Making Sense of the Doctrine & Covenants

A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations

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For those who love the Doctrine and Covenants and all who seek so to do
Doctrine & Covenants 132

ORIGIN

Doctrine and Covenants 132 was not written until July 1843, but parts of it were certainly revealed long before then. It answers two questions Joseph had about the Bible, one from the Old Testament, the other from the New. Joseph frequently asked the Lord questions as he revised the Bible, and it seems likely that Joseph had years earlier received some of section 132 in answer to the question the Lord restates in verse 1 about His rationale for the seemingly adulterous yet biblical practice of polygyny—simultaneously having more than one wife—by His servants Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others. The New Testament question comes from Matthew 22:30, Jesus' teaching that “in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven.”

The answer to the New Testament question was wonderful news. But the answer to the Old Testament question was potentially scandalous. It was more than Joseph had anticipated. Though he began to obey it within a few years, he did not write the revelation on eternal marriage, including the practice of plural marriage, until events in the summer of 1843 persuaded him to do so.

The Book of Mormon forbade plural marriage unless the Lord commanded otherwise (Jacob 2:27–30). The revelations Joseph had received declared adultery an abomination and promised punishment. “With these prohibitions emblazoned in his own revelations, Joseph was torn by the command to take plural wives. What about the curses and the destruction promised adulterers? What about the heart of his tender wife?” 1 It tells us something about Joseph’s certainty of the command that he acted on the revealed instructions. Joseph Smith entered a plural marriage in the 1830s, though it did not last. Then, between early 1841 and the fall of 1843, Joseph was sealed to approximately thirty women. As historian Richard Bushman observed, “What drove [Joseph Smith] to a practice that put his life and his work in jeopardy, not to mention his relationship with Emma?” 2

Joseph’s critics assume they know the answers to these questions. But their assumptions do not match up well with the historical Joseph. He acted on the Lord’s commands to him, inviting opposition, ostracism, persecution, beatings, mockery in the press, imprisonment, extradition, and finally murder. The one commandment Joseph did not throw himself headlong into obeying was taking plural wives. Uncharacteristically reluctant, Joseph resisted for years and then waited several more years before trying again. 3 The Lord evidently gave Joseph an ultimatum he had no doubts about. The revelation of the new and everlasting covenant of marriage required an Abrahamic test, which for Joseph and Emma and other members of the Church was plural marriage. Helen Kimball, who became one of Joseph’s plural wives, testified that “Joseph said that the practice of this principle would be the hardest trial the Saints would ever have to test their faith.” 4

Joseph knew and followed section 132 carefully. Two facts that may disturb some are that Joseph was sealed to women who were already married and that several of his plural marriages were performed without Emma’s knowledge or consent. Section 132 gives precise instructions for both instances (vv. 41–45, 64–65). Joseph followed these as best he could.

It is clear from the historical record that Joseph married plural wives “to create a network of related wives, children, and kinsmen that would endure into the eternities. The revelation on marriage promised Joseph an ‘hundred fold in this world, of fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, houses and lands, wives and children, and crowns of eternal lives in the eternal worlds.’ Like Abraham of old, Joseph yearned for familial plentitude.” 5 He wanted to obey the commandment of the Lord, even as Abraham had.

Revelation governs and dictates the practice of plural marriage, not only generally but case by case. Indeed, even as the Lord exacts such extreme tests, he offers personal confirmation and an accompanying peace. Joseph nearly
always went through the father, uncle, or brother of a woman to ask for her hand in marriage, but in each documented case he promised the woman her personal revelation to confirm what one of them, Zina Huntington, called “a greater sacrifice than to give my life.” She wrote, “I searched the scripture & by humble prayer to my Heavenly Father I obtained a testimony for myself that God had required that order to be established in this church.”

Joseph’s friend Benjamin Johnson described how Joseph taught him. Joseph visited Benjamin in Macedonia, Illinois. “Come Br. Bennie,” Joseph said, “let us have a walk.” Benjamin wrote, “I took his arm and he led the way into . . . the woods . . . and here, we sat down upon a log he began to tell me that the Lord had revealed to him that plural or patriarchal marriage was according to his law; and that the Lord had not only revealed it to him but had commanded him to obey it; that he was required to take other wives; that he wanted my Sister Almira for one of them, and wished me to talk to her upon the subject. If a thunderbolt had fallen at my feet I could hardly have been more shocked or amazed. He saw the struggle in my mind and went on to explain. But the shock was too great for me to comprehend anything, and in almost an agony of feeling I looked him square in the eye, and said, while my heart gushed up before him, ‘Brother Joseph, this is all new to me; it may be true,—you know, but I do not, to my education it is all wrong; but I am going, with the help of the Lord to do just what you say, with this promise to you—that if ever I know you do this to degrade my sister I will kill you, as the Lord lives.’ He looked at me, oh, so calmly, and said, ‘Br. Benjamin, you will never see that day, but you shall see the day you will know it is true.’ Joseph’s prophecy was fulfilled as Benjamin acted in faith. He engaged his sister in a private conversation. Trembling, hardly knowing what to say, “I opened my mouth and my heart opened to the light of the Lord, my tongue was loosened and I was filled with the Holy Ghost. I preached a sermon that forever converted me and her also.”

Joseph proposed a plural marriage to Lucy Walker in 1842 with the words, “I have a message for you. I have been commanded of God to take another wife, and you are the woman.” She wrote, “My astonishment knew no bounds. This announcement was indeed a thunderbolt to me. He asked me if I believed him to be a Prophet of God. ‘Most assuredly I do’ I replied. He fully explained to me the principle of plural . . . marriage. Said this principle was again to be restored for the benefit of the human family. That it would prove an everlasting blessing to my father’s house, and form a chain that could never be broken, worlds without end. ‘What have you to say?’ he said. ‘If you will pray sincerely for light and understanding in relation thereto, you shall receive a testimony of the correctness of these principles.’” Lucy wrote of her great struggle with the predicament. “I thought I prayed sincerely but was so unwilling to consider the matter favorably that I fear I did not pray in faith for light.” She went through excruciating bouts of what she called “darkness,” praying, like Christ, “Oh let this bitter cup pass. And thus I prayed in the agony of my soul.” When Joseph gave Lucy a date by which she had to make a decision, she responded, “Although you are a Prophet of God, you could not induce me to take a step of so great importance unless I knew that God approved my course.” Joseph “walked across the room, returned and stood before me with the most beautiful expression of countenance and said ‘God Almighty bless you. You shall have a manifestation of the will of God concerning you; a testimony that you can never deny. I will tell you what it shall be. It shall be that peace and joy that you never knew.’” Lucy “prayed for these words to be fulfilled. It was near dawn after another sleepless night. While on my knees in fervent supplication, my room became filled with a holy influence. To me it was a comparison like the brilliant sunshine bursting through the darkest cloud. The words of the Prophet were indeed fulfilled. My soul was filled with a calm sweet peace that I never knew. Supreme happiness took possession of my whole being and I received a powerful and irresistible testimony.”

Helen Kimball wrote about the Abrahamic test her father, Heber, and her mother, Vilate, endured well when Joseph commanded Heber to take a plural wife without disclosing it to Vilate. Heber became sick and overwhelmed with anxiety. “Finally . . . his misery became so unbearable that it was impossible to control his feelings. He became sick in body, but his mental wretchedness was too great to allow of his retiring at night, and instead of going to bed he would walk the floor; and the agony of his mind was so terrible that he would wring his hands and weep, beseeching the Lord with
his whole soul to be merciful and reveal to his wife the cause of his great sorrow, for he himself could not break his vow of secrecy. His anguish and my mother’s were indescribable and when unable to endure it longer, she retired to her room, where with a broken and contrite heart, she poured out her grief to [God].” Helen described her mother’s revelation and its comforting, assuring power. “She returned to my father, saying, Heber, what you have kept from me the Lord has shown me. She related the scene to me and to many others, and told me she never saw so happy a man as father was, when she described the vision and told him she was satisfied and knew it was from God.”

Even so it was not easy to participate in plural marriages. Joseph’s wife Emma understandably vacillated between accepting and resenting the practice. She and Joseph spent many hours discussing and struggling with the issues leading up to the July 12, 1843, writing of section 132. In those weeks Joseph had the undesirable task of convincing the two people closest to him—Emma and Hyrum, his brother—of the legitimacy of the revelation. Hyrum did not believe the first rumors he heard about the practice. He publicly spoke out against the idea of plural marriage but decided that he “needed to see Joseph about it, and if Joseph had a revelation on the subject, he would believe it.” Hyrum’s heart softened as Joseph explained that he could be sealed to his deceased wife, Jerusha, as well as his living wife, Mary, who was subsequently sealed to Hyrum and also served as proxy for Jerusha.

At times Emma worked up the will to consent to some of the sealings, but then her will failed and her feelings overwhelmed her. She had forsaken her parents and siblings to marry and follow Joseph. She believed in him and had made monumental sacrifices for her faith. But this one was Abrahamic. All she had was Joseph, and that was enough to compensate for all she had laid aside, but now she was being asked to share him. She would not do it willingly, at least not consistently. During a period of her willingness, however, in May 1843 she and Joseph were sealed. By July Emma was struggling to be reconciled to the revelation, and Joseph decided to commit it to writing. Joseph and Hyrum counseled about what to do for her and decided to write the revelation and see if it would help. William Clayton, Joseph’s secretary, wrote the revelation as Joseph dictated, with Hyrum present, in Joseph’s upstairs office in his Nauvoo store. It took nearly three hours and ten pages to write, after which Clayton read it back to Joseph for accuracy. Hyrum optimistically took it to Emma, who rejected it. Clayton confided to his journal that Joseph “appears much troubled about E[mma].”

By September Emma was again reconciled to the revelation, and she and Joseph received the crowning ordinances of exaltation that Doctrine and Covenants 132 describes.12 Joseph was determined that if he was going to break Emma’s heart to obey a commandment of the Lord, he would not lose her eternally. Despite their difficulties he was heard to say, “You must never speak evil of Emma.”

CONTENT

Doctrine and Covenants 132 is an extraordinarily complicated text. Not only does it intertwine the answers to two questions but it is the culmination of the Restoration, the most exalted of the exaltation revelations (see D&C 76; 84; 88; 93; 131). It sets forth gospel fulness in somewhat cryptic terms, as if some of its gems were too precious to be cast more publicly. Moreover, though it contains much that was revealed to Joseph earlier, the actual text of section 132 was determined by events in the summer of 1843, including Emma’s opposition to Joseph’s plural marriages, an otherwise unknown text the Lord gave her, and her concerns about the economic security of herself and her children.

Section 132 begins by acknowledging Joseph’s question about the polygynous relationships of Old Testament patriarchs, but in verse 4 it leaves that ultimately tangential question to set forth a fundamental premise: “For behold, I reveal unto you a new and an everlasting covenant.” One must enter this covenant to obtain a fulness of God’s glory, as verses 4–6 explain, but this covenant is not plural marriage. It is marriage according to the law of God—the law set forth in verses 7–8 and again in verses 15–21. In other words, the Lord leaves the discussion of plural marriage at verse 4 and does not return to it specifically again until verse 29. Meanwhile, he answers the question about whether there will be marriage after the resurrection and on what terms.
The answer, gloriously, is yes, and the terms and conditions are very specific. They are set forth in verse 7 in a three-step process where the word and connects the steps. It is one long if-then statement. It is a covenant. It says that any kind of marriage agreement is temporary unless a covenant is “made and entered into” as the first step, “sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise” as the second step, and “that too most holy, by revelation and commandment through the medium of mine anointed,” the one man on earth at a time authorized to confirm the sealing. All three steps are required. “All contracts that are not made unto this end have an end when men are dead” (v. 7). That is the Lord’s law. This world’s legal codes do not endure past death. Marriages that do not meet these conditions do not endure eternally. People who desire to be married forever will sooner or later participate in the three steps of the new and everlasting covenant. Otherwise they will remain “separately and singly, without exaltation, in their saved condition, to all eternity” (v. 17).

Verses 19–20 restate the three-step process with even greater detail than verse 7, explicitly using the words if and then as they describe the terms and conditions of exaltation. Step 1: “If a man marry a wife by my word, which is my law, and by the new and everlasting covenant . . .” Step 2: “and it is sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise,” meaning the Holy Ghost in his role as verifier of faithfulness. Step 3: “and it shall be said unto them—Ye shall come forth in the first resurrection; and if it be after the first resurrection, in the next resurrection; and shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths—then shall it be written in the Lamb’s Book of Life” that if the marriage partners do not commit the unpardonable sin explained best in verse 27, “it shall be done unto them in all things whatsoever my servant hath put upon them, in time, and through all eternity; and shall be of full force when they are out of the world; and they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon their heads, which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever. Then shall they be gods, because they have no end” (vv. 19–20; emphasis added). Verses 21–28 restate the law and the unpardonable sin—“blasphemy against the Holy Ghost . . . in that ye commit murder wherein ye shed innocent blood, and assent unto my [Christ’s] death after ye have received my new and everlasting covenant” (v. 27).

Having established the legal foundation of exaltation, the Lord returns in verse 29 to Joseph’s concerns about plural marriage and apparent adultery, though plurality of wives is not addressed until verse 34. Before that the Lord says more about exaltation. The first premise is that Abraham received and obeyed revelation and is now exalted (v. 29). The second is that God promised him an endless posterity (v. 30). The third is that Joseph has the same promise. The last is that Joseph should do as Abraham did—that is, receive and obey revelation, whatever it may be (vv. 31–32).

Beginning in verse 34, the Lord justifies plural marriage in cases where he commands it. Indeed, the justification is that he commands it. If he does not command it, it is not justified. The Lord illustrates, citing David as one who entered plural marriage without justification and lost his exaltation as a result.

But isn’t plural marriage adulterous, Joseph wonders? No, the Lord answers, very specifically, in verses 41–44 and 58–63. Adulterers will be destroyed. Will their adulterous choices ruin their innocent partner’s potential for exaltation? No, the Lord explains in verse 44, where he describes the power Joseph has to seal the innocent wife of an adulterous husband to another man, including as a plural wife. This is part of the sealing power, as explained in verses 44–48.

Because of Joseph’s willingness to sacrifice his life, in verse 49 the Lord seals him to exaltation, in verse 50 forgives his sins, and then promises to help him escape the awful predicament the commandment about plural marriage has put him in. Then the Lord addresses Emma’s situation in verse 51 before speaking directly to her beginning in verse 52. It is hard doctrine to hear. The Lord requires Emma to receive Joseph’s plural wives, to cleave to him, to “abide this commandment” (vv. 54, 55), and to obey the “law of Sarah,” Abraham’s wife, as set forth in verses 64–65, meaning that having been taught the doctrine, Emma is supposed to facilitate Joseph in taking plural wives as Sarah did Abraham.
OUTCOMES

Doctrine and Covenants 132 resulted in an Abrahamic test. “Plural marriage was the most difficult trial of 1843,” wrote historian Richard Bushman, and he could just as accurately have said of Joseph and Emma’s life and of the lives of many Latter-day Saints today. It is hard to imagine a more wrenching test for Joseph, and it was incomparably difficult for Emma. The revelation forced them—and us—to find out whether we trust the God who gave it. That would not be an Abrahamic test if the circumstances were simple and made sense, as if the gospel could be summed up as “exaltation made effortless.” The God of Abraham is all for all. Indeed, Abraham heard him saying that his plan for his children was to “prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:25). He asks all and gives everything, including his Only Begotten Son. He asked Joseph to accept plural marriage. He asked Emma to consent to it, even to sustain it, when it seemed to her more repugnant than anything else she could imagine.

Section 132 leads us to the conclusion that God requires all of our hearts first and foremost before he finishes the work of sealing them to each other and exalting them forever. The same revelation that requires such an extreme sacrifice of Emma, after all, sets forth the terms and conditions on which she will be exalted with Joseph. It seems that one of the main points of section 132 is to assure Joseph that he and Emma will be exalted together, that despite the wedge plural marriage has driven between them, the Lord will weld them eternally. Joseph had specifically prayed in the Kirtland Temple that Emma and their children would be exalted (D&C 109:68–69).

That would not require an exception to the law, for the law of exaltation is set forth in Doctrine and Covenants 132:7, 19–20, and the historical record shows that Joseph and Emma met its terms and conditions precisely. They made and entered the covenant on May 28, 1843, and received the confirming ordinance section 132 refers to as “most holy” on September 28, 1843 (v. 7). Though neither Joseph nor Emma was flawless after meeting the conditions on which the Lord will exalt them, neither committed the unpardonable sin verse 27 describes. Emma was never excommunicated, her ordinances never voided. She gave her children faith in the Book of Mormon but blamed Brigham Young for plural marriage. It seems as if the Lord spoke verse 26 specifically to set Joseph’s mind at ease about Emma’s eternal destiny. Perhaps that knowledge was the “escape” Joseph needed in order to make the extreme “sacrifices” for plural marriage that contributed to his death (v. 50; see D&C 135).

As they parted for the last time on earth, Emma asked Joseph for a blessing. He was unable to minister to her then but bade her write the desires of her heart and he would seal it. She wrote of her desire “to honor and respect my husband as my head, ever to live in his confidence and by acting in unison with him retain the place which God has given me by his side.” She wrote, in other words, that she wanted the blessings promised to her in section 132 and that she desired to obey its challenging commands. The next time Emma saw Joseph he had been shot to death. But section 132 makes that a small matter, for it promises them, and all others who make and keep the same covenants, “Ye shall come forth in the first resurrection; and if it be after the first resurrection, in the next resurrection; and shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths” (v. 19). Those last three words sum up section 132, the highest and deepest of Joseph’s revelations. Perhaps we are to understand that if we never plumb the depths, we will never ascend to the heights.