Choice Matters: A Critical Look at Mormon Polygamy from the Female Perspective

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Religious Studies Master's Thesis
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Introduction

While the exact number is unknown, a 2016 estimate puts the number of people practicing polygamy in the United States at 40,000 to 50,000, most prominently concentrated in Utah and practiced among Mormon fundamentalists.[1] Polygamy was outlawed by the U.S. government in 1882, but aside from cases that include abuse, it's rare that this law is enforced in any serious way. In fact, in 2020 the Utah state legislature passed S.B. 102, which lowers the classification of the crime of bigamy from a felony to an infraction in cases where all parties are willingly and knowingly involved.[2,3] This is indicative of current social trends as well. According to a 2022 poll performed by Gallup, 23% of Americans believe polygamy is morally acceptable, a significant uptick from the 7% in 2003. Of the 22 issues in the poll, polygamy is still 19th in moral acceptability, so while it is trending towards moral acceptability, it remains unpopular.[4]

Legal or not, morally acceptable or detestable, polygamy continues to be practiced today. In the Mormon fundamentalist context, we specifically see polygyny, or a marriage of one man to multiple women. Due to the gender composition of these relationships as well as the moral debate around them, I believe it's worth taking a closer look at the experiences of women in these relationships. The tendency of society

[1] Janet Bennion and Lisa Fishbayn Joffe, "Introduction," in *The Polygamy Question,* ed. Janet Bennion and Lisa Fishbayn Joffe (Boulder: Utah State University Press, 2016), 6.
[2] "S.B. 102 Bigamy Amendments," Utah State Legislature, accessed June 5, 2023, https://le.utah.gov/~2020/bills/static/SB0102.html.
[3] In cases of coercion or bigamy under false pretenses, the classification of the crime is third degree felony.
[4] "Moral Issues," Gallup, accessed June 5, 2023. https://news.gallup.com/poll/1681/moral-issues.aspx.

and government to decide what is morally “right” or “wrong” is based on the perception of a practice, often created by news, popular culture, and historical events. However, none of these can create a full picture without an insider perspective. As polygamy is often discussed in relation to women’s safety and freedom, I will focus on the stories of four women, from their own words, in order to better understand their freedom within their polygamous relationships and their freedom to enter, leave, or reject these relationships.

Before we look to these women, it’s first important to understand the context within which they are choosing to participate in polygamy. As it is a religious practice, I will first give an overview of the history of the church and this practice, and a breakdown of the theological writings related to polygamy. Then, to better understand the experiences of women who engage in Mormon plural marriage, I will analyze their accounts within the framework of negative and positive liberty, or more simply put, the freedom *from* and freedom *to.* This theory was outlined by social and political theorist Isaiah Berlin in his lecture *Two Concepts of Liberty* in 1958. Other scholars have also turned to Berlin’s work to expand on the female experience. In her book *The Subject of Liberty: toward a feminist theory of freedom*, for example, Nancy Hirschmann discusses Berlin’s theory while employing a social constructivist viewpoint and problematizing prior conceptions of liberty by political theorists as masculinist. My goal is to apply these concepts to the cases below to better understand the range of freedom these women have within the definitions of these concepts. On a fundamental level, I am interested in decision making and how seemingly distant religious ideas become the bedrock of personal experiences even if those experiences seem anathema to others. In my

analysis below, I make the argument that negative and positive liberty is apparent in certain contemporary cases of independent Mormon polygamists, but less so in cases from the 19th century, regardless of the agreement of women to engage in polygamy. Situating polygamy and choices in historical trajectories and from the perspective of those who chose this lifestyle help us complicate a social and religious relationship that appears, at least on the surface, to have negative consequences on women in an almost timeless way. As the range of choices available to women change in the U.S. context across a century and a half, the female gaze interprets polygamy differently. So then should scholars who situate polygamy in their studies on the sociology of religion and religion in the home. This research is important to show that women's experiences of polygamy differ, and while based on the same religious doctrine and practice, women experience varying levels of freedom and autonomy in their choices to enter these relationships.

Useful Terms

For the purposes of this paper, it's important to understand the concept of consensual non-monogamy, and the various forms it can take, as well as terms used by Mormon groups. Firstly, I will define a few relationship structures that will be necessary for this discussion.

Consensual Non-Monogamy: Any relationship structure between consenting adults that involves more than two people. This can refer to romantic and/or sexual relationships.

Polyamory: A relationship structure involving three or more consenting adults of any gender identity or sexual orientation.

Polygamy: Specifically refers to marriage; when one person has multiple spouses.

Polygyny: A form of polygamy where one man marries multiple women.

Polyandry: A form of polygamy where one woman marries multiple men.

Bigamy: Marrying once already married.

Plural Marriage / Celestial Marriage / The Principle: A polygynous marriage within the early Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) (and later fundamentalist groups), which ties partners and family members together through to the afterlife.

Sister wives: Term that refers to the relationship between the wives of one man within a Mormon polygamous context. (In this paper, I will be using the more neutral term "co-wives").

In addition to language around relationship structures, I would like to be clear about the language I use to discuss members of the LDS Church and fundamentalists from the same religious background. The term "Mormon" is reflective of the belief system of the LDS Church and is derived from an individual important in LDS scripture. However, a more accurate way to refer to members of the LDS Church would be "Latter-day Saints." In this paper, I will use the term "Mormon" because it more easily encompasses those who ascribe to the faith system I am discussing, whereas "Latter-day Saints" leaves out Mormon fundamentalists as they are not members of the LDS Church.

Methodology

In this research I have taken an interpretivist approach as my goal here is to better understand the practice of Mormon polygamy from the perspective of women by using their own accounts of their marriages. My aim is to show that not all Mormon polygamy is the same, and women experience different ranges of freedom within these relationships. Mormon polygamy, although seemingly one distinct practice, is not a monolith.

My strategy for approaching this research is to perform a historical and theological exploration of plural marriage within the LDS Church, then focus on case studies of women in early pioneer and current times who engaged in the practice. When looking at modern examples, I specifically focus on women who are not members of a fundamentalist group. I have three reasons for this: first, it is very difficult to find first-person accounts from women living in fundamentalist communities as they are often closed groups, second, because fundamentalist groups are organized in such a way that freedom is already restricted, regardless of marital status or relationship style, and third, fundamentalist groups are more often discussed in the media, and I am interested in showing another side to the practice of polygamy. In order to carry out case studies of four women, I will focus on sources that provide first-hand accounts and commentary from the women I discuss, including news articles, diaries, autobiographies, and interviews. I will apply Berlin's social theory outlining two concepts of freedom as the framework for analyzing the range of freedom these women enjoy within their polygamous relationships as well as the freedom they had to choose the relationships in the first place.

I faced certain limitation in my research on this topic regarding access to material and ability to speak to the experiences of others. In terms of material, the first obvious hole in my research is the experiences of women living in fundamentalist groups, as mentioned above. Similarly, it is difficult to find many first-person accounts from polygamous women, whether they are members of a group or not, because the practice is illegal and taboo in the U.S. I was, however, able to find two modern examples of women who had polygamous relationships and became open about the practice, both advocating for the benefits of the relationship style and against its illegality. This leads me to an important caveat: the stories I include here are not indicative of all polygamous relationships in the U.S. because the descriptions available are only from those who are willing to speak openly about polygamy. However, my aim is simply to show the experiences of a few women, not make a generalized claim about polygamy.

I also faced limitations in access to early material and heavily depended on quotes from the women I focus on that exist in secondary literature. In my descriptions of Rachel Simmons and Mary Jane Tanner's experiences, I rely on Paula Kelly Harline's book, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club: From the Diaries of Mormon Pioneer Women*, which covers the stories of various women through use of their diaries or autobiographies. Harline's writing includes many direct quotes from the women she talks about, which has been very helpful in my analysis. However, Harline performs her own analysis regarding the women she writes about in order to weave their stories together into an attention-grabbing narrative. I have been careful to separate her analysis from the primary material she writes about, as to focus as much as possible on the experiences and opinions of the women I write about. However, Harline also

includes various other pieces of information, such as names, dates, locations, and events that I do use throughout my descriptions due to the clearly well-researched content of her book. Similarly, I use some news articles in which the women I discuss as modern examples have given quotes or full interviews. Here I focus on the exact quotes and disregard any commentary or analysis by the author in an attempt to keep the voices of these women front and center.

Literature Review

In this paper I will with engage two sets of literatures alongside my primary documents to add context and a framework by which to better understand the stories I present. These literatures focus on the history and theology of the Mormon Church and socio-political theory, as well as feminist theory, concerning the definition of and capacity for freedom.

Beginning with the historical and theological sources, I rely heavily on Jon Krakauer's book, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, which contains a detailed background of the early LDS Church, including the introduction of plural marriage and the later rejection of the practice by the Church. Krakauer is a non-fiction writer who provided a well-researched account of Mormon history alongside an attention-grabbing account of a murder carried out by two Mormon fundamentalists. While the book is not strictly academic, it provides incredible detail and context regarding Mormon history. Additionally, I will turn to Mary Campbell's work "Mr. Peay's Horses: The Federal Response to Mormon Polygamy, 1854-1887" for a more detailed account of the legal

and political response to Mormon polygamy and the restrictions that Mormons faced in this time period. Lastly, to address the theological understanding of plural marriage, I will use religious texts as primary documents, but look to official Church commentary for clarity.

Next, I will present Isaiah Berlin's theory outlined in his 1958 lecture, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, which addresses negative and positive freedom, two lenses through which I will analyze the case studies I have chosen. Berlin is a Russian-British philosopher, historian, and social and political theorist who grew up Jewish in Latvia in the midst of increasing antisemitic sentiments, and later in Russia where he experienced the social democratic and Bolshevik revolutions, before he moved to Britain.[5] These early experiences may have contributed to Berlin's hesitancy to allow for concepts of freedom that can lead to paternalism or even totalitarianism, a discussion I will touch on when I introduce his concept of positive liberty later on. In addition to Berlin, I will employ Nancy Hirschmann's work, *On the Subject of Liberty*, to bring an important feminist lens to the discussion of freedom. Hirschmann is an American scholar of political science and feminist theory, with a focus on the concept of freedom.[6] Her voice is pivotal to this analysis and brings a much-needed viewpoint to a conversation previously dominated by male theorists.

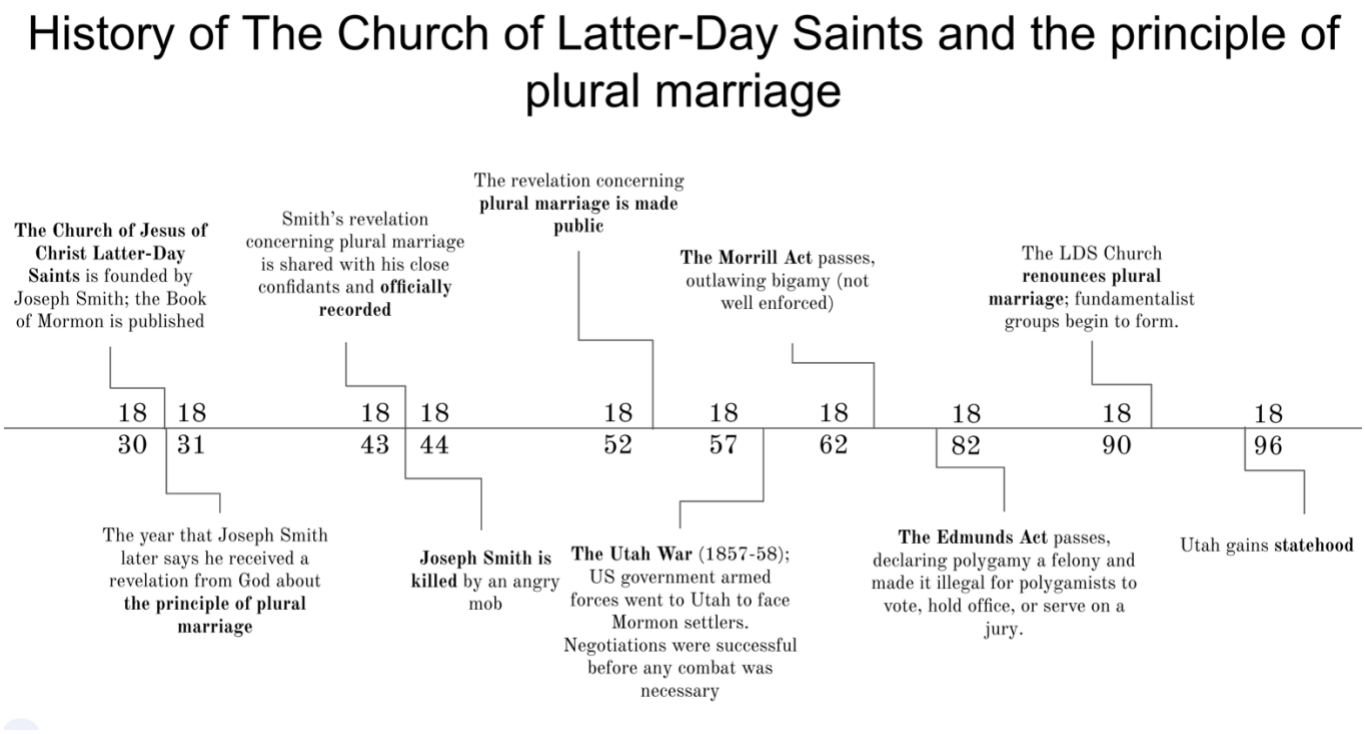
I will bring these literatures together in my use of case studies in my final section of this paper. I will introduce four women whose experiences I will analyze in context of the history of the practice and using Berlin and Hirschmann's concepts of freedom. I will

[5] Johnny Lyons and Henry Hardy, "Discovering Isaiah Berlin," *Society* 58, (2021): 463.
[6] "Nancy Hirschmann," Department of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania, accessed June 8, 2023, https://live-sas-www-polisci.pantheon.sas.upenn.edu/people/standing-faculty/nancy-hirschmann.

merge these literatures, along with primary documentation that I use to build my case studies, in a manner that prioritizes voices I deem helpful to better understand the lives and choices of women in polygamous relationships.

History of the LDS Church

In order to discuss plural marriage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) and later the fundamentalist groups resulting from the disagreement on this issue, it's first important to understand the historical landscape of the LDS Church and the wider environment in the United States at the time the church originated and later developed. I have included a timeline I created with some important dates and events for a quick visual overview.



The founder of the LDS Church, Joseph Smith, was born in 1805 in Vermont. His family was poor and living through an economic depression, so they moved frequently when he was young, eventually settling in Western New York in 1817, where he predominantly grew up.[7] Both of his parents were described as having "a propensity to superstition and a fondness for everything marvelous." His mother Lucy's beliefs were particularly strong, "She accepted a highly personalized God to whom she would talk as if He were a member of the family circle. Her religion was intimate and homely, with God a ubiquitous presence invading dreams, provoking miracles, and blighting sinners' fields."[8] Smith followed suit in his beliefs. He had an interest in folk magic prior to founding the LDS Church, and he founded the Church on evidence of revelations, showing a close personal relationship to God and his messengers (angels).[9] It's also worth noting that Joseph grew up in the time right after "The Second Great Awakening," which left a fair amount of religious uncertainty among the religiously faithful as people moved away from institutionalized churches and towards a more individual understanding of religion. This, coupled with the increasing popularization of science, created the opportunity for a new religion or religious institution that could give people certain "evidence." Joseph, whether by divine direction, personal ambition, or both, took this opportunity to spread a new religion that he saw as an extension of Christianity, called The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. He claimed that he was visited by an angel, Moroni, who led him to golden tablets with a lost language that described

[7] Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Random House, Inc, 2003), 56.
[8] Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 57.
[9] Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 58-60.

the earlier inhabitants of the continent.[10] This also gave Mormonism a uniquely American heritage. Smith then translated the tablets, and they disappeared shortly after. Nineteen other people claimed to have seen the golden book, giving a sense of empirical evidence to the basis of this new religion.[11]

Smith officially and legally founded the LDS Church in 1830, roughly a week after the translated Book of Mormon was released for sale.[12] Around this time, the religion began spreading quickly. Starting with about 50 members in 1830, one year later the Church was at 1,000 members and growing.[13] Jumping forward 22 years, the Church had a membership of about 50,000 by the end of 1852.

1852 proved a pivotal year for the Church on a register important to the topic at hand. In 1852, eight years after Smith's death, the principle of plural marriage became public and this particular relationship status was encouraged by the church for Mormons.[14] Although publicly acknowledged in 1852, Joseph Smith supposedly recorded his revelation regarding plural marriage in 1843, and received it in 1831, just one year after founding the LDS Church.[15] The propagation of plural marriage within the Church came at a time when many Mormons were moving west and settling in pioneer communities in Utah.[16] The rough travel and new settlements left women in a more complicated social and economic situation, often making plural marriage more appealing or more necessary. However, even among Mormons, plural marriage was not

[10] Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 59-61.
[11] Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 61.
[12] Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 63-64.
[13] Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 69-70.
[14] Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 182.
[15] Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 190; 182.
[16] Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 178-180.

quick to catch on and was primarily practiced by Church leaders. Regardless of the hesitancy of many Mormons to participate in the principle, it was generally accepted, and members of the Church were hesitant to actively speak out against the practice.

The hesitant Mormons kept good company in 19th century America. Non-Mormons tended to have a strong bias against polygamy, which was often referred to as a "twin barbarism" alongside slavery.[17] According to Daniel Walker Howe, an American historian, the Victorian-era idea of morality "was rooted in the assumption of the objectivity and universality of moral principles," or in other words, morality was seen as a rationally constructed idea that everyone should be able to agree on.[18] This strict idea of morality contributed to a perception that polygamy was unnatural. Additionally, the burgeoning women's suffrage movement gave anti-polygamists an even stronger platform for arguing that polygamy was harmful to women. In this political climate, multiple pieces of legislation were passed to outlaw polygamy and bigamy, including the Morrill Act of 1862,[19] the Edmunds Act of 1872, [20] the Poland Act of 1874,[21] and the Edmunds Tucker Act of 1887.[22] Each of these pieces of legislation aimed to outlaw polygamy, becoming more strict and enforceable with each piece of legislation, and even targeting rights such as voting, holding public office, and having a jury of peers in court.[23] These laws also targeted the LDS Church as an institution, withdrawing the

[17] Mary K. Campbell, "Mr. Peay's Horses: The Federal Response to Mormon Polygamy," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 13, no. 1 (2001), 60.
[18] Daniel Walker Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (1975): 525.
[19] Campbell, "Mr. Peay's Horses," 38.
[20] Campbell, "Mr. Peay's Horses," 29.
[21] Campbell, "Mr. Peay's Horses," 39.
[22] Campbell, "Mr. Peay's Horses," 50.
[23] Campbell, "Mr. Peay's Horses," 42.

incorporation of the Church, and setting limits to the real estate value that could be held by religious institutions.[24]

With their rights at risk, the Church faced a difficult decision. Still a territory, polygamy seemed to jeopardize Utah's chance at statehood. In 1890, fourth LDS President Wilford Woodruff (1889-1898) released "Official Declaration 1," more commonly known as the 1890 Manifesto. This declaration officially ended the practice of polygamy within the LDS Church; however many continued the practice, particularly those in leadership positions. In reaction, sixth President Joseph F. Smith (1901-1918), released the "Second Manifesto," reiterating the Church's position and stating that those who practice polygamy would be excommunicated from the Church.[25] This change in Church doctrine led to the formation of fundamentalist groups that continued the practice. Many fundamentalists cite third Church president, John Taylor (1880-1887), as confirmation of the validity of the practice because he was a strong proponent of plural marriage and an intense opponent of the U.S. government's anti-polygamy actions. Taylor claimed to have had a revelation in 1882 that called for polygamy,[26] making many fundamentalists feel that the Church's actions in 1890 were focused more on politics than religion. This theological disagreement leads us into a more in-depth discussion of the theological basis for plural marriage and how Mormon religious texts themselves have inconsistencies, as well as the controlling way these texts approach the role of women.

[24] Campbell, "Mr. Peay's Horses," 38.
[25] D. Michael Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890-1904," *A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no 1, Spring 1985, 10.
[26] Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages," 27.

Theology Surrounding Plural Marriage

Plural marriage's clear controversial history within the LDS Church and the theological debate behind the practice is still ongoing, as is evident by the fundamentalist groups that have split from the LDS Church. To better understand this conflict and the practice itself, we must look to the religious texts that discuss plural marriage. As previously mentioned, Joseph Smith claimed to have a revelation from God, which was later recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants as Section 132. We discussed the socio-political side of plural marriage in the last section, but perhaps we should take a theological tack to fully understand how plural marriage fits into Mormon belief and practice. When we approach the issue of polygamy we must tread carefully as scholars of religion. Holy texts have inconsistencies and there are unverified texts that are central to some self-described Mormon belief systems. This section draws on three of the central texts of the LDS Church (the Bible, The Book of Mormon, and The Doctrine and Covenants). I will proceed with a focus on: the control of women, inconsistencies and contradictions, and texts which seem to be self-serving towards Joseph Smith. This exegesis will help us understand both the religious reasoning for this practice, along with the specific view of women, and their role in marriage, that these texts proport.

Joseph Smith's revelation, recorded in Doctrine and Covenants section 132, describes an "everlasting covenant" that persists after death, tying family units together

in the afterlife:[27] “For behold, I reveal unto you a new and an everlasting covenant; and if ye abide not that covenant, then are ye damned; for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory.”[28] According to the revelation, men who enter into plural marriage “shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths,”[29] and if a man does not marry multiple wives, he will be an angel for eternity, described as “ministering servants, to minister for those who are worthy of a far more, and an exceeding, and an eternal weight of glory.”[30] However, while it seems clear from the text that plural marriage is not only encouraged, but required in order to reach the highest level of salvation, interpretation from Mormon leadership has not always made the issue so uncompromising.

For instance, the “everlasting covenant,” or celestial marriage, can refer to any heterosexual marriage performed in the temple and “sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise.”[31] So, while this revelation discusses plural marriage, it also ensures a clear understanding of the importance of a religiously performed marriage, which becomes relevant in the socio-political landscape of anti-bigamy laws as many polygamous men were only legally married to one of their wives, but religiously married to multiple women. Spencer Kimball, the LDS Church’s 12th president (1973-1985), added another caveat to this interpretation: people who do not marry through no fault of their own will not be damned.[32] Kimball’s interpretation also highlights that verse 16, stating that men

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[27] *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 267.
[28] *The Doctrine and Covenants,* 267.
[29] *The Doctrine and Covenants, 268.*
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] “Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed May 10, 2023, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-spencer-w-kimball/chapter-18?lang=eng.

who do not take multiple wives will become angels, shows that men and women who do not follow this requirement will not be damned, but limited in their salvation, and will become servants to those who lived the commandments more fully.[33] Kimball's interpretation walks the line between celestial marriage being a recommendation or requirement. He leaves room for those who diligently follow the religion but do not marry, but makes it clear that if someone is able to marry and has the opportunity, it is required. This interpretation, which focuses on marriage sealed by the Church rather than specifically on plural marriage, is a decidedly more modern take from Church leadership. It's worth taking a more straightforward reading of the text as well, which leads to an understanding of plural marriage as a requirement for both men and women. There are two sections of the text that exemplify this in an uncomplicated way:

> **Section 132 verse 1-3:** Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Joseph, that inasmuch as you have inquired of my hand to know and understand wherein I, the Lord, justified my servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as also Moses, David and Solomon, my servants, as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines / Behold, and lo, I am the Lord thy God, and will answer thee as touching this matter / Therefore, prepare thy heart to receive and obey the instructions which I am about to give unto you; for all those who have this law revealed unto them must obey the same.[34]

[33] Ibid.
[34] *The Doctrine and Covenants,* 266-267.

> **Section 132 verse 62:** And if he have ten virgins given unto him by this law, he cannot commit adultery, for they belong to him, and they are given unto him; therefore is he justified.[35]
>
> **Section 132 verse 64:** If any man have a wife, who holds the keys of this power, and he teaches unto her the law of my priesthood, as pertaining to these things, then shall she believe and administer unto him, or she shall be destroyed, saith the Lord your God; for I will destroy her.[36]

Verses 1-3 make biblical references in order to build the backbone of the principle of plural marriage. This ties the revelation to existing Christian theology, making the revelation not only feel strongly connected to existing Christian belief, but also more credible. Verse 62 is a clear example of the polygynous nature of this principle as it specifically describes one man with multiple female partners. Verse 64 makes it clear that this call for compliance does not just apply to men taking multiple wives, but women participating in the principal as well, as plural wives. The language we see in verses 62 and 64 also implies that men have a certain degree of ownership and control over women, and women should be subservient to men.

This section on plural marriage dives even deeper on the role of women, beyond the requirement that they participate in plural marriage. Much of the language about women in Section 132 focuses on the requirement that they accept this new principle, the ability of men to engage in the practice without the consent of their wives, and the purpose of procreation. This section also directly references the role of Sarah in the

[35] *The Doctrine and Covenants,* 272.
[36] *The Doctrine and Covenants,* 273.

Bible, seemingly giving the revelation more validity. In verse 34, it states “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 / This therefore, was fulfilling, among other things, the promises.” This biblical reference draws a parallel between God’s commandment to Abraham and God’s commandment to Joseph Smith, adding legitimacy to Smith’s revelation by highlighting that God has commanded polygamy in the past.

Additionally, this verse explicitly states that Sarah participated by giving her husband to Hagar to marry, an important detail for the understanding of plural marriage within Mormonism, and that she did so “because this was the law.” This phrase doesn’t necessarily imply that Sarah was against Abraham’s marriage to Hagar, but it does imply that her opinion on the matter was not relevant because the marriage was required by God. As another scholar put it, “The ‘law of Sarah” permitting one’s husband to enter plural relationships, thus raised wifely submissiveness to a divinely mandated principle.”[37] Lastly, this verse points out a clear reason for Abraham’s marriage to Hagar: procreation. By naming a purpose, plural marriage is painted as having a tangible and useful function, making the principle more palatable to the members of the LDS Church.

Let’s continue with this pivotal text that continues to inspire debate in the LDS Church. In addition to requiring that women participate in plural marriage, Section 132 sets out instructions for men whose wives do not agree to accept subsequent wives into

[37] B. Carmon Hardy, “Lords of Creation: Polygamy, the Abrahamic Household, and Mormon Patriarchy,” *Journal of Mormon History* 20, no 1 (Spring 1994), 143.

the relationship. Verses 54-55 lay this out by specifically addressing Joseph Smith's first wife, Emma Smith:

> **Section 132 verses 54-55:** And I command mine handmaid, Emma Smith, to abide and cleave unto my servant Joseph, and to none else But if she will not abide this commandment she shall be destroyed, saith the Lord; for I am the Lord thy God, and will destroy her if she abide not in my law. / But if she will not abide this commandment, then shall my servant Joseph do all things for her, even as he hath said; and I will bless him and multiply him and give unto him 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.[38]

Here, the revelation states that if Emma does not agree to Joseph taking multiple wives, he may do so anyway. This "law of Sarah" applies to all men and women, with the understanding that first, wives should be made aware of the principle of plural marriage and its requirement, then, if after some time they do not agree to their husbands taking subsequent wives, the husbands can do so in secret. However, ideally the first wife would take after Sarah, and willingly give her husband in marriage to his subsequent wives. The number of wives that a man can take does not seem to be limited in any way. Looking back at verse 62: "And if he have ten virgins given unto him by this law, he cannot commit adultery." The phrasing of this verse implies that a man can take as many wives as he likes, as long as they are all virgins. This focus on virginity changes in

[38] *The Doctrine and Covenants,* 272.

practice as men marry widows or previously married women, but an important impact remains that while men can marry multiple women at the same time, women are expected to be with only one man, or it constitutes adultery. This verse also labels women as the property of men; property that can be "given" to men. This phrasing can be tied to the way in which fundamentalist leaders control marriage within their groups, and give women to certain men for marriage.[39] This view of women as subservient is not exclusive to Section 132, The Book of Mormon, Mormonism's central text published by Joseph Smith in 1831, also paints women as docile creatures in Jacob 2:7: "And also it grieveth me that I must use so much boldness of speech concerning you, before your wives and your children, many of whose feelings are exceedingly tender and chaste and delicate before God, which thing is pleasing unto God."[40] This verse paints women as delicate creatures with less power than men and implies that this characteristic is morally good. This view of women within the religion likely makes revelations like plural marriage more realistic and palatable for the followers of the religion. However, as we delve into The Book of Mormon and other religious texts from the LDS Church, we begin to see contradictions with the theology and practice of plural marriage.

While Jacob 2 paints women as delicate, and possibly weaker beings than men, it specifically warns against men marrying multiple women: "The Lord commands that no man among the Nephites may have more than one wife – The Lord delights in the chastity of women."[41] Ironically, this is written as a commandment to men not to take

[39] Martha Bradley, "Cultural Configurations of Mormon Fundamentalist Polygamous Communities," *The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 8, no 1 (2004), 14-15.
[40] *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 119-120.
[41] *The Book of Mormon,* 119.

multiple wives, but implies that the issue would lie with the lack of chastity for the women, not the men. This is laid out even more clearly in Jacob 2:27-28:

> "Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none; / For I, the Lord God, delight in the chastity of women. And whoredoms are an abomination before me; thus saith the Lord of Hosts."[42]

Again, here men are forbidden from taking multiple wives, the reasoning being that "whoredoms are an abomination." This verse directly contradicts Joseph Smith's later revelation about plural marriage by implying that any relationship a man has with a woman after being married to a different woman is not legitimate and adds to the woman's promiscuity. Of course, men's chastity does not seem to be required; men are only prohibited from holding relationships with various women in so far as it affects the women's chastity, again putting men in charge of women's bodies. This one caveat may create room for Smith's later revelation about plural marriage, as women would be engaged in religiously "sealed" marriages, rather than non-marital sexual relationships.

These religious texts highlight a clear disregard for women's autonomy. On a base level, the texts address men directly, never women, even when speaking specifically about women. The language also implies that plural marriage is an action men must take and women must accept, without allowing women an opinion on the matter. Lastly, these texts talk about women as if they are under the control of men, a

[42] *The Book of Mormon,* 121.

key element in understanding the intentions of the practice. However, my analysis will show that intention and realistic practice do not always coincide.

Although plural marriage was practiced by the LDS Church for a time in the early years of the Church, the Church's relationship to plural marriage changed as the church itself evolved, becoming a socially acceptable form of "almost Christianity." In 1890, president of the LDS Church, Wilford Woodruff, put forth Official Declaration 1, better known as the 1890 "manifesto." According to Woodruff, this declaration was a result of a revelation. He stated that the LDS Church will submit to the laws of Congress regarding plural marriage, and that the Church has not encouraged polygamy since it became illegal in the U.S.[43] This was a turning point for the LDS Church, as the official stance on plural marriage changed and fundamentalist sects split off from the Church. Over time, these various fundamentalist groups continued to practice polygamy, and today, polygamy is still practiced by fundamentalist groups and independent fundamentalists, who are not associated with a larger group. Much of the news we see regarding Mormon fundamentalism and polygamy focuses on the coercion and abuse that many women have faced in polygamous relationships or within fundamentalist Mormon communities, and while these are very real concerns, I am interested in the women who choose this relationship structure, and why they advocate for and participate in polygamy.

Introduction to Theory

[43] Wilford Woodruff, "Official Declaration 1," *Doctrine and Covenants*, October 6, 1890.

In order to better understand and contextualize the experiences of the women living in polygamous relationships whose stories I will include later in this paper I will turn to a social and political theory of liberty, or as I will often refer to it, freedom. I will use Isaiah Berlin's lecture *Two Concepts of Liberty* as a framework for understanding and analyzing the various forms of freedom or restriction that these women face as a result of their relationship structures, and the degree of freedom they experienced in choosing to participate in a polygamous marriage in the first place. Additionally, I will discuss Nancy Hirschmann's feminist adaptation of Berlin's concepts of liberty in her book, *The subject of liberty: toward a feminist theory of freedom*, to acknowledge the gendered implications of existing definitions of liberty. This will allow me to better apply Berlin's theory, and to recognize areas in which we cannot make assertions due to the difficult nature of identifying anyone's "true" desires or intentions, or the impossibility of ignoring certain social systems that affect individuals' choices.

In Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty*, he discusses negative and positive liberty as two forms of freedom. These two concepts lay out what is sometimes seen as conflicting views of what constitutes freedom, or what can be seen as two halves of the larger perception of freedom. Simply put, negative liberty is the freedom *from* and positive liberty is the freedom *to*. In other words, negative liberty implies a freedom from outside constraints, while positive liberty entails the ability to pursue a desire without internal or resource-based hindrances. To put these two concepts into a religious context as an example, the U.S. law protecting religious freedom ensures negative freedom, in theory, because it protects against external obstacles to one's religious beliefs. However, in the U.S. there is not positive freedom to practice religion because

there is no active assistance in cases where a religious group or person lacks the resources necessary to practice their religion (for instance, a religious building or resources needed in a ritual). However, in the context of polygamy, people within the U.S. do not have negative freedom because the practice is illegal.

In his explanation of positive liberty, Berlin discusses the risk for paternalism to take place as a perceived solution to internal barriers people may face. For example, if someone has a drug addiction and wants to purchase recreational drugs: is the ability to pursue that desire really freedom, or are they restricted internally by their addiction? In this case, Berlin explains that paternalism, or "the interference with a person's liberty of action justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests or values of the person being coerced,"[44] might occur to help people achieve greater freedom in the long term, even though it may restrict their immediate freedom. Berlin warns against this view of freedom because it can be used on a larger level to justify dictatorships and the like.[45] I agree with Berlin that paternalism in determining freedom is dangerous. When considering a feminist lens to the issue, it allows others to determine what might be right for women. This applies to what we see in fundamentalist groups when young women are married off to older men because that man, or the leader of the group, claims to have had a revelation calling for the marriage. This mirrors Berlin's phrasing on the subject, "I am claiming that I know what they truly need better than they know it themselves."[46] While this line of thinking may seem obvious in the fundamentalist group context due to the prioritization of religious practices over

[44] Gerald Dworkin, "Paternalism," *The Monist* 56, no 1 (1972), 65.
[45] Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 18-19.
[46] Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, 27.

individual liberty, it's also worth questioning the legal and social obstacles to plural marriage for independent fundamentalists. Often justified as a way to protect women, laws against polygamy, in practice, restrict the freedom of women to enter into polygamous marriages if they choose to. In this way, questioning an individual's "true" desires can also lead to limitations in negative freedom as those who claim to be helping are enforcing external restrictions. Berlin warns against paternalism because, as described above, it allows for people or governments to use positive liberty theory to justify limiting negative freedom.

Nancy Hirschmann, on the other hand, points out that positive liberty is where we have the space to explore the implications of the patriarchy on the concept of liberty. Her argument focuses on social constructivism, the idea that our society, the systems in it, and our social roles are constructed, rather than formed by human nature. In this way, we are able to see that our freedom of choice can only be understood within the confines of the social systems we have set up, most relevant here being the patriarchy. While I will discuss both the negative and positive freedom of the women whose stories I will share, Hirschmann's perspective is important to keep in mind because it reminds us that there are some restrictions to choice inherent in our society, as well as some that may be harder to identify due to the ingrained nature of systems we have built and participated in. For instance, while discussing polygyny, it may be easy to identify a gender imbalance within the relationship, but we may overlook implications of the institution of marriage itself, whether monogamous or polygamous. However, my goal is not to pick apart the gender dynamics or historical implications of the institution of marriage in general, so I will set that aside in this analysis.

Hirschmann also notes that most previous, well-known theories regarding liberty were established by men, and therefore develop a masculinist conception of freedom. She specifically mentions four theorists, Locke, Mill, Rousseau, and Kant, all of whom address the concept of freedom. In her discussion of these four men, she notes that,

> In a persistent tension between free choice and right choice, these theorists seek to construct men so that they will want to choose what the theorists think they should choose. Gender is a significant element of this social construction; for in all of these theories the subject of liberty is male.[47]

This quote exemplifies an important point beyond the gender construction of these theorists' ideas, that being that they distinguished between "free choice" and "right choice." This relates back to Berlin's concept of positive freedom as it imposes the idea that one's own desires may not be "right" and therefore others could better determine the freedom of an individual who is making "wrong" choices. These theorists that Hirschmann focuses on rely heavily on the concept of rationality in determining liberty.[48] This strongly mirrors the Victorian-era view of morality that we previously discussed. The thought goes: if reason or rationality is the basis for decision making, either on the individual or state level, then any rational choice is freedom, and any irrational choice is giving into "wrong" or "deviant" desires.

[47] Nancy J. Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 41.
[48] Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty,* 40-74.

My point in highlighting Hirschmann's work in relation to positive liberty is to show how gendered perspectives of freedom can lead to paternalism specifically geared towards women's choices. I agree with Hirschmann's claim that our society is socially constructed, and that systems such as the patriarchy can lead to blind spots when discussing gender issues because of our participation in such systems and the extent to which they are ingrained in our society. I employ both Hirschmann and Berlin's frameworks here to argue that it's important to avoid paternalism even in cases where we may see women leaning into the patriarchy. Engaging in conversations and creating discourse around the issue is important, but pushing ideas or making decisions for women is taking the freedom of choice away from them and further perpetuating the idea that women are not able to make decisions for themselves, further questioning the rationality of women as a group.

I will enter the following analysis of my case studies with this in mind. I am not here to say how these women should think or feel, or to judge the choices they made, but to take a closer look at if they had the freedom to choose their marital situations, and how their choices have expanded or limited their freedom.

From The Perspective of Women

Women in the 19th Century: Early Mormonism

To better understand plural marriage from the perspective of women who participate, or have participated, in the practice, we must step back and look at the evolution of the practice as it relates to these women's freedom of choice and execution. To do this, I will highlight the voices of two women from early Mormon

pioneer communities, and two women from contemporary times. Paula Kelly Harline's book, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club: From the Diaries of Mormon Pioneer Women*, canvasses the feelings of early Mormon pioneer women through their diaries and other writings, bringing together the thoughts and feelings of various women of the time who were engaged in polygamous relationships. As personal diaries, these accounts can be reasonably assumed to be unbiased, and an honest account of the way women felt in their polygamous relationships.

When the practice of polygamy began in the LDS Church it was not readily and enthusiastically accepted by most members. First of all, members of the Church had been raised in a monogamous context and had been taught, by society and their religion, about the importance of being faithful and committed in their monogamous unions.[49] Living in plural marriage was a huge adjustment for the women who agreed to it, and regardless of how accepting they were of the doctrine, it was often a difficult lifestyle to get used to, particularly for the first generations to practice it. In the first chapter of *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, Harline highlights two women, both first wives, who entered plural marriages willingly but still faced struggles along the way.

Rachel Simmons (1836-1926)

Rachel Simmons' family joined the LDS Church in 1839, when Rachel was three years old. Her family was close with Joseph Smith, who taught her parents about the principle of plural marriage. Rachel notes that her mother was hesitant to engage in plural marriage, which she commented was "natural," but she did eventually agree.[50]

[49] Campbell, "Mr. Peay's Horses," 32.
[50] Paula Kelly Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club: From the Diaries of Mormon Pioneer Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12.

When Rachel was eleven the family moved to Salt Lake City, where Rachel grew up and dated various men. Her mother pushed her towards Joe Simmons, although she was in love with another man. When she learned that the other man was seeing someone else, she turned her attention towards Joe. Joe and Rachel were married in 1852 by Brigham Young when they were 27 and 15, respectively. Three years after their marriage, Joe began looking for another wife, leaving Rachel with mixed feelings. In her writings, Rachel claims that Joe pursuing another woman was not the issue, but how actively he did so bothered her. She wrote, "It wouldn't have been so hard if he had not courted [Emma Bloxom] so strong. [...] Joe used to go every other night to see her, and I thought that was too much when he had a family at home, but it made no difference what I thought."[51] Rachel's feelings towards her husband courting another woman show a level of acceptance or willingness to participate in plural marriage, but a desire to keep a certain status within her relationship. Her comments also show that she did not have much say in her husband's choices as they related to their marriage. After Joe's marriage to Emma, Rachel wrote that he "brought her home and gave her my bedroom and the best of everything in the house, and was so infatuated with her that he neglected me shamefully. It was hard to bear."[52] However, Rachel remained in her marriage, and eventually Joe and Emma separated. Later, Joe married Rachel's sister, Nett, who was a pleasant addition to the family. Rachel wrote that she did not regret her choice to accept plural marriage, even though it decidedly added hardship to her marriage. She was happy with the outcome for her family and had followed a religious practice.

[51] Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 16.
[52] Ibid.

Rachel Simmons: Freedom of Choice Within the Confines of Pioneer Times

How does the lens of negative liberty sharpen our understanding of Rachel's situation? Rachel made continuous choices throughout her courtship and marriage to Joe to stay with him. However, these choices may have been limited by the context in which they were living as early Mormon pioneers in a recently settled area. Given this situation, we can argue that Rachel had negative liberty due to a lack of outside obstacles to her freedom of choice. There were no laws prohibiting polygamy, no laws prohibiting divorce, and no physical force or direct coercion keeping her in her marriage, that we know of. Rachel was free to leave or to stay in her marriage, and free to make choices in reaction to the choices of her husband. In other words, she was not "prevented by other persons" and in that sense did not face direct coercion.[53]

However, Rachel may not have had positive liberty due to the financial, social, and religious situation she was in. Positive liberty requires action to overcome any obstacles to practicing one's negative liberty. In this case, Rachel had come from poverty, and leaving her husband would have likely led to financial instability. Also, if Rachel were to divorce her husband, especially without another man to marry, she would risk being a single mother, which would lower her social status in the community she lived in and require her to raise her children on her own. As Berlin writes, "I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. […] to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes which are my own, not by causes which

[53] Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, 7.

affect me, as it were, from outside."[54] Rachel was limited by causes which affected her, even if no person was specifically standing in her way or coercing her decisions. She also would have faced an internal barrier when it came to her religion, as rejecting the religious practice of plural marriage when faced with the choice could be considered an internal barrier to following her own desires. However, we cannot know what she desired any further than what her writing tells us, so this internal barrier may have restricted the options she felt she had, but we cannot speak to whether it restricted the options she wanted. Additionally, it seems Rachel was pleased with the eventual outcome of her plural marriage because of the inclusion of her sister in her family. I would argue that Rachel had freedom of choice within the historical, religious, and social context she was living in, meaning she had negative liberty. However, the patriarchal social and religious systems she was living in did not provide active assistance for women who may have wanted to leave their marriages, meaning Rachel did not enjoy positive liberty.

Mary Jane Tanner (1837-1890)

Rachel was not alone in her acceptance of and struggle with plural marriage. Mary Jane Tanner grew up in Salt Lake City, arriving in 1847, and was also the daughter of parents who were engaged in plural marriage. Mary Jane's family, who were among the first to settle in Salt Lake City, struggled to make ends meet and survive in the new settlement. Her father left for California to earn a better living, sometimes sending money and gifts back for them, but not enough for Mary Jane and

[54] Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, 16.

her mother to easily make ends meet. In the end, her father wanted them to move with him to California, but after five years of separation, Mary Jane's mother refused, instead divorcing him and marrying someone else who was better able to care for them.[55] Mary Jane's mother's second marriage was polygamous and offered the opportunity for her and her daughter to be more economically stable. In 1855, Mary Jane met her future husband, Myron Tanner. Mary Jane wrote letters to Myron, while he was working in California, that made it clear she had strong feelings for him. In one, she wrote "how beautiful to see two souls meet joined together in the ties of holy love leaning on each other for that happiness the world cannot give ... shall not our hearts be thus united."[56] As Harline observes, Mary Jane's writing implies a certain proclivity towards monogamous love. Her line referencing two souls joining in love and their hearts uniting follows this idea. After their marriage, Mary Jane and Myron continued to face financial hardship, and Myron left to work in California from time to time, which eventually paid off, giving them some financial stability. Ten years after their marriage, Myron married his second wife, Ann Crosby. Mary Jane believed plural marriage was a "true principle" and had clear religious convictions regarding the practice.[57] When her husband brought home a second wife, she accepted it, but was not enthusiastic about the arrangement. Her account of the family's life includes various ups and downs, but she primarily blamed Ann's family's arrival (her mother, sister, and nephew) for the hardships in their plural marriage. Mary Jane wrote, "Previous to their coming we had overlooked each other's imperfections and tried to live our religion putting all jealousies aside, and had

[55] Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 16-17.
[56] Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 17.
[57] Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 19.

she striven as I did instead of allowing her people to come between us it would no doubt resulted in entire happiness and confidence in each other."[58] In this way, Mary Jane blamed their situation for the difficulty with plural marriage, not the practice itself.[59]

Mary Jane Tanner: An Internal Struggle and Perceived Limits

Mary Jane's writings, while similar to Rachel's, provide a bit more emotion and clarity as to her feelings. This will help us analyze her freedom in a slightly different way, with a focus on her freedom to make her own choices as well as her freedom to choose what she truly desires. Analogous to Rachel, Mary Jane enjoyed a high level of negative freedom. She was clearly not coerced or forced into her marriage with Myron, as is evident from the letters she wrote in and her description of them meeting: "We seemed to be mutualy attracted, and as his time was limited he did not wait for a long acquaintance, but soon asked me to be his wife."[60] We also know that Mary Jane's mother had been in a monogamous marriage, divorced, and then entered a polygamous marriage. From this, we can assume that Mary Jane was aware of her choices regarding monogamy and divorce, yet still chose to stay in her marriage once her husband married a second wife.

Analyzing Mary Jane's choices brings us to her experience of positive liberty. Again, similarly to Rachel, Mary Jane was limited in her positive freedom due to limited resources if she were to leave her marriage. However, with Mary Jane we can dig a bit deeper due to the emotional nature of her writing. Mary Jane said that she "summoned all [her] fortitude to bear it bravely" ("it" being plural marriage) because it was a religious

[58] Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 20.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 17.

principle. Here we can see that religion acts as a sort of internal barrier for Mary Jane because it is pushing her to partake in a practice that she readily admits is difficult for her. We can assume from the tenor of her writing that Mary Jane would have preferred a monogamous marriage, but accepted a polygamous one due to the internal barrier of her religious belief. However, as Hirschmann notes, internal barriers "reflect, and work interactively with, a social context that determines the limits of the conceptually possible."[61] In this way, religion as well as the social context developing around polygamy throughout the pioneer communities may have created internal barriers for women that they didn't consider or even see. In Mary Jane's case, we can see that she acknowledged her feelings about the practice and her religious convictions regarding plural marriage, but she still faced an internal barrier based on her socialization as a Mormon woman in this time period.

Understanding the 19th Century Mormon Opinion

In 1872, *The Exponent*, a women-run Salt Lake City newspaper ran an article titled "Ignorance and Bigotry." The author of this article, who is not named but we can assume is a Mormon woman, defends the practice of plural marriage against critiques made by a non-Mormon woman in a San Francisco-based paper, the *Pioneer*. Written with an air of resentment colored by sarcasm, the author of "Ignorance and Bigotry" highlights the attempt to color plural marriage negatively with the use of specific phrases and language rather than reasoned arguments. The author also points out language that implies the subservience and suffering of Mormon women, highlighting that these

[61] Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty*, 77.

ideas are driven by *ignorance and bigotry* and not the opinions or experiences of Mormon women themselves. The author wrote that:

> The "Pioneer" and others of the same class, are more anxious to hold up their hands in affected horror against an imaginary evil and point to an assumedly sickly condition of society at a distance, than to look upon the pestilence of corruption which surrounds them at home, striking down the fairest and the loveliest, victims of man's lust and woman's folly.[62]

It is particularly interesting that the author implies non-Mormon women who are criticizing the practice of polygamy are "victims of man's lust." This view was not uncommon, as many Mormons justified plural marriage by saying it was a solution to adultery committed by men because they were simply able to marry additional women openly rather than have secret relationships outside of their marriage. More generally, this quote highlights the author's view of anti-Mormon criticism as unfounded and prejudiced, especially considering her perception of the state of society outside of the LDS Church.

This article highlights the desire of Mormon women to make their own choices without outside coercion or pressure. Regardless of the social construction of the society in the Utah territory at the time, and regardless of whether that construction limits women's freedom, outside coercion is a clear infringement on their negative liberty and ability to make their own choices. This idea is not unique to the late 19th century but

[62] "Ignorance and Bigotry," *Woman's Exponent,* August 15, 1872.

permeates the range of time I explore as polygamous women continue to fight for their ability to choose this lifestyle for themselves.

20th Century to Now: Current Practice of Plural Marriage

Today, polygamy continues to be a taboo and illegal practice in the United States. The perception of modern-day Mormon polygamy is largely created through popular culture and news stories. For instance, television shows like *Sister Wives* (a reality show, 2010-current) and *Big Love* (a scripted show, 2006-2011) paint a picture for viewers of what an independent, modern-day polygamous family might look like, while documentaries like Netflix's *Keep Sweet, Pray, and Obey* (2022) gives viewers an overview of one of the largest Mormon fundamentalist groups' practice of polygamy. In addition to popular culture, news articles about polygamy heavily influence the American view of this relationship style. However, these articles are often skewed towards reporting on groups or individuals who practice polygamy and commit abuses, likely because these are the more attention-grabbing cases.[63] While these accounts are important to highlight, they don't provide a complete picture of the female perspective or experience within Mormon polygamy. While this may never be possible due to closed fundamentalist groups and the illegality of the practice pushing people to hide their polygamous relationships, I feel that adding the voices of those women whose stories we do have access to is an important step in showing the broad diversity of women's experiences today and throughout history. My goal in highlighting the next two women is

[63] Negativity bias is a phenomenon in new reporting in which people pay more attention to negative news, and as a result, news organizations skew their reports towards negative news. Stuart Soroka, Patrick Fournier, and Lilach Nir, "Cross-National Evidence of a Negativity Bias in Psychophysiological Reactions to News," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 38 (September 17, 2019): 18888–92, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908369116

to show that not all contemporary Mormon polygamy is practiced in closed fundamentalist groups, and as a result they have a different experience with freedom. Both examples below discuss women who lived in independent Mormon polygamous families, meaning they did not belong to any group, and therefore were not subject to any rules or coerced practices that one might find in a group such as the FLDS. The experiences of these two women further my point that polygamy is practiced in a variety of ways, and we cannot assume a lack of autonomy for women.

Anne Wilde (born 1936)

In contemporary times, two women stand out as advocates for polygamous relationships: Anne Wilde and Elizabeth Joseph. Anne Wilde was born and raised in the LDS Church, attended BYU for her bachelor's degree, and has always been a very religiously active person. In 1959, a year after she graduated from BYU, Anne got married monogamously in the LDS temple. Nine years and three children later, the marriage ended in divorce. Throughout this time, Anne and her husband became interested in early church history, including the principle of plural marriage, slowly learning that aspects of this history were taboo in the Church. A year after her divorce, Anne married her second husband, Ogden Kraut, not legally, but through religious sealing. Anne was Kraut's second wife, and they were married 33 years, up until his death in 2002. While Anne does not give many details about her decision to enter into a plural marriage, stating that the subject is very personal, she did say that she made the decision through prayer and fasting, and that she has never questioned that she was

meant to live the principle of plural marriage and be a member of Kraut's family.[64] In this particular family, each wife had her own home, and Kraut would spend time with each of them separately. Anne and Kraut kept their relationship out of the public eye for many years, even keeping it a secret from Anne's family and friends for over 20 years. To most of the community, Anne was a single mother and divorcee. She supported herself and her children as a working mother. She and Kraut tried to have children, but were unable, which came with certain silver linings although Anne notes that she had wanted to have additional children with Kraut. Without the two of them having children, they were more easily able to keep their relationship a secret. Anne also credits much of their closeness to their work together on writing, printing, and publishing books; a working relationship that she viewed as an alternative to bonding over children.[65] Anne's story is a strong example of a woman in suburban America who entered into a polygamous marriage for religious reasons and of her own free will. She has become an activist for polygamists, with a goal of having polygamy (between consenting adults) decriminalized and considered a legitimate relationship structure by society.[66]

Anne's marriage and the structure of her family is not a universal experience for those in polygamous family structures, and there are of course people and groups that use this family structure as a way to coerce and control girls and women. However, Anne's experience is important because it shows that polygamy is not always practiced the same way. As I mentioned above, Anne and her co-wives all lived in separate

[64] Anne Wilde, "Understanding Mormon Polygamy," interview by Dr. John Dehlin, *Mormon Stories Podcast*, January 16, 2007, https://www.mormonstories.org/podcast/mormon-stories-042-and-043-understanding-mormon-fundamentalist-polygamy-an-interview-with-anne-b-wilde/.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.

houses. The entire family met up occasionally, but not frequently. All the wives in her family got along, but they did not have strong, sisterly bonds that can be seen in some other polygamous families. Anne sees herself as a very independent woman and attributes her ability to live her life that way, while still enjoying a partnership, to her plural marriage. Her husband visited on weekends, and they frequently spoke on the phone, but she lived her day-to-day life as a single mother with three kids. She was able to spend ample time with her kids, her friends, and her family, choosing exactly how she spent her time without needing to consider a partner. She was also able to have a relationship with a man whom she loved and who loved her, without this relationship overtaking her time. Anne discusses the benefits of plural marriage for women more generally in an interview she gave, stating:

> This is one of the good things, I think, about plural marriage, is that a woman can have the best of both worlds. She can have a family and have a lot of children, and then she can also go back to school and get a college degree or an advanced degree. She can have a career and know that her kids are well provided for because there's a sister-wife who will agree, you know, ahead of time that she'll take care of the kids. And then in return, the wife that goes to work will share her income maybe with her, or whatever, it just works out.[67]

For a deeply religious woman, Anne clearly recognizes pragmatic reasons for plural marriage in addition to religious. This is an important distinction to make because, while

[67] Ibid.

religious women can of course still enter plural marriages of their own free will, there is an underlying belief system they adhere to that states this family structure is how they reach the highest level of salvation. So, it's important to identify how a woman feels about the relationship they are a part of, beyond their religious belief. If they are unhappy and only in the relationship for religious reasons, there is some argument to be made that the religion itself is coercing the woman to enter into plural marriage. However, if women in this relationship structure are fulfilled in their marriage and identify various non-religious benefits to the relationship structure, then the argument that they entered into the marriage with consent is more convincing.

Anne Wilde: Freedom of Choice and Religious Conviction

This leads us back to the discussion of negative and positive liberty. Anne is very clear in her narrative about her life that she chose plural marriage. Now a widow, we have the benefit of Anne's account of both her marriages in hindsight. Anne was in a monogamous marriage prior to her plural marriage, and although this marriage ended in divorce, she was clearly aware of the option of monogamy, and she clearly had access to that option. In fact, she was restricted in her negative freedom in her ability to enter into a polygamous marriage in the first place, as polygamy is illegal in the U.S. As Berlin noted in his lecture, "All the errors which a man is likely to commit against advice and warning are far outweighed by the evil of allowing others to constrain him to what they deem is good."[68] Berlin made this comment in his explanation of negative freedom, and it mirrors the legality of polygamy well because it warns against constraining individuals' choices, even in cases where society may deem a particular action as "wrong." It is

[68] Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty,* 12.

clear that in Anne's case, her freedom from outside obstacles is impinged upon by U.S. law.

While Anne made the decision to enter into a plural marriage largely for religious reasons, her practical and pragmatic reasoning for the marriage, as well as her love for her husband, shows that it was not solely a religious choice. Additionally, Anne was a working mother who financially supported herself and her children, so she was clearly not coerced to enter or stay in her plural marriage for financial stability. While her strong belief in exaltation through plural marriage can be read as a certain form of religious coercion, she came to this belief through her own research and prayer, not through indoctrination from a group or individual, which she makes clear by highlighting that her beliefs in plural marriage are not mainstream and that she had to initially hide her beliefs from others as a member of the LDS Church. If anything, the LDS Church is limiting her negative freedom by excommunicating those who engage in plural marriage, and therefore limiting her access to her faith if she chooses a certain relationship style. Lastly, Anne kept her marriage secret from friends and family, meaning to most, she appeared to be a divorced single mother. Her plural marriage was not an attempt to gain status or social acceptance. Anne is a clear example of a woman choosing polygamy of her own accord, and of negative liberty as it pertains to monogamous versus polygamous marriage.

Turning to Anne's experience of positive freedom, as a woman living in the 20th and 21st centuries, Anne benefitted from significantly more positive liberty than early Mormon women. For Rachel Simmons and Mary Jane Tanner, the LDS Church was not just a religious institution, but practiced as a sort of local government in the early years

of settling Utah. This meant that any outside resources they had access to, aside from family or friends, came from the same institution that encouraged plural marriage. For Anne, the opposite is true. Today, the LDS Church excommunicates those who practice polygamy and the U.S. government has made it illegal. However, this provides Anne with more resources if she were to choose to leave her polygamous marriage, such as opportunities for financial assistance if needed or access to shelters or other support if abuse were to occur in her relationship. These forms of assistance enhance Anne's positive freedom because they act as bridges to assist in her action, if she desired to leave her polygamous marriage. However, Anne is also somewhat limited in her positive freedom due to the same institutional positions on polygamy. Because of the negative view of the practice by the Church and the government, Anne was unable to make her life choices openly. She faced religious, societal, and governmental pressure to be monogamous, even though her desire was to practice polygamy; and while she did pursue that desire, she did so with certain limitations.

Anne's experience paints an interesting picture of an independent Mormon polygamist who has very strong religious beliefs but is also a proponent of the practical reasons for polygamous relationships. The limitations to her freedom, both positive and negative, come largely from outside of her relationships, and primarily inhibit her ability to enter into a polygamous union in the first place. Within her relationship, she seems to enjoy a high degree of both positive and negative freedom, and even argues that her relationship style can be credited in providing more freedom than she would have in a monogamous marriage. Anne is not alone in this view, Elizabeth Joseph, another

modern, independent polygamist also attributes her expanded freedom to her relationship.

Elizabeth Joseph (born in the early 1950s)

Elizabeth Joseph married Alex Joseph in 1974. Alex already had five wives when they got married and is estimated to have married roughly 20 women total, with at least nine overlapping at one time. Elizabeth is a self-proclaimed feminist who juggled law school and later a significant career with raising three children and being a supportive member of her large family.[69] Elizabeth married Alex during her senior year of college. Two of her close friends from college were already married to Alex; she went to visit during her spring break and came back married. Her Methodist family was upset by the news, but she stood by her decision. Elizabeth believes that Alex already being married was a good thing, it showed he had a successful track record as a husband and father.[70] As Elizabeth puts it, "in Alex, there was no gamble. He was demonstrably a good husband, demonstrably a good father. So there was little risk to the situation."[71] Elizabeth sees her reasoning for marrying Alex as feminist because she chose the family and relationship style that was most secure and brought her the most freedom and independence. She juxtaposed this with what she saw as two other options: "I could either marry somebody my own age and take another 10 years and finish the job of raising him, his mother started. Or I could marry a proven failure and I practice divorce

[69] "Polygamist Wife Contends Polygamy Is the Ultimate Feminist Lifestyle - Las Vegas Sun Newspaper," May 5, 1997, https://lasvegassun.com/news/1997/may/05/polygamist-wife-contends-polygamy-is-the-ultimate-/.
[70] Elizabeth Joseph, "I Enjoy Being A Girl, Sort Of: Taking Sisterhood One Step Further," Interview by Ira Glass, *This American Life*, NPR, December 14, 2017, https://www.thisamericanlife.org/99/i-enjoy-being-a-girl-sort-of.
[71] Ibid.

law."[72] Elizabeth's viewpoint here assumes a specific role for women, one that puts the onus on mothers and wives to "raise" men, even into adulthood. This is noteworthy as we consider Elizabeth's reasoning for supporting and practicing polygamy, as much of her defense lies in shared responsibility for childcare, caring for her husband, and household tasks. However, despite her reasoning for entering the marriage, Elizabeth was not forced or coerced into it, and, as is evidenced by Alex's multiple divorces, she was free to leave at any time.

Elizabeth chose a relationship with an already functioning and stable family unit, which would allow her to pursue further education and a career while still having children. Between herself and all her co-wives, Elizabeth had built-in childcare and support throughout raising her children. In one instance, she and two of her co-wives had children at the same time, and they paid for one wife to quit her job and stay home with the kids until they reached the age to start school.[73] So, while childcare within the family wasn't always free, it was with someone trusted who was considered family. This is also a great example of a polygamous relationship style supporting women in a way for which a monogamous relationship style is not set up. Generally, if a parent in a monogamous relationship decides to stay home with their kids for the first few years of their lives, they do this without any additional monetary compensation. Of course, they might have a partner who is working and sharing their income or covering family expenses, but the parent staying home with the kids is generally not directly compensated for the childcare they are providing. This puts women who stay at home with their kids at an economic disadvantage because they become financially reliant on

[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.

their partner. In Elizabeth's anecdote, her co-wife was able to maintain financial stability and independence by receiving direct compensation for childcare from her other co-wives.

It is important to note that this is simply one anecdote from one family, and that other polygamous families may not pay the partner who is watching the children, or may not provide childcare for one another at all. However, while all polygamous families are not the same, there are more adults in these families, creating more options for childcare, and a specific look at one family that seems to function in a way that empowers the women in the family is important for understanding that feminism and female empowerment is at least possible within polygamous relationships.

While this example shows women supporting women, it seems to assume that women are responsible for childcare and household tasks. In telling this story, Elizabeth was highlighting the benefits of a polygynous marriage based on having multiple women in the family. She discusses the way that the *wives* established a childcare plan with each other, not Alex. A lawyer, Elizabeth said, "as I see it, if this life style didn't already exist, it would have to be invented to accommodate career women."[74] Elizabeth's claim that plural marriage benefits women is based on the idea that it allows the time and space for women to both raise children and have a career. She claims that without plural marriage, compromise is the only solution:

[74] Dirk Johnson, "Polygamists Emerge From Secrecy, Seeking Not Just Peace but Respect," *The New York Times*, April 9, 1991, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/1991/04/09/us/polygamists-emerge-from-secrecy-seeking-not-just-peace-but-respect.html.

> In a monogamous context, the only solutions are compromises. The kids need to learn to fix their own breakfast, your husband needs to get used to occasional microwave dinners, you need to divert more of your income to insure that your pre-schooler is in a good day care environment.[75]

While this may be a valid argument for one solution to the difficulty of juggling a career while raising children, it presupposes a very specific gender dynamic that has women as the sole caretakers for the children and the family as a whole. This gender dynamic is significantly adding to the difficulty because it puts the onus on women to come up with a solution. Within this gender dynamic, plural marriage may be considered feminist in that it affords women more time, space, and independence in their lives, but it still exists within a distinctly patriarchal framework. Elizabeth made the comment, "I was able to go to law school 400 miles away, knowing my husband had clean shorts in the morning and dinner at night."[76] This statement strongly implies her husband's absence regarding household responsibilities, even when it comes to his own needs. So, while Elizabeth has the help of her co-wives, that need is created by the gender roles that place women in the role of family caretaker, even in cases where they have careers.

Elizabeth Joseph: A Pragmatic Approach to Expanding Freedom

This leads us into an interesting discussion about Elizabeth's range of freedom due to her general outlook on marriage and responsibility. On the one hand, Elizabeth is

[75] Elizabeth Joseph, "Opinion | My Husband's Nine Wives," *The New York Times*, May 23, 1991, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/1991/05/23/opinion/my-husbands-nine-wives.html.
[76] "Polygamist Wife Contends Polygamy Is the Ultimate Feminist Lifestyle - Las Vegas Sun Newspaper," May 5, 1997, https://lasvegassun.com/news/1997/may/05/polygamist-wife-contends-polygamy-is-the-ultimate-/.

in a similar situation to Anne and enjoys a high level of negative freedom aside from the U.S. law against polygamy. While she may have been encouraged by her friends who married Alex before her, Elizabeth was not forced into the marriage, nor was she forced to stay. As mentioned above, Alex had multiple divorces and no wife was forced to stay in the marriage. Additionally, Elizabeth came from a Methodist background. Her family was not Mormon or polygamous, so Elizabeth clearly had an example of monogamy that she could have followed.

Due to her background, Elizabeth, unlike Anne, did not have a strong religious conviction to practice plural marriage. In fact, after her husband's death, she studied to become a Methodist minister, leaving Mormonism all together. She said, "I didn't live the polygamist lifestyle because of a religious doctrine, [...] I fell in love with a man who happened to have more than one wife."[77] This makes her a particularly interesting example of a modern-day polygamous relationship because her reasoning was rooted in pragmatism rather than religious conviction. This propels us into a conversation about positive liberty, as we can identify both an expansion of positive liberty within Elizabeth's family dynamics, as well as some internal limitations that Elizabeth may impose on herself.

First, Elizabeth's family grants one another additional resources. They clearly work well together and support one another when it comes to childcare and household tasks. This allowed Elizabeth the freedom *to* pursue further education and a career. The added resources in Elizabeth's family no doubt expand the ability of all adults in the relationship to pursue various goals. However, I will complicate this argument by

[77]House, Dawn, "Sister Widows: Wives of dead polygamist rebuild their lives," *Salt Lake Tribune* reprinted by *Cult Education Institute*, November 1, 2006.

returning to Hirschmann's discussion of gender. Hirschmann includes the opinion of another scholar, Paul Benson, who discusses how women may not realize the limitations they face due to internalized standards, which in turn further oppresses them.[78] But Hirschmann's response brings up the point I am continually drawn to, she notes that this assumes "that women could be *not* socially constructed at all, that there is some true identity and set of interest that women have as women."[79] Bensons idea, while it has merit, can lead again to assuming what is best for others because of "some true identity" that women share. So, while Elizabeth may focus on a specific gender dynamic in terms of household responsibilities, and that dynamic may be internalized and oppressive, it's difficult to say that it impedes her positive freedom. This is because we do not know Elizabeth's "true self" or exactly how she feels about the delineation of responsibilities in her household. Elizabeth focuses on the freedom she gains from polygamy: "More important, it enables women, who live in a society full of obstacles, to fully meet their career, mothering and marriage obligations."[80] As my goal is to listen to the voices of women who live in polygamous marriages, and not to judge their choices, but to evaluate their freedom to make those choices, I conclude that Elizabeth's marriage affords her more freedom, and I will hold off on evaluating those choices as "right" or "wrong."

[78] Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty*, 78.
[79] Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty*, 79.
[80] Elizabeth Joseph, "My Husband's Nine Wives," *The New York Times*, May 23, 1991, https://www.nytimes.com/1991/05/23/opinion/my-husbands-nine-wives.html.

Conclusion

In the last year of my bachelor's degree, one of my professors was writing a book about the history of the abortion debate in the United States and how it relates to religion and politics. She titled this book *Trust Women*. Her argument hinged on the idea that as a society, we don't trust women to make their own moral decisions. My argument throughout this paper, while focused on a different topic, echoes Dr. Peters' argument and expands upon it. It is my view that, as a society, we need to trust women to make decisions for themselves rather than legislating and regulating their choices. An important caveat is, of course, that this can only occur in situations where women have the freedom, opportunity, and safety to do so.

With this in mind, I chose to focus on early Mormon women and modern independent polygamists because I do not believe that Mormon fundamentalist groups provide a safe and open environment for women to make their own decisions. In that way, Mormon fundamentalist groups are inherently restricting women's freedom, and any analysis I could perform would be futile. Based on my analysis, I find that polygamy in and of itself is not the issue, but certain social systems within which polygamy is practiced can be problematic. While comparing monogamy and polygamy is not my goal here, we should not overlook the fact that abuses occur in all manner of relationship styles, including monogamous marriages.

This research is important because it expands the understanding we have of polygamy in the U.S. and reminds us to be critical of our assumptions regarding women's autonomy and freedom in these relationships. This research also contributes to the field of religious studies because it provides an in-depth look at not only the

theological belief of plural marriage, but also the ways in which it is and was practiced. I also use a socio-political theory and adapt it to engage with religious content, providing a new lens through which to understand the practice. Relatedly, an interesting point of potential further research is how exactly religious belief impacts positive freedom, to further utilize this theory in a religious studies context.

Other further research that could help us better understand the practice of polygamy, but which were not within the scope of my research, could include conducting interviews with women living in Mormon plural marriages (if possible including members or ex-members of fundamentalist groups), conducting interviews with non-Mormon Americans to measure the perception of polygamy in the U.S. and how it has shifted, and lastly exploring the interesting dynamics that are evolving tying the LGBTQ movement to polygamy activism.

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