

## No One Knows His History: The Wives of Joseph Smith

First was Emma — no one disputes her place at the top of the list. Then Fanny, who, when asked about the rumors, said, “That is all a matter of my own.” Followed by — we think — Lucinda, Louisa, and Zina. Presendia married Joseph Smith while still married to another man. She speculated the Prophet might be the father of her son (a photo suggests she was right). Agnes preceded Sylvia. At eighty-four Mary swore in an affidavit she had married the Mormon leader as a teen. Sylvia’s mother, Patty, followed her daughter by a month. There was Marinda, and probably Elizabeth. Then Sarah — the first of three. Soon after Delcena, a widow. Initially Eliza found the idea “repugnant” but eventually assented. Martha, Ruth, Flora married Joseph between the summer of 1842 and the spring of 1843. Whether or not sisters Emily and Eliza squabbled over marrying the same man, we cannot know. When Joseph told Lucy God had commanded him to take her as a plural wife she said “my astonishment knew no bounds.” Maria and Sarah, another pair of sisters, were sealed to Joseph in the spring of 1843. Not long after — or was it before? — Helen became one of Joseph’s wives at age fourteen. The list of Joseph Smith’s plural wives continues: Hanna, Elvira, Rhoda, Desdemona, Olive, Melissa, Nancy — two more Fanny’s. The records are thin about Jane, Sophia, Phoebe, Vienna, and Clarissa. Probably others. The exact chronological

order is unclear. Some evidence is indisputable. Some more speculative. By the time he was assassinated in a Carthage, Illinois, jailhouse in June 1844, Joseph Smith had married an unknowable number of women, possibly forty, quite possibly more.

Several years ago I was on the campus of Brigham Young University in Utah interviewing a professor about Mormon doctrine. I was working on a novel about Ann Eliza Young, plural wife of Brigham Young, who succeeded Smith as the second prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Ann Eliza was either Brigham's 19<sup>th</sup> or 27<sup>th</sup> or 56<sup>th</sup> wife — the records can seem willfully confusing. When I brought up the subject of polygamy, the professor dismissed it as a sideshow. "It wasn't a sideshow if you were one of those women," I said.

Recently the LDS Church has acknowledged that its founder and prophet Joseph Smith had up to forty wives. For some 180 years the Church has discouraged any kind of discussion of Joseph's plural marriages despite the historical evidence — Temple Records, letters, diaries, affidavits, and family trees. Some of these women were Joseph's wives only in a spiritual sense, married, or sealed, to him in a temple ceremony intended for the soul's afterlife. Others were what we would today call mistresses, adultery elevated by "celestial marriage." Almost from the beginning people have wondered about Joseph's relationships with dozens of women. Some of this speculation has been to discredit Joseph and the Church and to expose hypocrisy. Some of it has been mere human curiosity — we wonder about the romantic lives of

others, we just do. For close to two centuries historians and writers have wrestled with the question to reach some kind of elusive truth about the origins of the LDS Church and its beliefs.

When I was writing *The 19th Wife* I struggled to accept that a question so basic about a man — who did he marry? — was to a certain degree unanswerable. Even after the Church's recent acknowledgements, this question about Joseph Smith remains a partial mystery. If you wanted to review a list of Joseph's wives (or Brigham's) you will encounter fragmentary and sometimes conflicting evidence. The Church's next step will be to give historians full access to its archives to create an even richer account of the women Joseph married than the one posted on its website. Why does such marital recounting matter? For the dignity of the women involved, and the value of truth in history.

Origin stories are often messy. The new testament provides four official versions of Christ and Christianity's earliest days (and of course more versions exist). Sometimes the only way to understand the past is to accept conflicting facts and interpretations. In many ways this is the definition of faith — accepting as true the inherently unknowable. I doubt we will ever know the full story of Joseph's marriages, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. Can the LDS Church withstand such historical scrutiny? Of course. Will it reduce the Church's authority when it moralizes about the intimate lives of others? Probably, and the Church will be only stronger for it.

Two months before his death, Joseph Smith stood up at a funeral and said, “You don’t know me; you never knew my heart. No man knows my history.” This scene opens Fawn Brodie’s remarkable biography of Smith, *No Man Knows My History*. Brodie’s biography has been controversial since it was published in 1945. Some view it as the best biography of Joseph ever written. Others have denounced it as false and anti-Mormon propaganda (one Mormon critic wrote a rebuttal called “No Ma’Am That’s Not History.”) Still, it’s my favorite book about Joseph. The book includes an appendix of Smith’s plural wives. Brodie counts forty-eight women and says her list “is probably not complete.” The LDS Church made clear its opinion of Brodie’s work when they excommunicated her for apostasy a year after the book’s release. Now, after 180 years of veiling the past of its founder, the Church has acknowledged that knowing Joseph’s history — and its own — means accepting truths that are full of contradiction and complexity.