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Authors Explore Early Mormon Polygamy

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Brian C. Hales (right) and Don Bradley (left) discuss early Mormon polygamy at Pioneer Bookstore in Orem. Photo by Stephen Smoot.

Two LDS authors, Brian C. Hales and Don Bradley, discussed LDS Church founder Joseph Smith's controversial practice of plural marriage at Pioneer Bookstore in Orem, following the recent release of a three-volume commentary on the subject. The lecture, which was held on March 9th, included a book signing and Question & Answer session. The two authors, who had been working on the series for six years, commented on both the history and theology behind Joseph Smith's teachings, and noted groundbreaking new discoveries in their research.

Hales, an anesthesiologist by practice who began researching Mormon polygamy in the early 1990s after a family member joined an FLDS splinter group, has previously presented portions of his research at various Mormon symposia, including Sunstone, the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), and the Mormon History Association. He has published articles and books on early Mormon polygamy and modern Mormon fundamentalism with Greg Kofford Book, the *Journal of Mormon History*, and *Mormon Historical Studies*. His award-winning book *Mormon Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations After the Manifesto* has received high praise from Mormon historians.

Bradley, an independent researcher who has performed an internship with the Joseph Smith Papers Project and is working toward an M.A. in History at Utah State University, has likewise presented with Sunstone and FAIR, and has previously published an article on Mormon

polygamy in the volume *The Persistence of Polygamy*, published by John Whitmer Books. Bradley has recently rejoined the LDS Church after a period of disbelief, wherein he viewed Joseph Smith as an “opportunistic and insincere” fraud who “used religion to get money, sex, and power.” Since then he has had a dramatic change of belief, thanks in part to his work with Hales, which “changed [his] mind to look again at religion” and reevaluate his belief in the LDS Church.

The new three-volume set, titled *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy* and published by Greg Kofford Books, attempts to “bring in every single document talking about polygamy” into an accessible format, according to Hales. “We have 90% of all known sources on early Mormon polygamy,” Hales said. “Anything less would have been unsatisfactory.” Bradley, Hales’ research assistant who compiled most of the primary sources for the book, has spent countless hours scouring through archives at the Church History Library and other university libraries in search of sources relating to Mormon polygamy. He expressed special appreciation for the cooperation of employees at the Church History Library in locating sensitive documents relating to polygamy. “It is common to hear that sensitive things are kept under lock and key in LDS archives,” Bradley remarked. “However, none of the documents I requested were restricted because of polygamy, and every single document I asked for was granted, even as I was doing research as an ex-Mormon. Documents actually aren’t restricted because they contain sensitive information, but because of other reasons, such as sacred content relating to the temple or other personal information.”

Building on earlier scholarship done by LDS historians such as Todd Compton and D. Michael Quinn, Hales and Bradley attempt to provide a more balanced view of Joseph Smith’s polygamy, which includes “looking at the spiritual and theological motives for polygamy”, and not just over analyzing sensationalistic aspects of polygamy, which previous works on the subject have usually done.

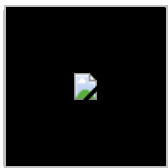
In addition to exploring the origin and history of early Mormon polygamy, including an overview of Joseph Smith’s plural wives, Hales and Bradley attempt to break new ground into the especially controversial practice of polyandry, the practice of one woman having multiple husbands. According to Hales’ and Bradley’s research, Joseph Smith was sealed to 14 women who were already legally married to other men. This has prompted harsh criticism from Smith’s critics as well as perplexity by his followers. Hales and Bradley address this issue in their books, and argue that their research reveals new information. For instance, Hales remarked that his research has led him to conclude that 11 of these sealings were “eternity only” sealings, with no concrete evidence of sexuality between them and Smith. According to Hales, with regard to the other three “time and eternity” sealings for which there is evidence of sexuality with Smith, two of the women weren’t cohabitating with or were otherwise separated from their husbands at the time.

Bradley likewise spoke of new discoveries of “enormous implications” relating to Joseph Smith’s first plural wife Fanny Alger, whom Smith secretly married in the mid-1830s while residing in Kirtland, Ohio. Previous biographers of Joseph Smith such as Fawn Brodie, Bradley said, have viewed the relationship of Smith and Alger as an adulteress affair. But new evidence explored in the books, he argues, indicates that the relationship was an actual marriage. “This new evidence indicates that Fanny Alger was not a paramour or adulteress lover but an actual wife of Joseph Smith’s” Bradley said.

The new work of Hales and Bradley on Joseph Smith’s polygamy is sure to prompt further discussion on this polarizing issue. Hales himself indicated that he is open to feedback and criticism of his work. However, he added, “If you disagree with my arguments and have a counterclaim, I just have one question, ‘What is your evidence for your claim?’” It is too early to see the impact these new books will have on the discourse surrounding Joseph Smith’s practice of polygamy, but for those interested in the subject, these new volumes may prove very helpful.

For more on the books, visit <http://www.josephsmithspolygamy.com/>.

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