>Kimball, Discourse, Sep. 2, 1866, Pitman Transcription.

<sup>61</sup>Richards recorded attending a meeting in June 1883 where Latter-day Saint high councilman Thomas Grover signed an affidavit that "Joseph Smith (the prophet) had the revelation on Celestial marriage (as is recorded in Doctrin[e] & Covenants) read in 1836 by his Brother Hyrum before the High council for their acceptance or rejection." As historians note, other evidence available from this time indicates that Grover's 1883 affidavit likely named 1843 as the year Hyrum Smith read a revelation regarding marriage and polygamy to the high council, though the original affidavit is no longer extant to verify. George F. Richards Journals, Jun. 10, 1883, n1, CHL, [LINK](#).

## Brigham Young, Oliver Cowdery, and Oral Traditions (1867 and 1872)

The influence of W. W. Phelps' recollection is apparent in Brigham Young's recorded sermons, as in the following example from 1867:

Joseph had a manifestation given to him that he didn't write out never was written until 1843 I think in the year 1830 or 1831 this manifestation was given to Joseph it was simply this the Lord said to Joseph the time has come that it is my will that my servants should take to themselves wives but the revelations [sic] was not given but a manifestation to Joseph that the elders of Israel would be required to take more than one wife.<sup>62</sup>

Just as Phelps and later Young conflated Joseph Smith's 1831 inter-cultural marriage revelation with polygamy, Young's accounts of Oliver Cowdery appear to suffer from similar distortion. In 1867 and 1872, Young added further detail to his 1857 statement that Cowdery "did act upon" a polygamy revelation despite being warned not to by Smith.<sup>63</sup> In his 1872 discourse to a congregation in Salt Lake City, Young expounded upon Cowdery's error, narrating the scene between Smith and Cowdery and placing the revelation on polygamy yet earlier, to 1829:

[W]hile Joseph And Oliver were translating the Book of Mormon, they had a revelation that the order of Patriarchal Marriag[e] and the Sealing was right. Oliver said unto Joseph, "Br Joseph, why don't we go into the Order of Polygamy, and practice it as the ancients did? We know it is true, then why delay?" Joseph's reply was, "I know that we know it is true, and from God, but the time has not yet come." This did not seem to suit Oliver, who expressed a determination to go into the order of

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<sup>62</sup>Brigham Young, Discourse, Sep. 8, 1867, Church History Department Pitman Shorthand transcriptions, 2013-2025, CR 100 912, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>63</sup>Wilford Woodruff journal, 1854 January-1859 December, entry for Aug. 26, 1857, MS 1352, 239, CHL.

Plural Marriage anyhow, altho he was ignorant of the order and pattern and the results.<sup>64</sup>

However, despite this story's repeated telling, the challenges to its veracity are manifold; and consequently, this narrative is viewed with skepticism by scholars.<sup>65</sup> As with Heber C. Kimball, Young did not join the church until 1832 and did not join the body of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio until fall of 1833. He was thus not able to have witnessed the conversations he quoted. Additionally, Oliver Cowdery was not married until December 18, 1832, making polygamous marriage any time before that impossible.<sup>66</sup>

In his 1831 letters, Ezra Booth had criticized Oliver Cowdery for entering into a matrimonial contract with a young lady with the consent of her parents, "but as soon as his back is turned upon her, he violates his engagements, and prostitutes his honor by becoming the gallant of another, and resolves in his heart, and expresses resolutions to marry her."<sup>67</sup> Some have asserted that this demonstrates Cowdery's determination to engage in polygamy before it was permitted,<sup>68</sup> however, as Lawrence Foster observed, "If Cowdery's character in this regard had been anything but spotless, there can be little doubt that he would have been thoroughly vilified for his indiscretions."<sup>69</sup> Indeed, Church discipline records seem to dispute the claim that Cowdery became polygamous: Cowdery was the Second Elder of the Church in 1830 and remained one of the top leaders until his excommunication in 1838, and the charges against Cowdery did not include any accusation of attempting polygamy.<sup>70</sup>

Further challenging Brigham Young's description of Oliver Cowdery is an 1846 letter Cowdery wrote to his sister. Cowdery's

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<sup>64</sup>A. Karl Larson and Katherine Miles Larson, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker* (Utah State University Press, 1980), 349, [LINK](#).

<sup>65</sup>See, for example, Brian C. Hales, "'Guilty of Such Folly'? Accusations of Adultery or Polygamy against Oliver Cowdery," in *Days Never to be Forgotten: Oliver Cowdery*, ed. Alexander L. Baugh (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 279–93, [LINK](#).

<sup>66</sup>Jackson County, MO, Marriage Record Book, vol. 1, page 44.

<sup>67</sup>Booth, "Mormonism—Nos. VIII–IX," *Ohio Star* 11, no. 49 (Dec. 8, 1831): 1, col. 3.

<sup>68</sup>See, for example, Hales, "'Guilty of Such Folly?'" 279–93.

<sup>69</sup>Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1981), 300 n35, [LINK](#).

<sup>70</sup>Minutes, 12 April 1838, 118, JSP, [LINK](#); see also Journal, March–September 1838, 29–31, JSP, [LINK](#).

sister Phoebe had evidently written to him concerning rumors of polygamy among the people as Church members following the Twelve began their westward exodus. Cowdery's response was one of shock and disbelief:

I can hardly think it possible, that you have written us the truth, that though there may be individuals who are guilty of the iniquities spoken of,—yet no such practice can be preached or adhered to, as a public doctrine. Such *may* do for the followers of Mahomet; it may have been done some thousands of years ago; but no people, professing to be governed by the pure and holy principles of the Lord Jesus, can hold up their heads before the world at this distance of time, and be guilty of such folly—such wrong—such abomination.<sup>71</sup>

Cowdery's letter demonstrates that he did not believe polygamy could be harmonized with pure Christian principles, and as one personally familiar with the original faith, he did not anticipate Smith's church would ever condone it. Additionally, on his deathbed Cowdery bore testimony "of the truth of the gospel revealed through Joseph Smith, and the power of the holy Priesthood which he had received through his administrations."<sup>72</sup> It is difficult to reconcile Cowdery's 1846 letter and deathbed witness of the gospel that he understood to require monogamy with Young's later testimony that sometime between 1829 and 1831, Cowdery knew that polygamy was or would be a requirement of God, and that Cowdery became polygamous himself.

## Orson Pratt and the Joseph F. Smith Affidavits

By 1869, Orson Pratt's public defense of polygamy had evolved as well. The man who had officially introduced "the principle and doctrine of...many wives and concubines" (D&C 132:1) to the Latter-day Saints as having been received in 1843 now sought to establish the revelation as having originated in the early 1830s:

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<sup>71</sup>Oliver Cowdery, personal letter to Daniel and Phoebe Jackson, July 24, 1846, published in *The Saints' Herald* 55 no. 3 (Jan. 15, 1908): 56–57, (emphasis in the original), [LINK](#).

<sup>72</sup>"Oliver Cowdery," in Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols., (Deseret News, 1901), 1:251, [LINK](#).

I will tell you what the Prophet Joseph said in relation to this matter in 1831, also in 1832 . . . In the fore part of the year 1832, Joseph told individuals, then in the Church, that he had inquired of the Lord concerning the principle of plurality of wives, and he received for answer that the principle of taking more wives than one is a true principle, but the time had not yet come for it to be practised [sic]. That was before the Church was two years old.<sup>73</sup>

Pratt did not then name the “individuals” who Joseph Smith purportedly told about a Kirtland-era polygamy revelation, but his wording seems to echo the earlier statements of Phelps, Kimball, and Young.

In 1869, LDS Apostle Joseph F. Smith, son of Joseph Smith’s brother and fellow martyr Hyrum Smith, began systematically preparing affidavits after realizing “the scarcity of evidence, I might say almost total absence of direct evidence upon the subject [of polygamy], as connected with the Prophet Joseph himself.”<sup>74</sup> Indeed, outsiders had noted that “no proof has ever yet been adduced to show that Joseph either lived as a polygamist or dictated the revelation in favor of a plurality of wives.”<sup>75</sup> This evidentiary void was particularly problematic given the testimonies of Joseph F. Smith’s senior leaders, who asserted that the polygamy revelation was known to the Prophet Joseph at or soon after the organization of the Church. Seemingly without any firsthand account of the practice from his own mother, Mary Fielding Smith, who died weeks after the revelation was publicly announced, Joseph F. Smith was also reckoning with the public denial of the practice by his aunt Emma, Joseph Smith’s widow. Emma’s consistent response is exemplified in her interview with historian William Hepworth Dixon, published in 1867: “Emma . . . coolly, firmly, permanently denies that her husband ever had any other wife than herself. She declares the story to be false, the revelation a fraud. She

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<sup>73</sup>Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” Oct. 7, 1869, *Journal of Discourses* 13:193, [LINK](#).

<sup>74</sup>Joseph F. Smith to Orson Pratt, Jul. 19, 1875, in Joseph F. Smith Letterpress copybook, 3, MS 1325, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>75</sup>William Hepworth Dixon, *New America*, (J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1867), 222, [LINK](#).

denounces polygamy as the invention of Young and Pratt.”<sup>76</sup> To counter Emma’s narrative, and that of her sons, and perhaps to provide a retroactive foundation for the narrative of Smith’s early involvement with polygamy, Joseph F. Smith crafted affidavits to be signed as the primary evidence that Joseph Smith was “married or sealed” to the signatories sometime between 1841 and 1844.<sup>77</sup>

## Legal Threats and the Fact-Finding Mission of 1878

During this time of theological opposition, the Church also faced continuous legal threats, as the proposed Wade (1866), Cragin (1868), and Cullom Bills (1869) unsuccessfully made their way through the U.S. legislature.<sup>78</sup> When the Poland Act was passed in 1874, Latter-day Saint First Presidency secretary and polygamist Geoge Reynolds was designated to be a test case. Reynolds’ indictment for bigamy by a grand jury in December of 1875 may have served as a catalyst for the Church to solidify the legitimacy of the polygamy revelation; soon after, Brigham Young assigned Orson Pratt to revise the Doctrine and Covenants to create an updated edition. The resulting 1876 edition removed the Church’s statement on monogamous marriage,<sup>79</sup> and added several revelations, including the polygamy revelation as Section 132.

As the Reynolds case worked its way toward the United States Supreme Court, Joseph F. Smith perpetuated the 1831 narrative of polygamy’s genesis by echoing Brigham Young’s accusation against

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<sup>76</sup>Dixon, *New America*, 223.

<sup>77</sup>Affidavits about celestial marriage, 1869-1915, CHL, MS 3423, [LINK](#). See also Cheryl L. Bruno and Michelle B. Stone, “Crafting a Sacred Story: Joseph F. Smith and the William Clayton Affidavits,” *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* 1, no. 1 (2025), [LINK](#).

<sup>78</sup>As various challenges prevented meaningful enforcement of the 1862 Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act, Congress continued working toward an abolishment of polygamy. The Wade Bill proposed giving the governor control over executive, judicial, and militia activities, stripping the Church of its temporal authority. The Cragin Bill proposed to eliminate trial by jury in Utah for cases involving polygamy. The Cullom Bill proposed sending the Army to Utah to enforce anti-polygamy laws. The Poland Act of 1874 incorporated the strictest measures of the proposed bills and mandated that polygamy cases be heard in federal courts, removing the ability of polygamists to have their cases tried by fellow Church members sympathetic to their religious practice. See Richard D. Poll, “The Legislative Antipolygamy Campaign,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 107-121, [LINK](#). See also Andrew C. Skinner, “Civil War’s Aftermath: Reconstruction, Abolition, and Polygamy,” in *Civil War Saints*, ed. Kenneth L. Alford (Deseret Book, 2012), 295–315, [LINK](#).

<sup>79</sup>The article on Marriage was Section 101 (CI) in the 1835 edition and Section 109 (CIX) in the 1844 edition.

Oliver Cowdery, claiming Cowdery had brought “reproach upon himself and thereby upon the church by ‘running before he was sent,’ and ‘taking liberties without license’” by becoming polygamous at that early date.<sup>80</sup> Confident that Joseph Smith’s theology of polygamy had developed a decade before his practice of it, but lacking evidence for their claim, Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith embarked on a fact-finding mission to the East in 1878, “to obtain, if possible, some dates and facts that pertained to the early history of the Church.”<sup>81</sup> However, in Smith’s report at the 1878 Semi-Annual Conference of the Church, he relayed that “they found no one who could give them any information, or who knew as much as ourselves on these matters.”<sup>82</sup> Smith’s assertion that the early members knew less than “ourselves” is ironic considering that he was not born until 1838, leaving him with no firsthand knowledge of the events in question.<sup>83</sup>

Having found “no one” capable of providing any information, Pratt’s recitation of the 1831 narrative upon his return is problematic:

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<sup>80</sup>Joseph F. Smith, “Plural Marriage—For the Righteous Only—Obedience Imperative—Blessings Resulting,” Jul. 7, 1878, *Journal of Discourses*, 20:29, [LINK](#).

<sup>81</sup>Joseph F. Smith, “Semi-Annual Conference,” *Deseret News* 27, no. 36 (Oct. 9, 1878): 572, [LINK](#).

<sup>82</sup>Joseph F. Smith, “Semi-Annual Conference,” 572.

<sup>83</sup>A few other Joseph F. Smith sources are similarly problematic in that Joseph F. was not alive or old enough to have heard the history from Joseph Smith himself before his death, and Joseph F. does not reveal the original source for this information. At Elizabeth Ann Whitney’s 1882 funeral, he was quoted as follows: “The speaker said, perhaps, for the first time in public, that the women who entered into plural marriage with the Prophet Joseph Smith were shown to him and named to him as early as 1831, and some of them were given in marriage to him as that date, although it was not then prudent, under the circumstances, to make these facts public” (“Funeral Services of Sister Elizabeth A. Whitney,” *Deseret News* 15, no. 75 (Feb. 17, 1882): 3, [LINK](#)). This quote is occasionally used as supporting evidence of a Fanny Alger marriage to Joseph Smith; however, Joseph F. Smith corrected the record the next day in a Letter to the Editor: “I see, by the reporter’s synopsis of my remarks yesterday . . . that I am made responsible for the following statement: ‘That the women who entered into plural marriage . . . and some of them were given in marriage to him as early as that date.’ This latter statement is wholly incorrect. What I did say was to the effect that when the Prophet Joseph Smith received the revelation in relation to the eternity of the marriage covenant, which includes plural marriage, in 1831, the Lord showed him those women who were to engage with him in the establishment of that principle in the Church, and at that time some of these women were named and given to him, to become his wives when the time should come that this principle should be established” (“Correction,” *Deseret Evening News* 15, no. 76 (Feb. 18, 1882): 2, [LINK](#)).

[He] refuted the statement and belief of those present that Brigham Young was the author of that revelation; showed that . . . Joseph actually received revelation upon that principle as early as 1831. Said, "Lyman Johnson, who was very familiar with Joseph at this early date, Joseph living at his father's house, and who was also very intimate with me, we having travelled on several missions together, told me himself that Joseph had made known to him as early as 1831, that plural marriage was a correct principle. Joseph declared to Lyman that God had revealed it to him, but that the time had not come to teach or practice it in the Church, but that the time would come." To this statement Elder Pratt bore his testimony.<sup>84</sup>

Lyman Johnson had died in 1859, nearly twenty years before Pratt's attribution, so he was not alive to remind Pratt of this story during the fact-finding mission, and Pratt did not name any other individuals who knew of a polygamy revelation at that early date. Additionally, much like Ezra Booth, Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, Joseph Coe, and Ziba Peterson, Johnson had loudly criticized Joseph Smith's faults following his own disaffection, yet he remained notably silent regarding any early polygamy revelation.<sup>85</sup>

Though these testimonies of Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith have hitherto been featured prominently as evidence of the 1831 narrative, they remain second-hand and uncorroborated by contemporary records. Viewed in the context of the severe external pressures facing the Church, these accounts appear to be a result of efforts to reconcile inconsistencies and provide foundational evidence where contemporary documentation and witnesses were absent.

## **Judicial and Legislative Acts (1879-1887) and Joseph B. Noble Statement (1883)**

In 1879, the United States Supreme Court dashed Latter-day Saint hopes for legal victory with its unanimous decision

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<sup>84</sup>Orson Pratt, "Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 40, no. 50 (Dec. 16, 1878): 788, [LINK](#).

<sup>85</sup>See Lyman Johnson's excommunication trial, Minute Book 2, 126, JSP, [LINK](#).

against George Reynolds (*Reynolds v. United States*), rejecting the argument that polygamy was a constitutionally protected practice of the LDS religion.<sup>86</sup> Soon after, the 1882 Edmunds Act was passed, reinvigorating the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act and strengthening its provisions, making not just bigamy and polygamy with more than one woman illegal but also “unlawful cohabitation.”<sup>87</sup> The Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887 delivered the final blow, disincorporating the Church and introducing a host of legal punishments, including the seizure of its assets.<sup>88</sup> In this climate of legal siege, Latter-day Saints were incentivized to use history as a form of resistance to government oppression, and an increasing number of members began to publicly testify that Joseph Smith had received a polygamy revelation in the early 1830s.

Joseph B. Noble, an early convert to Mormonism, began providing testimony in 1869 of Joseph Smith’s polygamy as part of the effort to counteract the missionary efforts of the RLDS Church, including proselytizing visits to Utah by Smith’s sons. Noble’s testimony that he had sealed Joseph Smith to Noble’s sister-in-law in “the first ceremony of the plural mar[r]riage performed in this dispensation” led him to become a trustworthy witness for the LDS church.<sup>89</sup> At an 1883 stake conference, as the community reeled from the newly passed Edmunds Act, Noble shifted his testimony from verifying Nauvoo polygamy to providing a foundational origin for the doctrine. As reported in *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, the theme of polygamy—also called plural or celestial marriage—as instituted by Joseph Smith and Hyrum Smith was strongly impressed upon the attendees of this conference by the leading elders of the Church. Noble stated that “the prophet Joseph told him that the doctrine of celestial marriage was revealed to him while he was engaged on the work of translation of the Scriptures.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>*Reynolds v. United States*, 98 U.S. 145 (1878), [LINK](#).

<sup>87</sup>Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act, March 22, 1882, Chap. 47, [LINK](#).

<sup>88</sup>Text of the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887 made available through the Washington County Historical Society, Washington County, Utah, [LINK](#).

<sup>89</sup>George F. Richards Journals, Jun. 10, 1883. Joseph B. Noble testified of his first-hand knowledge of Joseph Smith’s polygamy in Nauvoo in the Temple Lot trial (1891-1894).

<sup>90</sup>“Plural Marriage,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 45 no. 29 (Jul. 16, 1883): 454, [LINK](#).

Noble's reference to the scriptural translation is ambiguous and could refer to the Book of Mormon, Smith's translation of the Bible, or the book of Abraham.<sup>91</sup> However, Noble's other statements do not suggest a deviation from the previously mentioned 1872 institutional narrative established by Young, who then asserted that the polygamy revelation was given to Smith while he was translating the Book of Mormon, which would have been 1829 or earlier.<sup>92</sup> While the Book of Mormon condemns David and Solomon's polygamy and does not suggest God justified it as Section 132 does,<sup>93</sup> and while no contemporary evidence points to a revelation being received so early, such assertions may have been valuable to the cause of the Utah Church because they placed the origin of the revelation at the very inception of the Restoration.

### Hubert Howe Bancroft History (1889) and the Manifesto (1890)

The first to publish the claim that Smith's polygamy revelation came as he was translating the Bible was American historian and ethnologist Hubert Howe Bancroft in his 1889 book, *History of Utah: 1540-1886*. Bancroft recorded the difficulty of sorting through the competing and often oppositional evidences of Latter-day Saint polygamy, acknowledging that it was "impossible at this day" to determine exactly who began to participate in polygamy, or when, as "the evidence comes to us in the form of rumors, general assertions, and bold statements from the mouths of men filled with deadly hate, and cannot be altogether trusted."<sup>94</sup>

As part of his research, Bancroft visited Utah and "gathered from them no inconsiderable stores of original and interesting

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<sup>91</sup>For example, Thomas Brown Holmes Stenhouse wrote that "Elder W. W. Phelps said in [the] Salt Lake Tabernacle, in 1862, that while Joseph was translating the Book of Abraham, in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835, from the papyrus found with the Egyptian mummies, the Prophet became impressed with the idea that polygamy would yet become an institution of the Mormon Church." B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints* (D. Appleton and Company, 1873) 182, n., [LINK](#).

<sup>92</sup>Larson and Larson, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, 349.

<sup>93</sup>The Book of Mormon states, "Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord" (Jacob 2:24), while Section 132:1 begins by citing an inquiry "to know and understand wherein I, the Lord, justified my servants... David and Solomon, my servants, as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines."

<sup>94</sup>Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft. Vol. XXVI, History of Utah: 1540-1886* (The History Company, 1889): 158-159, [LINK](#).

information,” but was frustrated by the clear influence outside pressures had on the collective memory: “In regard to the quality of evidence I here encounter, I will say that never before has it been my lot to meet with such a mass of mendacity. The attempts of almost all who have written upon the subject seem to have been to make out a case rather than to state the facts.”<sup>95</sup> Bancroft appeared to draw from oral tradition, then, to present the most logical explanation of polygamy’s beginnings in the Church:

It is said that as early as 1831, the will of the Lord in this respect had been revealed to Joseph. In translating the bible he had come upon the passages relating to plural wives and concubines, and had inquired of the Lord what he should do. He was told to wait, and not make the matter public then, the people not yet having faith to receive it.<sup>96</sup>

While the timing of this explanation fits with the contents of the Bible from which Smith was translating, it does not account for the content of the Bible translation that Smith produced, as will be demonstrated in the second half of this paper. But because Smith’s changes were not noted with clear comparison against the original KJV in the RLDS Church’s 1867 publication of the IV, it likely would have been an exercise in diminishing returns for Bancroft to comb through the text to confirm whether Smith’s changes affirmed the Utah Saints’ polygamy narrative.<sup>97</sup>

The institutional effort that Bancroft observed to “make out a case” reached a breaking point soon after the publication of his book. In 1890, the Edmunds-Tucker Act was upheld by the United States Supreme Court (*The Late Corporation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints v. United States*), and the Church’s resources began to be seized with no hope of legal recourse.<sup>98</sup> Soon after, Church President Wilford Woodruff issued the Manifesto, officially declaring that “we are not teaching polygamy or plural marriage, nor permitting any person to enter into its practice,”

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<sup>95</sup>Bancroft, *History of Utah*, viii, vii.

<sup>96</sup>Bancroft, *History of Utah*, 161.

<sup>97</sup>Joseph Smith, *The Holy scriptures: Translated and corrected by the spirit of revelation* (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1867), [LINK](#).

<sup>98</sup>*Mormon Church v. United States*, 136 U.S. 1 (1890), [LINK](#).

as well as his intention to personally and institutionally submit to laws forbidding it.<sup>99</sup> In 1894, the Temple Lot case resulted in a legal failure to prove polygamy had originated with Joseph Smith at all, let alone in 1831.<sup>100</sup> The actual cessation of polygamy in the LDS Church ultimately required numerous official communications, including the Second Manifesto (1904)<sup>101</sup> and a statement from the First Presidency of the Church (1933).<sup>102</sup> Gradually, the intense pressure to prove Section 132's origination in 1831 lessened as the narrative became naturalized within the Church as an established fact—no longer asserted as a defensive claim, but rather as something members had set aside in order to obey the law of the land.

## B. H. Roberts History (1910)

More than twenty years after Bancroft published what Utah members said about polygamy's genesis, the narrative was formally codified as institutional history by B.H. Roberts in *The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. In this 1910 publication, Roberts asserted that “there is indisputable evidence that the revelation making known this marriage law was given to the Prophet as early as 1831,” citing the JST as this “indisputable” evidence.<sup>103</sup> According to Roberts, as Smith began his revision of the Old Testament

he was doubtless struck with the favor in which the Lord held the several Bible Patriarchs of that period, notwithstanding they had a plurality of wives. What more natural than that he should inquire of the Lord at that time, when his mind must have been impressed with the fact—Why, O Lord, didst Thou justify Thy servants, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; as also Moses, David, and Solomon, in the matter of their having many wives and

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<sup>99</sup> *The Woman's Exponent* 19, no. 9 (Oct. 15, 1890): 68, [LINK](#).

<sup>100</sup> “Decision of John F. Philips in Temple Lot Case,” Circuit Court of the United States, March 20, 1894 (Lamoni, IA: The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, n.d.), 43-44, [LINK](#).

<sup>101</sup> Joseph F. Smith, Address, Apr. 6, 1904, in *Seventy-Fourth Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (The Deseret News, 1904), 75, [LINK](#).

<sup>102</sup> *Deseret News*, Church Section (June 17, 1933), 42, [LINK](#).

<sup>103</sup> Roberts, *History of the Church* Vol. V, xxix-xxx, [LINK](#).

concubines (see opening paragraph of the Revelation)?  
In answer to that inquiry came the revelation, though  
not then committed to writing.<sup>104</sup>

Because Roberts (1857-1933) was born well after Smith's death, his summary relied on theological assumptions that were based on oral traditions rather than contemporary records. As will be demonstrated, however, these assumptions are not only inconsistent with the contemporary record of the 1830s, but they also ignore the actual textual revisions Smith made in his Bible translation.

Roberts' supporting evidence is similarly problematic. He cited the condemnation of polygamy found in both the article on marriage in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants<sup>105</sup> and in a published series of questions asked and answered by Smith<sup>106</sup> as *corroborating* evidence that Smith had received a polygamy revelation by that time. Assuming that charges against the people meant Joseph Smith had received a polygamy revelation, Roberts reasoned, "Why was [a charge of polygamy made] unless the subject of 'polygamy' had been mooted within the Church?"<sup>107</sup> Roberts suggested that Smith's absence from the general assembly that approved the 1835 D&C demonstrated that Smith was not behind the article on marriage's inclusion in the book. Others, such as Osborne J. P. Widtsoe, made the point more explicitly: "The Prophet Joseph Smith knew nothing of the article [on marriage]. He was absent, in Canada, when it was accepted by the conference."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup>Roberts, *History of the Church*, Vol. V, xxix-xxx.

<sup>105</sup>"Inasmuch as this church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy: we declare that we believe, that one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband, except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again." This statement is Section 101 (CI), "Marriage," in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, and Section 109 (CIX) in the 1844 Doctrine and Covenants. Doctrine and Covenants, 1835, 251, JSP, 2026, [LINK](#).

<sup>106</sup>"Question 7th. Do the Mormons believe in having more wives than one. Answer. No, not at the same time. But they believe, that if their companion dies, they have a right to marry again. But we do disapprove of the custom which has gained in the world, and has been practised among us, to our great mortification, of marrying in five or six weeks, or even in two or three months after the death of their companion. We believe that due respect ought to be had, to the memory of the dead, and the feelings of both friends and children." Questions and Answers, 8 May 1838, 43, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>107</sup>Roberts, *History of the Church*, Vol. V, xxx.

<sup>108</sup>Osborne J. P. Widtsoe, *The Restoration of the Gospel* (The Deseret News, 1912), 158, n. c, [LINK](#).

While Joseph Smith was, in fact, in Michigan when the general assembly was held to approve the Doctrine and Covenants,<sup>109</sup> this argument regardless relies on a narrow view of the conference itself that ignores Joseph Smith's role as one of four committee members selected in 1834 "to arrange the items of the doctrine of Jesus Christ for the government of the church" into the 1835 D&C.<sup>110</sup> In the book's preface, Smith and his fellow committee members explicitly stated their "expectation" that they were "to be called to answer to every principle advanced" in the volume.<sup>111</sup> In August 1835, the committee finished their work and pronounced the entire book, including the 1835 marriage article, as "a law unto the Church, and a rule of faith and practice unto the same."<sup>112</sup>

Considering that the 1835 D&C was printed after being approved by the general assembly, it is evident that Smith—as a member of the D&C committee and as President of the First Presidency (with First Presidency member Frederick G. Williams as printer for the Church)—knew about and supported the inclusion of the statement against polygamy, and considered it the law governing the Church.<sup>113</sup> Subsequent publications of the 1835 marriage article under Smith's direction—including the 1844 publication of the D&C, which included the same and was prepared for publication under Smith's direction—back up the assertion that Smith was aware of, and affirmed, the marriage article.<sup>114</sup> Roberts' conclusion that Smith's Bible translation served as a catalyst for a revelation on polygamy at a time when clear instruction on monogamy was being given seems to have stemmed from theological necessity rather than historical documentation.

## Additional Sources

In addition to the legal threats by the U.S. government and the competitive claims to authority presented by the RLDS

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<sup>109</sup>"A Chronology of the Life of Joseph Smith: 1835," *BYU Studies* 46, no. 4 (2007), Aug. 17, 1835, [LINK](#).

<sup>110</sup>Minutes, 24 September 1834, 76, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>111</sup>Doctrine and Covenants, 1835, iv, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>112</sup>Minute Book 1, 98, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>113</sup>Doctrine and Covenants, 1835, Source Note and Historical Introduction, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>114</sup>See "On Marriage," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 23 (Oct. 1, 1842), [LINK](#); and Doctrine and Covenants, 1844, 438, JSP, [LINK](#).

Church, Latter-day Saints' collective memory was further influenced by decades of intense rhetoric. The following 1852 teaching by Orson Pratt, frequently emphasized thereafter by the leaders of the Church, illustrates the spiritual pressure placed upon members to embrace polygamy as a requirement for exaltation:

Now let us enquire, what will become of those individuals who have this law [polygamy] taught unto them in plainness, if they reject it? (A voice in the stand, they will be damned.) I will tell you, they will be damned, saith the Lord God Almighty, in the revelation he has given... This was the word of the Lord to his servant Joseph the prophet himself. With all the knowledge and light he had, he must comply with it, or, says the Lord unto him, you shall be damned; and the same is true in regard to all those who reject these things.<sup>115</sup>

Decades of such strong teachings, alongside early mandates announced by the President of the Church for women to “bow down... and submit” to polygamy or “leave,” institutionalized a culture of compliance.<sup>116</sup> This pressure to embrace the doctrine as a necessity likely contributed to a willingness to reshape memories to agree with a narrative that secured polygamy to the foundation of the Restoration.<sup>117</sup>

Such sources began to emerge in the 1880s, during the height of institutional pressure to prove a Kirtland-era polygamy revelation.

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<sup>115</sup>“Minutes of conference: a special conference of the elders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints assembled in the Tabernacle, Great Salt Lake City, August 28th, 1852,” *Deseret News-Extra* (Sep. 14, 1852): 21, [LINK](#).

<sup>116</sup>Brigham Young, “A Privilege Given to All the Married Sisters in Utah,” September 21, 1856, *Journal of Discourses* 4:55-57, [LINK](#).

<sup>117</sup>Evidence that polygamy was asserted to be necessary for exaltation is found throughout the published materials of the church between 1852 and 1890, but it is most clearly expressed in a December 1891 letter to the President of the United States, from the First Presidency and Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: “We, the first presidency and apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, beg to respectfully represent to Your Excellency the following facts: We formerly taught to our people that polygamy or celestial marriage as commanded by God through Joseph Smith was right; that it was a necessity to man’s highest exaltation in the life to come. That doctrine was publicly promulgated by our president, the late Brigham Young, forty years ago, and was steadily taught and impressed upon the Latter-Day Saints up to September, 1890.” *Proceedings before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate: in the matter of the protests against the right of Hon. Reed Smoot, a senator from the state of Utah, to hold his seat*. Vol. 1 (Government Printing Office, 1904), 18, [LINK](#).

Some of these sources are framed as conclusive statements lacking any detail. A primary example of this type of source is found in Helen Mar Kimball Whitney's 1884 book, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage*: "[W]e will yet be looked up to and regarded as the founders of a superior system of Christianity [one which embraces polygamy]. This fact the Lord revealed to His prophet, Joseph Smith, as early as the year 1831."<sup>118</sup> With an evolving story, Marinda Hyde, sister of Lyman Johnson, asserted in a late recollection that "the Lord gave me to Joseph Smith" in 1831, but she reported that she was entirely unaware of this arrangement at the time: "This I did not know until ten years after, when Joseph taught me the doctrine of celestial marriage . . . in the fall of 1841."<sup>119</sup>

Other accounts with added details began to proliferate at this time. Benjamin F. Johnson, the brother of two of Joseph Smith's alleged wives,<sup>120</sup> eventually provided one of the most frequently cited accounts of Kirtland-era polygamy because of information it contains about "a verry nice & Com[e]ly young woman," Fanny Alger.<sup>121</sup> Written sometime between 1903 and 1911, Johnson recorded details of 1835 Kirtland, recalling how he allegedly learned from his by-then-deceased brother-in-law "that the ancient order of plural marriage was again to be practiced by the Church."<sup>122</sup> This account was recorded so late that it could not help but be influenced by the oral traditions surrounding it, as well as the doctrinal necessity of asserting polygamy's foundational importance.

Further illustrating the pattern of retrospective substantiation is the autobiography of Levi Hancock. Although his original journal was silent on the matter, his son Mosiah Hancock added a detailed

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<sup>118</sup>Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1884), 53, [LINK](#).

<sup>119</sup>Marinda N. Johnson Hyde statement, circa 1880, CHL, [LINK](#). In 1869 Hyde had signed an affidavit that she was she was "married or sealed" to Joseph Smith in May of 1843; her 1880 recollection does not give any explanation for her learning about the doctrine nearly two years before she claims to have acted on it. Marinda Nancy Johnson Hyde affidavit, 40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, Book number 1, 15, MS 3423, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>120</sup>These were Delcena Didamia Johnson, whose only record of being a polygamous wife of Joseph Smith was provided by her brother Benjamin F. Johnson in his autobiography, *My Life's Review*, published in 1947, and Almera Woodard Johnson, who provided an affidavit in 1883 of a polygamous marriage with Smith while in Nauvoo.

<sup>121</sup>Letter from Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, April-October, 1903, 30, MS 1289, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>122</sup>Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, 30.

1896 supplement, fourteen years after Levi's death, which claimed, "As early as the Spring of 1832 Bro Joseph said 'Brother Levi, The Lord has revealed to me that it is his will that righteous men shall take Righteous women even a plurality of Wives that a Righteous race may be sent forth Uppon [sic] the Earth preparatory to the ushering in of the Millennial Reign of our Redeemer."<sup>123</sup>

The testimony of Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner seems to have been shaped by both institutional pressure she experienced in Utah as well as more personal concerns. As a widow who testified in 1877 that she was polygamously married to Joseph Smith in 1842,<sup>124</sup> Lightner was a recipient of Church assistance in a time when assistance was scarce.<sup>125</sup> She also wrote about experiencing feelings of neglect, and a desire to be remembered. In a letter written in response to Relief Society General Secretary Emmeline B. Wells to "[answer] all your questions," Lightner confessed being "very much surprised to receive a letter from you, after 15 years silence . . . I have felt, and do yet, that I am alone, I feel as if I was not recognized by the Smith family [specifically Joseph F. Smith] . . . I feel that I have been spiritually neglected." After commenting on the small attention she received from the leading sisters of the Church at a recent Relief Society conference, Lightner wrote, "How happy you must be up there all together among the noble women who are energetic in the work of God." Lightner then wrote of her important place in Church history, noting that "the Prophet Joseph first told me about his great vision concerning me, he said I was the first woman God commanded him to take as a plural wife \in 1834/."<sup>126</sup> Lightner's detailed recollections of Smith's early

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<sup>123</sup>Autobiography of Levi Ward Hancock (with additions by his son Mosiah Hancock dated "Farmington Davis Co, 1896"), MS 570, 61-64, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>124</sup>Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner affidavit, Mar. 23, 1877, MS 2673, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>125</sup>Multiple letters were sent to church presidents requesting financial assistance based on Lightner's status as one of Smith's polygamous wives. See "Letter from Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, Oct. 9, 1887," 1, *The Wilford Woodruff Papers*, [LINK](#), as cited in Cheryl L. Bruno and Michelle B. Stone, "Crafting a Sacred Story: Joseph F. Smith and the William Clayton Affidavits," *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* 1, no. 1 (2025), n50, [LINK](#). In 1899 Lightner mentioned her distressing financial situation and hopes for continued Church assistance in a letter to her daughter: "Brother . . . says I shall have my orders from the Church as usual, but the Church is so in debt, that he don't think Brother Snow [LDS Church president] will be willing to pay me my money, but he will talk with Brother Snow and see what he can do." Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner to her daughter Mary, Mar. 2, 1899, [11-12], MS 29376, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>126</sup>Mary E. Lightner letter to Emmeline B. Wells, Mary E. Lightner papers Vault MSS 363, Folder 2, Item 12, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library,

polygamy seem to have emerged around the time of this letter. Most notable is her 1905 address at Brigham Young University, in which she expressed surprise and gratitude at being invited to testify. In that setting, Lightner recounted novel details of an 1834 polygamy revelation more than seventy years after the fact, notably aligning her narrative with stories of Joseph Smith's early visionary experiences with future polygamous wives that Joseph F. Smith had perpetuated.<sup>127</sup>

The many late accounts of an early 1830s polygamy revelation coalesced as Utah Church members were attempting to mount a united defense of their religious freedom, yet they suffer from incongruencies resulting from an evolving narrative. Some individuals contradicted their own earlier polygamy accounts; others recorded information, but lacked firsthand knowledge.

## Modern Incorporation

Despite the lack of contemporary support for these accounts, the narrative that God revealed “the principle and doctrine of. . . many wives and concubines” to Joseph Smith as early as 1831 has found its way into multiple institutional resources, including the first volume of *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*. The 2018 *Saints* book explains that while creating a new translation of the Bible, Joseph Smith pondered why the Lord had not condemned Abraham and other Old Testament patriarchs for marrying multiple wives, and that upon praying about the matter, “the Lord revealed that He sometimes commanded His people” to engage in polygamy, and that a day would come when He would restore the practice and ask some of the Saints to participate.<sup>128</sup>

While supplementary institutional resources have always been more speculative than the scriptural heading to Doctrine and Covenants Section 132, the heading seems to indicate the direction of the institutional narrative. In Section 132's case, the 2025

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Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, [LINK](#). The catalog description describes the letter as “dated in the summer of 1905,” however no date appears on the seven pages of digital images.

<sup>127</sup>Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner remarks, Apr. 14, 1905, signed typescript, MS 833, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>128</sup>*Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days, Vol. 1* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 121, [LINK](#).

revision to a more cautious heading indicates that there is potential for the early 1830s polygamy revelation narrative itself to be revised. Examining the treatment of polygamy in Smith's translation of the Bible will demonstrate why such a revision may be merited.

## **Polygamy in Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible**

The Inspired Version's treatment of polygamy has received very little analysis and is thus a significant area in need of rigorous historical and textual explication. As we examine Joseph Smith's changes related to polygamy and polygamists, as well as the verses he left untouched in his Bible translation, it is important to note that interpretations may vary. Rather than focusing on exact interpretations, though, textual trends will be examined to determine how they may illustrate Smith's marital theology during the time he translated the Bible. The examination of Smith's Inspired Version, if corroborating an 1831 or early 1830s polygamy revelation, should demonstrate an evolving understanding that there may be times that God commands polygamy, or an effort to understand how the Lord justified Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and also Moses, David, and Solomon "as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines" (D&C 132:1). Conversely, finding a condemnatory stance would indicate that Smith was not seeking such understanding during the time he translated the Bible.

### **Lamech and the Antediluvian Era**

Joseph Smith's first encounter with Biblical polygamy was in Genesis 4, where Cain's descendant, Lamech, was recorded to have "[taken] unto him two wives" (Gen. 4:19). As part of his translation, Smith added detail to Lamech's story well beyond the Genesis account, recorded also in the book of Moses, found in the Latter-day Saint scripture, *The Pearl of Great Price*. Written between October 21 and November 30, 1830,<sup>129</sup> Smith's translation describes this first polygamist as "having entered into a covenant with Satan, after the

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<sup>129</sup>Robert J. Matthews, "A Plainer Translation:" *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, A History and Commentary* (Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 64, [LINK](#).

manner of Cain, wherein he became Master Mahan” (Gen. 5:35, IV; Moses 5:49). While Section 132 asserts that God’s servants “received many wives and concubines...from the beginning of creation until this time” (D&C 132:38), Smith’s translation firmly establishes monogamy as the law given at the creation and only associates polygamy with murder, secret combinations, and a rejection of God’s commandments.

Once Lamech is introduced, the subsequent narrative suggests polygamy was one of the principal abominations that contributed to the destruction of humanity at the Flood. Continual reference is made to God’s commandments, and entreaties to obey the things of God as they were preached “from the beginning” (Gen. 5:44, IV; Moses 5:58). Smith’s translation echoes the KJV in recording one of the few commandments given in the beginning, that a man should “leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh” (Gen. 2:30, IV; Moses 3:24). After Adam and Eve began to multiply and replenish the earth, Smith’s Moses adds that “from that time forth, the sons and daughters of Adam began to divide two and two in the land” (Gen 4:3, IV; Moses 5:3). By adding the detail that Adam and Eve’s posterity divided “two and two,” Smith demonstrated that when translating the Bible, he saw monogamy as the divine social order practiced by God’s people, leaving no room for him believing in the need to restore polygamy as Section 132 implies (D&C 132: 40, 45).

Smith’s translation describes Lamech and his house and all who had covenanted with Satan as cursed because “they kept not the *commandments* of God” (Gen. 5:38, IV; Moses 5:52, emphasis added). Having just described Lamech’s marriage to two women and the murder of a young man through a secret combination, the clear implication is that, in addition to murder, Lamech also broke the command to cleave to his wife as one flesh by marrying two women. Enoch’s account in Smith’s translation validates this, quoting “a voice from heaven” lamenting that the people “have gone astray...and in their own abominations have devised murder, and have not kept the commandments, which I gave unto their father, Adam” (Gen. 6:28, IV; Moses 6:28). The only abomination that Smith’s translation describes leading to murder is polygamy, which is also a direct violation of one of the commandments given to Adam. As the chronology reaches Noah’s day, Smith’s translation

describes the sons of men, who “took them wives, even as they chose,” kindling the anger of the Lord, “for they will not hearken to my voice” (Gen. 8:2-3, IV; Moses 8:14-15). As he called these men to repentance, Noah “taught the things of God, even as it was in the beginning” (Genesis 8:4, IV; Moses 8:16). Smith’s addition that the sons of men would not hearken to the Lord’s voice, accompanied by his description of Noah teaching the things of God “as it was in the beginning,” serve as a direct indictment of the departure from the divine “two and two” order perpetuated by Lamech and his house.

These additions are subtle but significant. If Joseph Smith were truly “struck with the favor” God showed to polygamists, the antediluvian record was his first opportunity to provide a righteous exception.<sup>130</sup> Instead, he framed men having multiple wives as a corruption that was in direct contradiction to God’s commandments given to humanity at the creation. This condemnatory pattern continues as Smith’s translation moves into the stories of David and Solomon, two of the figures Section 132 claims served as the catalyst for Smith inquiring and receiving a revelation on “the principle and doctrine of [men] having many wives and concubines” (D&C 132:1).

## David and Solomon

In his Bible translation, Joseph Smith consistently rewrote the descriptions of Kings David and Solomon, altering the laudatory prose to cautionary descriptions of men who tragically chose unrighteousness. The books with these changes were revised between July 1832 and July 1833 in what is known as Old Testament Revision 2, as Smith had paused his initial revision of the Old Testament at Genesis 24 to first complete his translation of the New Testament. Tables 1-9 provide specific evidence of this pattern.<sup>131</sup>

In 2 Samuel, the IV significantly intensifies the consequences of David’s adultery and murder. Whereas David was told in the KJV that the Lord “hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die,” Smith’s translation leaves him further condemned: “The Lord also

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<sup>130</sup>Roberts, *History of the Church*, Vol. V, xxix-xxx.

<sup>131</sup>In the tables, ~~striketrough~~ is used to reflect text the IV/JST removes, and *italics* to reflect IV/JST additions to the text; none of the italicized words quoted in the IV/JST indicate emphasis unless explicitly stated. The text in the tables does not include scribal notes and alternate capitalizations from the manuscript revisions which do not affect the content of the verses cited.

hath *not* put away thy sin, *that* thou shalt not die.” This change was made after Smith and his scribes simplified their notation process, only making a truncated notation of “Verse 13—not—that” for this verse in Old Testament Revision 2 (OT 2).<sup>132</sup>

Table 1

| 2 Samuel 12: 13<br>King James Bible (KJV)  | 2 Samuel 12: 13<br>Inspired Version (IV),<br>Joseph Smith Translation (JST)   |
|--|---|
| And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die. | And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath <i>not</i> put away thy sin, <i>that</i> thou shalt not die. |

In his translation, Smith made several changes to the chapter in 1 Kings which recounts King Solomon’s marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter and the dream in which he received the gift of wisdom from the Lord. Rather than an observation of Solomon’s actions, Smith revised this verse to express the Lord’s displeasure with Solomon’s polygamous union with Pharaoh’s daughter, which because of its Egyptian alliance violated both the law against a king multiplying wives to himself, and the law against causing the people to return to Egypt (Deut. 17:16-17).

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<sup>132</sup>Old Testament Revision 2, 74, JSP, [LINK](#). Such brief revisionary notes understandably contributed to the work of Smith’s translation being acceptable and finished, as Robert Matthews observed, even though the manuscript was not fully prepared for the press. Robert J. Matthews, “Joseph Smith’s Efforts to Publish His Bible Translation,” *Ensign* 13, no. 1 (Jan. 1983): 57–64, [LINK](#).

Table 2

| 1 Kings 3: 1<br>KJV  | 1 Kings 3: 1<br>IV   |
|--|--|
| And Solomon made affinity with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter, and brought her into the city of David, until he had made an end of building his own house, and the house of the Lord, and the wall of Jerusalem round about. | And <i>the Lord was not pleased with Solomon, for he</i> made affinity with Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter to wife, and brought her into the house of David until he had made an end of building his own house, and the house of the Lord, and the wall of Jerusalem round about. <i>And the Lord blessed Solomon for the people's sake only.</i> |

Contrary to the KJV, Smith's translation does not portray King David as keeping the Lord's statutes and commandments. Solomon is specifically told in the following verse to not follow David's example because he "walk[ed] in unrighteousness." This wording implies David's sin in taking Bathsheba by having Uriah killed was not the single act that God did not justify. Rather, it communicates a lifestyle which was not justified by the Lord's law. This change contributes to a textual trend of re-evaluating David from one who was sought by the Lord for being "a man after his own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14) into a cautionary example of one who fell into unrighteousness.

Table 3

| 1 Kings 3: 14<br>KJV  | 1 Kings 3: 14<br>IV   |
|---|---|
| And if thou wilt walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as thy father David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days. | And if thou wilt walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, <del>as thy father David did walk,</del> then I will lengthen thy days, <i>and thou shalt not walk in unrighteousness as did thy father David.</i> |

The Bible portrays Solomon's polygamy as leading him to have a heart that was not perfect with the Lord, and the following verse in 1 Kings 11 has led to a widespread belief that it was the influence of his foreign wives' idolatry, rather than the polygamy itself, that

caused this sinful state. But the IV change here is noteworthy because Solomon's heart is said to have become like David's, and yet David did not marry foreign wives who turned his heart after other gods. Both kings had many wives in violation of the law in Deuteronomy, and the change in this IV verse implies that this specific violation—the multiplying of wives—rendered both men's hearts imperfect.

Table 4

| 1 Kings 11: 4<br>KJV   | 1 Kings 11: 4<br>IV, JST  |
|--|---|
| For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. | For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not perfect with the Lord, his God, <i>and it became as was</i> the heart of David his father. |

David's condemnation continues two verses later, where the IV clarifies that he did evil in the sight of the Lord and did not go fully after the Lord, a textual indictment that undermines the description in Section 132 that “in none of these things [having many wives and concubines] did [David] sin against me save in the case of Uriah and his wife” (D&C 132:39).

Table 5

| 1 Kings 11: 6<br>KJV   | 1 Kings 11: 6<br>IV, JST  |
|--|---|
| And Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord, and went not fully after the Lord, as did David his father. | And Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord, <i>as David, his father,</i> and went not fully after the Lord <del>as did David his father.</del> |

Another change related to King David interestingly portrays him as having tried to follow the Lord but ultimately having the kingdom rent from his house because he did not keep the Lord's commandments. This reading aligns with and offers a possible explanation for why King Josiah later rent his clothes when the law was discovered in Kings 22: a succession of rulers had not

kept the commandment to not multiply wives because that portion of the law was unknown. This suggests that in Smith’s view, David’s polygamy was not a divinely sanctioned exception, but a transgression born of a lost law. By framing the rending of the kingdom as a consequence of this earlier, perhaps ignorant, disobedience, Smith aligns the IV with the Book of Mormon’s earlier declaration that David having many wives and concubines “was abominable” (Jac. 2:24).

Table 6

| 1 Kings 14: 8<br>KJV   | 1 Kings 14: 8<br>IV   |
|--|---|
| And rent the kingdom away from the house of David, and gave it thee: and yet thou hast not been as my servant David, who kept my commandments, and who followed me with all his heart, to do that only which was right in mine eyes; | And rent the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it thee: <del>and yet</del> <i>because he kept not my commandments. But</i> thou hast not been as my servant David, <del>who kept my commandments, and who</del> <i>when he</i> followed me with all his heart, <del>to do that only which was</del> <i>only to do</i> right in mine eyes, |

The IV consistently changes descriptions of David’s “perfect” heart to communicate that he was commanded to have a perfect heart, but he fell short. This shift from a statement of fact to a statement of unfulfilled command reinforces the hypothesis that Smith viewed David as living in a state of transgression.

Table 7

| 1 Kings 15: 3<br>KJV  | 1 Kings 15: 3<br>IV, JST   |
|---|--|
| And he walked in all the sins of his father, which he had done before him: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father. | And he walked in all the sins of his father, which he had done before him; and his heart was not perfect with the Lord, his God, as <del>the heart of</del> <i>Lord commanded</i> David, his father. |

While David’s unrighteousness is frankly stated, the IV also portrays him as being willing to repent. The changes in the following verse are minor but demonstrate this nuance by expressing

David's desire to not sin against the Lord, while also upholding God's consistent standard which forbids adultery and murder. Smith's description notes that while David was "cursed" for his murder of Uriah, his entire life was characterized by a need for repentance rather than a state of divine justification, as Section 132 asserts.

Table 8

| 1 Kings 15: 5<br>KJV  | 1 Kings 15: 5<br>IV, JST   |
|---|--|
| Because David did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, and turned not aside from any thing that he commanded him all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite. | Because David did <del>that which was right</del> in the eyes of the Lord and turned not aside from <del>any thing</del> <i>all</i> that he commanded him, <i>to sin against the Lord, but repented of the evil</i> all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriah, the Hittite, <i>wherein the Lord cursed him.</i> |

Following is another small change which implies that although the Lord commanded David to do right, it was Asa alone who pleased the Lord through his actions. Although not directly related to polygamy, the KJV phrases Asa's righteousness as following the example of King David, which may or may not extend to his having many wives and concubines. Smith's IV removes the patriarchal ideal associated with David, ensuring that he is no longer viewed as a righteous example.

Table 9

| 1 Kings 15:11-12<br>KJV   | 1 Kings 15:11<br>IV, JST  |
|---|---|
| And Asa did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, as did David his father. And he took away the sodomites out of the land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made. | And Asa did right in the eyes of the Lord, as <del>did</del> <i>he commanded</i> David his father; and he took away the Sodomites out of the Land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made, <i>and it pleased the Lord.</i> |

The changes to the descriptions of David and Solomon in these verses represent a systematic effort to deconstruct their idealized

status. They do not suggest a translator who is inclined to ask how the Lord justified David and Solomon “as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines” (D&C 132:1).

## **Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**

Equally significant when examining Joseph Smith’s marital theology are the scriptural passages that received no revision in his Bible translation. For example, although Section 132 assumes Moses “received many wives and concubines,” it is noteworthy that none of Smith’s changes in Exodus nor Numbers suggest that he believed Moses was a polygamist (D&C 132:38).<sup>133</sup> When Smith worked on text about Abraham and other polygamous marriages, Clair Barrus notes that he “did not take the opportunity to expand or clarify text from Genesis about the practice.”<sup>134</sup> Interestingly, Smith did not change the widowed Abraham’s instructions to his servant, which explicitly required monogamy to maintain the covenant:

Thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take *a wife* unto my son Isaac . . . The Lord God of heaven, which took me from my father’s house, and from the land of my kindred, and which spake unto me, and that sware unto me, saying, Unto thy seed will I give this land; he shall send his angel before thee, and thou shalt take *a wife* unto my son from thence (Gen. 24:4,7, emphasis added).

Nor did Smith change Isaac’s charge to his son Jacob. After grieving over Esau’s decision to marry polygamously (Gen. 26:34-35), Isaac commanded Jacob:

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<sup>133</sup>There is not a consensus on whether “the Ethiopian woman” that Moses had married recorded in Numbers 12:1 was Zipporah, a polygamist second wife, or a widowed Moses’ second marriage. Many scholars and traditional commentators such as Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki, 1040-1105) agree that the woman is Zipporah. In the Book of Mormon’s many references to Moses, polygamy is not referenced, even in passages which would be a natural fit, such as when the gospel as taught by Moses and Abraham is expounded (Hel. 8:11-19). References to Moses in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants appeal to Moses’ teachings and works but do not imply polygamy (see D&C 84:22-25).

<sup>134</sup>Barrus, “Prologues to Plurality,” 3.

Arise, go to Padan-aram, to the house of Bethuel thy mother's father; and take thee *a wife* from thence of the daughters of Laban thy mother's brother. And God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people; And give thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee, and to thy seed with thee; that thou mayest inherit the land wherein thou art a stranger, which God gave unto Abraham (Gen. 28:2-4, emphasis added).

Additionally, Smith did not alter the Biblical chronology of Abraham and Israel, whose engagement and possible cessation of polygamy may recast the practice as a transgression for which they later repented. This interpretation is evidenced through the Biblical narrative, which lists no polygamous posterity once Abram and Jacob received their new, covenant names. Although Abram fathered Ishmael, covenant Abraham never again impregnated Hagar, and instead waited more than ten years before he was blessed to father Isaac with Sarah.<sup>135</sup> Once Sarah died, he remarried Keturah monogamously and had children with her, yet she was not held in the same covenant regard as Sarah and her posterity.<sup>136</sup> While Jacob had children with Leah and Rachel and their handmaids Zilpah and Bilhah, covenant Israel only had children with Rachel, and after she died giving birth to Benjamin, the Bible records no further posterity, despite Israel's relative youth, wealth, and culturally approved access to fertile women.<sup>137</sup>

Smith's translation of the patriarchs was interrupted in March 1831 by his work on the New Testament. It is worth noting that even though Smith did not resume translating Genesis until July 1832, his translation offers no change or development in polygamous theology over time. If Smith was beginning to consider polygamy as a righteous element of the Abrahamic covenant during the time he translated Genesis, it is surprising that he left the terms of the covenant and the narrative of the covenant fathers so explicitly monogamous.

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<sup>135</sup>See Gen. 17-21.

<sup>136</sup>See Gen. 25:6.

<sup>137</sup>See Gen. 29-35.

## The Sons of Noah

One change in Joseph Smith’s Bible translation that could relate to polygamy is ambiguous (see Table 10):

Table 10

| Genesis 5: 32<br>KJV  | Genesis 7: 85, IV<br>Moses 8: 12, JST   |
|---|---|
| And Noah was five hundred years old: and Noah begat Shem, Ham, and Japheth. | <i>And Noah was four Hundred and fifty years old, and begat Japheth, and forty two years afterward, he begat shem of her who was the Mother of Japheth, and when he was five hundred years old, he begat Ham.</i> |

The notation that Japheth and Shem were born of the same mother without a direct comment on Ham’s maternal line has been said to “[clarify] that Ham was born later to a different mother than Japheth and Shem were born to.”<sup>138</sup> However, this reading injects meaning into the text that the words do not necessarily convey. The verse does not say anything about Noah having multiple wives, as he could have remarried as a widower, or, more likely, the verse may simply be written in such a way as to ward off speculation that forty-two years after the birth of Japheth, Noah’s wife would no longer have been fertile so he must have fathered children with another woman. If Shem was from the same mother as Japheth, the elder brother, as Genesis 10:21 notes, it follows that Ham, born only eight years later, was as well. To read this as an endorsement or example of a righteous man having multiple wives is to impose a later, Utah-era theological lens onto a verse that remains silent on the matter of polygamy.

## Paul’s Epistle to the Romans

One candidate in the IV that has been interpreted as indicating an emerging polygamous theology is found in Smith’s changes to Romans 7. In Paul’s complex discourse on the Mosaic

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<sup>138</sup>Aaron P. Schade and Matthew L. Bowen, *The Book of Moses: from the Ancient of Days to the Latter Days* (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2021), 363–80, [LINK](#).

Law, Smith's translation supports the transcendence of that law in phrasing that some scholars believe hints at an effort to justify polygamy.

Table 11

| Romans 7: 15 – 22<br>KJV  | Romans 7: 15 - 22<br>IV, JST  |
|---|---|
| <p>For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.</p> <p>If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good.</p> <p>Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.</p> <p>For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.</p> <p>Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.</p> | <p><i>But now I am spiritual; for that which I am commanded to do, I do; and that which I am commanded not to allow, I allow not.</i></p> <p><i>For what I know is not right, I would <del>that do</del> I not do; for that which is sin, <del>but what I hate that do</del> I.</i></p> <p><i>If then I do <del>not</del> that which I would not allow, I consent unto the law, that it is good. <del>Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me; and I am not condemned.</del></i></p> <p><i>Now then, it is no more I that do <del>it</del> sin; but I seek to subdue that sin <del>that</del> which dwelleth in me.</i></p> <p><i>For I know that in me, (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me, but <del>how</del> to perform that which is good I find not, <i>only in Christ.</i></i></p> <p><i>For the good that I would <del>have done when under the law, I find not to be good; therefore,</del> I do it not. But the evil which I would not <del>do under the law, I find to be good; that,</del> I do.</i></p> <p><i>Now if I do that, <del>through the assistance of Christ, I would not do under the law, I am not under the law; and it is no more that I <del>that do it</del> seek to do wrong, but to subdue sin that dwelleth in me.</del></i></p> |

Table 11 (cont.)

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me.<br/>For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:</p>                          | <p>I find then a <del>law</del>, that; <i>under the law, that</i> when I would do good, evil is <i>was</i> present with me; for I delight in the law of God after the inward man.</p>  |
| <p>But I see another law<br/><br/>in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.</p> | <p><del>But</del> <i>And now</i> I see another law <i>even the commandment of Christ, and it is imprinted in my mind.</i><br/><i>But</i> my members <i>are</i> warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.</p> |
| <p>O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?</p>  | <p><i>And if I subdue not the sin which is in me, but with the flesh serve the law of sin,</i> O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?</p>   |
| <p>I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.</p>                         | <p>I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord, then, <i>that so</i> with the mind I myself serve the law of God; <del>but with the flesh the law of sin.</del></p>  |

Ronald V. Huggins observed a possible “theological justification for the reintroduction of polygamy” in Smith’s treatment of verse 19: “For the good that I would *have done when under the law, I find not to be good; therefore, I do it not.* But the evil which I would not *do under the law, I find to be good; that, I do.*”<sup>139</sup> However, this appears to be a retrospective interpretation of Smith’s changes taken entirely out of context. First, the original verse in Paul’s epistle, before Joseph Smith’s translation, reads: “For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do” (Rom. 7:19). When Smith’s translated version of this verse is read in context with the surrounding verses, the message is clear: one can only do good through Christ, and when one becomes spiritual in Christ, they are no longer under the old law, but a new law,

<sup>139</sup>Ronald V. Huggins, “Joseph Smith’s ‘Inspired Translation’ of Romans 7,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 4 (1993): 179, [LINK](#).

which helps them subdue the sin that is inherently in them as a fallen mortal.

Huggins comments that threads of such justification appear in the later “Happiness Letter,” attributed to Smith as an attempt to woo his First Presidency counselor Sidney Rigdon’s unmarried daughter, Nancy, to become a polygamous wife. However, that attribution was repudiated by Smith as well as by Sidney and Nancy Rigdon. It also appears to contradict the spirit of Smith’s teachings; and it is difficult to establish a clear, direct, unquestionable link between the letter and Joseph Smith.<sup>140</sup>

As with the previous verse (Gen. 7:85), interpreting Smith’s additions to Romans 7 as a justification for polygamy injects meaning into the text that the words themselves do not necessarily convey; the New Testament has multiple examples of laws which are not found to be good, and good that goes against the law.<sup>141</sup> As previously noted, Smith’s changes to the Old Testament that were made after translating the New do not indicate an emerging theological flexibility with polygamy. These verses in Romans seem to indicate an interest in ascending above the creeds of men to a spiritual life in Christ, a concept Smith consistently taught from the time of his First Vision.<sup>142</sup> Importantly, transcending the law was not how polygamy was framed by leaders who claimed to be teaching Joseph Smith’s theology; polygamy was consistently described as “the law.”<sup>143</sup>

## The Book of Isaiah

There are two additional polygamy-related changes to the translation found in the 1867 IV that support this paper’s thesis, although they do not appear to have been made by Joseph Smith.

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<sup>140</sup>See Appendix: Letter to Nancy Rigdon, circa Mid-April 1842, Historical Introduction, JSP, [LINK](#) and E. L. Kelley, “Correspondence,” *The Saints’ Herald* 31, no 22 (May 31, 1884): 339, CHL, [LINK](#).

<sup>141</sup>See, for example, Christ’s teaching that prevented the scribes and Pharisees from following the law to stone the woman taken in adultery (John 8), and Peter’s vision where he resists eating unclean animals because it would be against the law, until God tells him, “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (Acts 10:15).

<sup>142</sup>See Joseph Smith-History 1:19.

<sup>143</sup>For example, “God commanded Abraham, and Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to wife. And why did she do it? Because this was the law; and from Hagar sprang many people” (D&C 132:34). More than thirty references to “the law” of “many wives and concubines” are found in Section 132.

Isaiah chapter 4 in Old Testament Revision 2 shows two faintly penciled-in verse alterations next to verses 3 and 5, indicating these verses should be changed to 2 and 4, respectively.<sup>144</sup> These changes moved the verse in which “seven women shall take hold of one man” to the end of the previous chapter, making it a concluding bookend to the description of wickedness in chapter 3 rather than leaving it in chapter 4, where it is sometimes interpreted as part of the “beautiful and glorious” day that chapter describes. Kent Jackson noted of Smith’s Bible manuscripts that “a very few small corrections, written lightly in pencil, appear to be in the handwriting of Joseph Smith III, the Prophet’s son and president of the RLDS Church (1860-1914),” making it unlikely that this change was made by Smith in his original translation.<sup>145</sup>

**Esau**

The second change was made in the 1944 edition of the IV, where Genesis chapter 26 verse 35 was edited as seen in Table 12:

Table 12

| Genesis 26: 34 - 35<br>KJV   | Genesis 26: 34 - 35<br>IV, JST   |
|--|--|
| <p>And Esau was forty years old when he took to wife Judith the daughter of Beerli the Hittite, and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite:</p> <p>Which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah.</p> | <p>And Esau was forty years old when he took to wife Judith the daughter of Beerli the Hittite, and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite:</p> <p>Which <del>were</del> <i>was</i> a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah.</p> |

After Esau sold his birthright, he married two women. The KJV’s commentary reads as if the women themselves “were a grief of mind unto Isaac and Rebekah.” The IV’s change of the past tense verb “were” to “was” implies Isaac and Rebekah’s grief was *because* Esau married polygamously, rather than the original statement,

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<sup>144</sup>Old Testament Revision 2, 98, JSP, [LINK](#). This observation credited to Jared T. Marcum, “The Seven Women Seeking the Bridegroom: Isaiah 4:1 as Transition Point in a Redemption Allegory,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 61 (2024): 298, n 15, [LINK](#).

<sup>145</sup>Jackson, “New Discoveries in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible,” 152.

which alternatively could be understood to mean that the two women had personalities which caused Isaac and Rebekah grief. This change is most certainly not from Smith, as Old Testament Revision 2 contains no notations for this verse.<sup>146</sup>

## Influence of Adam Clarke's Commentary

Also worth considering is the possible influence of Adam Clarke's *Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments: Together with the Apocrypha*, which was the leading commentary among American theologians and scholars during Joseph Smith's day. Smith's view of the first polygamist, Lamech, does not contradict Clarke's, who expressed his disapproval of Lamech and the institution of polygamy clearly: "He was the first who dared to reverse the order of God by introducing polygamy; and from him it has been retained, practiced, and defended to the present day."<sup>147</sup> This similarity, however, appears to be the extent of Clarke's influence on the verses previously cited. While Haley Wilson and Thomas Wayment found parallels between Smith's translation and Adam Clarke's Biblical commentary,<sup>148</sup> aside from a generally negative view of polygamy, these parallels are not apparent in Smith's changes to the above verses.

## Summary of Polygamy in the Inspired Version

As we evaluate the treatment of polygamy in the IV, a clear orientation toward monogamy emerges. This should inform any historical narrative related to Joseph Smith's view of polygamy in the early 1830s. Rather than revealing an evolving curiosity and inspired openness toward polygamy, Smith's translation of the Bible demonstrates a theological stance that polygamy was an unrighteous practice.

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<sup>146</sup>Old Testament Revision 2, 61, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>147</sup>Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible* (1831), Genesis 4:19, [LINK](#).

<sup>148</sup>Haley Wilson and Thomas Wayment, "A Recently Recovered Source: Rethinking Joseph Smith's Bible Translation," *Journal of Undergraduate Research*: 2017, Iss. 1, Article 310, [LINK](#).

## Joseph Smith's Concurrent Revelations and Teachings

Robert L. Millet explains that changes in Smith's translation of the Bible "may represent a harmonization of doctrinal concepts that were revealed to Joseph Smith independently of his work with the Bible, but proved to be the means whereby he came to recognize biblical accuracy."<sup>149</sup> Many of these doctrinal concepts were revealed while Joseph Smith translated the Bible, which time was "the most prolific period in the Prophet's lifetime for the writing of revelations."<sup>150</sup> Several of these revelations addressed the nature of marriage, providing further insight into Smith's marital theology. Rather than marking the start of Joseph Smith's interest in polygamy, however, the 1831 translation period produced revelations that were explicitly and consistently monogamous.

In January 1831, Joseph Smith produced a revelation in the name of the Lord, commanding members of the Church to move from their current home in New York to Ohio, "and there I will give unto you my law; and there you shall be endowed with power from on high" (D&C 38:32). With great effort and amidst persecution, the community quickly relocated to receive direct revelation in their own language, unencumbered by the ambiguities typical of ancient translations. Once they arrived in Kirtland, Ohio, a revelation from Smith told them that the purpose of the law was "that ye may know how to govern my church and have all things right before me," and they were commanded: "ye shall see that my law is kept" (D&C 41:3-4). On February 9 and 23, 1831, twelve elders assembled themselves together with Smith, who pronounced the greatly anticipated "law of the church" (D&C 42, section heading).<sup>151</sup> Included in the revelation was a command for married

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<sup>149</sup>Robert L. Millet, "Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: A Historical Overview," in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Truths*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1985), 23–47, [LINK](#).

<sup>150</sup>Danel W. Bachman, "New Light on an Old Hypothesis: The Ohio Origins of the Revelation on Eternal Marriage," *Journal of Mormon History* 5, no. 1 (1978): 24, [LINK](#).

<sup>151</sup>The Latter-day Saints attempted to publish the law of the church in the 1833 *Book of Commandments*, but the destruction of the print shop halted printing and destroyed most of the stock before any books were bound. *Book of Commandments*, 1833, 89, JSP, [LINK](#).

men: “Thou shalt love thy *wife* with all thy heart, and shalt *cleave unto her and none else*” (D&C 42:22, emphasis added). Warnings against violations of this marital law were repeated (D&C 42:74-78).

In May 1831, Joseph Smith produced a revelation addressing some of the teachings of the Shakers, including celibacy, proclaiming: “Marriage is ordained of God unto man. Wherefore, *it is lawful that he should have one wife, and they twain shall be one flesh*, and all this that the earth might answer the end of its creation” (D&C 49:15-16, emphasis added). In the ensuing months, Smith pronounced God’s disappointment upon those that would not keep the commandments of marital fidelity they had been given (D&C 63:13-14).

As elders began to return from their missions in the Eastern states in September 1832, Joseph Smith gave “the word of the Lord concerning his church” (D&C 84:1-2). In the ensuing revelation, Smith proclaimed the whole church was under condemnation, and stated that it would not be lifted until the people repented and remembered the Book of Mormon and the former commandments they had been given (D&C 84: 54-57). The idea that Smith began contemplating polygamy at this time, then, is illogical, for the former commandments Smith gave the Latter-day Saints were wholly monogamous, and the Book of Mormon taught that cursings would follow any that hearkened to the things David and Solomon did by having many wives and concubines (Jacob 2:24-33; 3:3-6).<sup>152</sup>

The command for monogamy in Joseph Smith’s revelations extended into special circumstances, such as an excess of women, and having many widows in need of care. The Book of Mormon recounts a time when “there were a great many widows in the land... a great number of women, more than there was of men; *therefore*, king Limhi commanded that every man should impart to the support of the widows and their children, that they might not perish with hunger” (Mosiah 21:10,17, emphasis added). This same theology of communal support without an expectation of marriage

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<sup>152</sup>Hyrum Smith taught in 1843 that “a <sup>^</sup>man/ might have one wife,—concubines he should have none...the idea was that this was given to Jacob [in the Book of Mormon] for a perpetual principle.” The Book of Mormon has been said to contain an exception for polygamy in Jacob’s sermon. Hyrum Smith’s teachings in Nauvoo demonstrate that this was not an interpretation the Latter-day Saints accepted until they were established in Utah. See Levi Richards Diary, Vol. 18, entry for May 14, 1843, MS 1284, CHL, [LINK](#).

is reinforced by a revelation from Smith in April 1832, which stated, “Women have claim on their husbands for their maintenance, until their husbands are taken . . . And the storehouse shall be kept by the consecrations of the church; and widows and orphans shall be provided for, as also the poor” (D&C 83:1-2, 6). In the Book of Mormon and Smith’s early revelations, then, polygamy is not even an option to be considered when caring for the widows or accommodating a society with many more women than men.

Additional sources by Church leaders during the early 1830s display a similar theological commitment to monogamy and lack of interest in polygamy. In the Church’s monthly periodical, the ancient pattern of marriage as revealed in Joseph Smith’s translation of Genesis was highlighted: “It ought to be known, for it is published, that after Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden of Eden, they had many children, and *the children went forth two and two* and began to multiply and replenish the earth.”<sup>153</sup>

This is contrasted with the theology promulgated in Utah, where Church leaders strenuously taught that polygamy was an essential component of the Abrahamic covenant. This is demonstrated by an 1857 sermon by Heber C. Kimball: “Do you suppose that Joseph and Hyrum and all those good men would associate with those ancient worthies, if they had not been engaged in the same practices? They had to do the works of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in order to be admitted where they are;—they had to be polygamists in order to be received into their society.”<sup>154</sup>

Interestingly, the Biblical record contains a lengthy description of Isaac’s courtship and monogamous marriage to Rebekah. Utah leaders such as Kimball, however, taught according to Section 132, referring to the patriarchs as “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, three of the old polygamists.”<sup>155</sup> This stands in stark contrast to Joseph Smith’s teachings in the early to mid-1830s. Just as with Moses, when Smith invoked Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he did not

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<sup>153</sup>“Olden Time,” *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 11 (Apr. 1833), emphasis added, [LINK](#).

<sup>154</sup>Heber C. Kimball, “The Ax That Is Laid At The Root of The Tree—Regeneration—Products of Polygamy, A Numerous Offspring, Etc.,” Feb. 8, 1857, *Journal of Discourses* 4:224, [LINK](#). See also John Taylor Revelation, Sep. 27, 1886, MS 34928, CHL, [LINK](#). “All those who would enter into my glory must & shall obey my law & have I not commanded men that if they were Abraham’s seed & would enter into my glory, they must do the works of Abraham.”

<sup>155</sup>Kimball, “The Ax That Is Laid At The Root of The Tree,” 224.

highlight polygamy, nor refer to Isaac as a polygamist. Rather, he taught the Latter-day Saints that:

- All could receive the promise of eternal life for themselves by the voice of the Lord.<sup>156</sup>
- Abraham's offerings of sacrifice served to open the eyes of the covenant fathers, enabling them to look forward to the time of the coming of the Savior, and to rejoice in his redemption.<sup>157</sup>

The 1835 acquisition of multiple scrolls of papyrus, which Joseph Smith translated as the book of Abraham, must also be considered. This scripture, which was not canonized until more than thirty years after Smith's death, details the Abrahamic covenant, but, like the IV, does not include any explanation nor intimation of a divine doctrine of many wives and concubines (see Abr. 3).

## Conclusion

Through official Church publications such as *Saints*, LDS members are instructed as follows:

[A]s Joseph read Abraham's story, he pondered much about the patriarch's life. Why had the Lord not condemned Abraham and other Old Testament patriarchs for marrying multiple wives, a practice Bible-reading Americans abhorred? . . . Joseph prayed about the matter, and the Lord revealed that He sometimes commanded His people to practice plural marriage. The time to restore the practice was not yet, but a day would come when He would ask some of the Saints to do so.<sup>158</sup>

For some time, official Latter-day Saint publications have suggested that Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible in 1831 prompted him to inquire about the patriarchs' polygamy, leading to a revelation that the practice was justified for the righteous and

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<sup>156</sup>Letter to Silas Smith, Sep. 26, 1833, 4, JSP, [LINK](#); see also, Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1845, 231, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>157</sup>Letter to the Church, circa March 1834, 143, JSP, [LINK](#).

<sup>158</sup>*Saints*, 1:121.

would one day be restored. This narrative was supported by Section 132's heading from 1981 until 2025, and by supplementary resources such as *Saints*. It presented a seamless theological trajectory from Smith's biblical translation to the 1843 revelation.

However, when we compare the 1831 claim to the documentary record, the evidentiary foundation proves thin. The sources used to link polygamy to 1831 are retrospective, ambiguous, or dependent upon later interpretive layering. More significantly, Smith's own scriptural revisions, revelations, and teachings from the early 1830s do not even demonstrate an emerging inclination toward polygamy, much less advocacy for it.

Because Joseph Smith's *Inspired Version* of the Bible has only become widely accessible and institutionally permissible to Latter-day Saints in recent decades, it is unsurprising that Smith's treatment of the biblical polygamists named in Section 132 have gone relatively unexamined. However, it now appears that this trajectory has received institutional encouragement to recalibrate. As current LDS Church President Dallin H. Oaks has said, "There should be no doubt about the current status of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. It is a member of the royal family of scripture. [And] as a member of the royal family of scripture it should be noticed and honored on any occasion when it is present."<sup>159</sup>

The history of the Section 132 heading illustrates an important dimension of Latter-day Saint canon formation. Section headings, while not revelations themselves, shape how readers understand the history, and thus the meaning, of sacred texts. By anchoring the principles of polygamy in 1831, the previous section heading authorized and implicitly regulated a particular narration of the doctrine's development.

The 2025 revision not only updates this official framework but also provides a path for revising the narrative. By removing the specific reference to 1831, the heading now aligns more closely with the documentary record. This adjustment signals that official statements which provide context are not set in stone; they evolve in response to ongoing historical analysis. Claims that attach to

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<sup>159</sup>Dallin H. Oaks, "Scripture Reading, Revelation, and the JST," in *Plain and Precious Truths Restored: The Doctrinal and Historical Significance of the Joseph Smith Translation*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Robert J. Matthews (Bookcraft, 1995), 13.

scripture remain subject to evidentiary scrutiny, and when new research clarifies the strength or weakness of supporting sources, canonical framing can be refined accordingly.

Reconsidering the origins of this narrative challenges the assumption that polygamy was embedded in the Church's theological foundation from its earliest years. Instead, any evidence of an early polygamy revelation points to a more complex process of doctrinal development and institutional memory formation that was primarily based on an 1831 Joseph Smith revelation regarding the mission to the Lamanites, which over time was reconstructed to address the theological and legal needs of the Church in Utah. By disentangling later stories from contemporaneous documentation, this paper shows that Section 132's heading change demonstrates how historical evidence should enable us to refine canonical context, clarify the unfolding of doctrine, and consider alternate narratives. Though the petitioner of Section 132 sought to know and understand how God justified Biblical servants "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as also Moses, David and Solomon . . . as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines" (D&C 132:1), this inquiry cannot be shown to have emerged from Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible.

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