

# SCARED SACRED: HOW THE HORRIFYING STORY OF JOSEPH SMITH'S POLYGAMY CAN HELP SAVE US

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Probably the most destabilizing piece of historical information most Mormons come across is Joseph Smith's polygamy. Though his practice is vaguely known by many, there seems to come a time when the details really come into focus: when we understand how young some of the girls Joseph took to wife were, how many of the women were already married to his friends, how coercive he could be in gaining a woman's hand, how he kept Emma in the dark for such a long time, how much pain and heartbreak the practice caused. And it is very difficult to reconcile these details with our desire to revere Joseph Smith as a prophet and as a good man.

This reaction is understandable since so many of us come from cultures that don't have a history of polygamy. It goes against our tradition of the "one and only," of the nuclear family, of our hope for equality between the sexes, of our desire to protect children, of our belief in agency. Seriously, would we countenance *any* of Joseph Smith's polygamous behavior today? Anyone who would pursue fourteen-year-old girls, or woo already-married women would be lucky to stay out of jail. And certainly that person would be excommunicated.

However, Joseph Smith is not going away. He founded our church, and the Church is committed to defending him, as was shown in the

polygamy essay on [lds.org](https://www.lds.org) that absolved him of his behavior by saying that he was forced into it by an angel with a flaming sword.

The story of Joseph's polygamy is a disturbing one, but my thesis is that it is also one of the most essential stories Mormonism has—a modern-day version of the story of Abraham and Isaac: a story uniquely capable of shocking Latter-day Saints—not out of the Church, but into a deeper relationship with the divine.



The story of Abraham and Isaac is one of the Bible's most frequently told stories. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son on a mountaintop. So Abraham takes Isaac on a long journey and binds him to a boulder. He raises his knife but is stopped by an angel who offers a ram in Isaac's stead. We have all heard interpretations of this story in church. In fact, it seems to me that we spend much more time on the interpretations than we do on the story itself, probably because, deep down, we feel how horrifying and repugnant the story is to our most basic values. Think about it. A man brought his child to a mountain in order to kill him. Period.

As the Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard observed, if you taught the story of Abraham and Isaac in church on Sunday and then on Monday came upon a member of your congregation taking his son to a mountain in order to sacrifice him, what would you do? You would stop him, of course.<sup>1</sup> Using any force necessary. Why? Because killing children is wrong. Period. Further, if you had encountered Abraham on the road with Isaac and understood what Abraham intended to do, what would your reaction be? You would stop him, of course. Using any force necessary. Who cares if an angel was planning to abort the sacrifice at

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1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, translated by Alistair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 1985), 59.

the last second? Who cares if Isaac's sacrifice is a prefiguration of Jesus' crucifixion? One does not attempt to kill children. Period.

Given the fact that one should not kill children (period), how can we encounter the story of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac? First, we need to go past the story's events and peer into its inner workings. We need to recognize what the story is *doing* rather than getting hung up on what it is *telling*. This is very difficult: it goes against all our training on how to encounter a story.

In some ways, stories are tools. We use them to give order to our experiences. They can be templates that guide our own lives and actions. For example, perhaps we might hear the story of the Good Samaritan and decide to follow the example of the Samaritan by being more compassionate. Perhaps in our youth we are inspired by a testimony given in sacrament meeting, and then, years later, find ourselves testifying of the same thing. When we find a story that resonates with us, we often use it like a cookie cutter, pressing it onto our lives, watching how it molds the once amorphous lump of our experience into a recognizable shape. This reveals a far more profound way that stories affect us. We think that *we* tell stories, but more often stories tell *us*. This is a strange thing to contemplate; after all, don't stories come out of *our* mouths, through *our* pens, or through *our* keyboards?

The science fiction/fantasy novelist Terry Pratchett once described stories as rivers, flowing through space-time.

Stories etch grooves deep enough for people to follow in the same way that water follows certain paths down a mountainside. And every time fresh actors tread the path of the story, the groove runs deeper.

[...]

So a thousand heroes have stolen fire from the gods. A thousand wolves have eaten grandmother, a thousand princesses have been kissed. A million unknowing actors have moved, unknowing, through the pathways of story.

[...]

Stories don't care who takes part in them. All that matters is that the story gets told, that the story repeats.<sup>2</sup>

I'm a good case in point. I grew up hearing stories about some of my progenitors who had made their careers as writers, editors, and poets. I decided that I wanted to be a writer as well. So I focused my energies: I joined the student newspaper. I became a full-time news reporter. I got an MFA. I wrote articles, essays, and books, and eventually became a magazine editor. The writer story "told" me, just as it had told my great uncle Paul and great aunt May. Certainly their individual stories had different details than mine because of the time and place they lived in, but we have a very similar overall story. And we deliberately let that story tell us—even invited it. Letting a story "tell" you isn't necessarily a bad thing: people with knowledge of their family history tend to be more resilient because they have stories close at hand that they can hitch rides on. "Uncle so-and-so was an engineer; I might have an aptitude for that, too. Grandma was a great organizer; I might do well in business." So, though the first (and usually *only*) thing we see about stories are the events they narrate, their true power lies in what they *do*—which can often be invisible. Let's take a look at the story of Abraham and Isaac again, but instead of focusing on its content, let's focus on what it's *doing*.



According to Kierkegaard, the story of Abraham and Isaac is *deliberately* structured to horrify us. It is trying to break us out of our perceptions of what it means to have a relationship with God. Most of us consider God to be a fatherly figure that blesses us when we are righteous and allows punishment to come upon us when we sin. Mormonism sticks very close to the father metaphor, making God the father of our spirits, a

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2. Terry Pratchett, *Witches Abroad: A Novel of Discworld* (New York: Harper, 1991), 3.

father who presented a plan of salvation for his “children,” who watches over us on Earth as a father might, who wants us to return to live with him. It’s an easily understood and comforting metaphor.

However, Kierkegaard argues that this approach eventually blocks us from being able to enter into a deeper, more direct relationship with God, simply because (as both Christian and Mormon scripture argue) God is beyond our comprehension. As God self-describes in the Book of Moses, “Endless is my name; for I am without beginning of days or end of years” (Moses 1:3). When Moses encounters God, his physical being has to be transfigured in order for him to even survive: “. . . no man can behold all my glory, and afterwards remain the flesh on the earth,” God explains (Moses 1:5). Indeed, when the glory of God leaves Moses, his physical body collapses for hours, and Moses muses that “man is nothing, which thing I had never supposed” (Moses 1:10). When Satan comes to tempt him, Moses sees through him easily simply because Satan is comprehensible to his mortal mind, “where is thy glory that I should worship thee?” Moses asks. “I can look upon thee in the natural man” (Moses 1:13–14).

If Moses, one of the greatest prophets, had never supposed humanity’s utter nothingness compared to God, what makes us think we have even a whisper of understanding concerning the divine? Our mortal minds and weak language can’t even begin to conceive of or attempt to describe God. God is too vast, too powerful, too ineffable, too complex, too simple, too everything. When we approach God, we are stepping into unexplored territory, the one-millionth part of which we’ll never be able to traverse, much less comprehend, *much* less communicate. What makes us think that a deep relationship with God is epitomized by warm feelings, answered prayers, and a happy life? We are like people living on a sandbar, never even imagining that a continent lies just yards away.

The story of Abraham and Isaac attempts to break us out of our tiny perception by saying something utterly horrifying. “A man of God tried to sacrifice his son.” That sentence should not exist. How can a man of

God contemplate the murder of his child? If we are being honest—if we are not letting our awe of scripture and tradition make us lazy—this is where our perceptions explode. This is where we can start to understand that the story is trying to do something normal stories don't usually do: push us out of itself and into the realm of metaphor. This story is not valuable as a description of a literal occurrence; it's valuable as a story that brings us into an alternate reality teeming with symbols—like saying, “Once upon a time, a woodcutter brought his son and daughter out into the forest and abandoned them there.” The story of Abraham and Isaac is trying to show us what happens when a person becomes deeply connected with God: when a person has stepped off the sandbar and made for the continent; when a person has gone beyond the father/child metaphor; when a person enters what Kierkegaard called a “subjective” relationship with God.

In order to enter a subjective relationship with God, we need to become a subject ourselves: someone fully aware, fully in control, fully oneself, tapped into the deepest roots of our own unique spark. And then we need to bring that wholeness into a relationship with God, holding nothing back. We are a subject, and God is a subject. There is no subject and object. One does not act while the other is acted upon. We become like Nephi, to whom God granted any desire, not because Nephi had become an excellent sock puppet, but because Nephi knew Nephi, Nephi knew God, and God knew Nephi. They had become one.

When one has entered such a state, conventional morality, which had before taken up so much of our bandwidth, falls away. Not because we should no longer live by it, but because it has become miniscule: irrelevant to our relationship with this amazing being. It was helpful as we groped toward God, but now it's like sounding out the letters of a word when we know how to speed-read. As the Waterboys once sang, “That was the river. This is the sea.”

When you enter into a subjective relationship with God, the relationship is between you and God *only*. No one looking at that relationship

from the outside has any basis for judging it. The possibilities that this relationship has opened up are so far beyond human understanding that an outside viewer would have no way of perceiving what was happening anyway. That person would have to enter his or her own subjective relationship with God to get even an inkling, and then he or she would be too caught up in his or her own divine relationship to care anymore.

This is what Abraham's story is pointing us toward: how, when we enter into an intimate relationship with God, we are catapulted beyond good and evil, how human law and rationality suddenly look like pitiful candles in the noonday sun. How we make a quantum leap into a relationship that no eye hath seen nor ear heard nor mind conceived.

At this point, you would be fully justified in saying, with no attempt to hide your incredulity, "You mean that the story of Abraham uses attempted infanticide to symbolize what happens to a person when he or she enters a relationship with God? That's messed up." On one level, I completely agree with you. Using a violent, repulsive act to signify a subjective relationship with God seems very strange, especially if, as many faith traditions maintain, God is love.

But I'm hard pressed to think of an approach that would work better simply because of how stories work. As the narrative theorist Robert McKee has pointed out, conflict is the only thing that can drive a story. If things just get better and better for a character, the character has no reason to strive, no reason to struggle; he or she becomes complacent. If the character is nice to the world and the world is nice back, nothing changes. However, the higher the obstacles mount against a character, the more a character struggles, the more he or she suffers, the more intrigued we get, the more invested we become. Conflict arouses our faculties. Niceness lulls us into complacency.

A good example of this principle is Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Everyone and their dog are fascinated with its first book, *The Inferno*. (Some have even read it.) We hang on every word of Dante's journey through the nine circles of hell and the torments he observes in each.

But less than one percent of those who have encountered *The Inferno* know a single thing about *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Why? Because those two books are full of angels, clouds, and songs. Things just get nicer and nicer—the antithesis of a compelling narrative. So even though our first hope is that a story that could break us out of our complacent relationship with God would be a nice one, it probably can't be so. Only conflict can awaken us. There must needs be opposition in all things.

To recap. The story of Abraham and Isaac is a horrifying one. None of us here endorse Abraham's actions in any way. We would all do our level best to stop him from going up that mountain and would probably vote for locking him away. However, this story is not about its content. It is structured to break us out of conventional thought, much as a *koan* is meant to (e.g., If you meet the Buddha, kill him). It is meant to help us see that a subjective relationship with God is so far outside mortal ken that it cannot be perceived—and especially not judged—from the outside.



It seems to me that the tale of Joseph Smith's polygamy functions as a modern-day Abraham and Isaac story. So many of its events are horrifying; and a man of God commits them. If we caught Joseph Smith on the road to convince a fourteen-year-old girl to marry him, we would do everything in our power to stop him. We would probably even vote to lock him away. Just as with Abraham's story, the shockingness of the tale wants to eject us from the narrative all together, which is why so few Mormons can stay for long in Joseph's story without jumping to one conclusion or another: Joseph was forced into polygamy by an angel and is therefore blameless (Abraham was commanded by God to kill his son and is therefore blameless), or Joseph was an oversexed, manipulative, power-drunk man (Abraham suffered from a psychosis; he believed God was speaking to him when it was really his mental illness). If we



resist using either of these very understandable escape hatches, I think we can find something of the power of this story.

As with Abraham's, Joseph's story is of a man who has entered into a subjective relationship with God and therefore finds himself beyond conventional morality. Abraham was given license to kill. Joseph was given license to marry. But we can't get caught in the content; in a story like this, it's all about the symbolism. When one is in a subjective relationship with God, conventional morality is like sounding out letters when one can speed-read. You've entered a context where the mortal mind and all its structures are far transcended. God is much too big to be confined to neurons and language. That was the river; this is the sea. The story of Joseph Smith's polygamy is another version of the story of Abraham and Isaac. They are similarly structured, and they teach the same principle.

Now is the perfect time to say, "But, Stephen, isn't it obvious that Abraham's story is a myth while Joseph Smith's is historical? Actual people were involved in Joseph's actions. We have *records* of his doings. How can it be profitable to read his story symbolically when it is painfully literal?" In many ways, I think you're right. Joseph's story is thousands of years closer to us than Abraham's and it takes place in a cultural context similar to our own. Some of it may have happened to our own ancestors. Some of us may feel the reverberations of Joseph's actions in our own families.

However, I think the story's proximity is also its strength. As I've said, the story of Abraham and Isaac has been repeated so many times that it has lost much of its shock value. (We tell it to *children*, for Pete's sake.) And with the loss of that shock comes a diluting of the story's potency. However, Joseph Smith's story still hits the gut. We see our own fathers, sisters, wives, husbands, mothers, and brothers in the story. We especially see ourselves. Here is the man we revere as the greatest of all prophets. What would have happened had he approached *us*? And how do we reconcile our reaction to our respect for prophethood? How do

we reconcile our reaction with our own selfhood? Our own subjectivity? We are put in a position of deep conflict, which is where struggle and purification occur. Where a subject begins to get built.

I also think that Joseph's tale has a somewhat more constructive arc than Abraham's does. While Abraham's trajectory leads toward death, Joseph's leads toward life. Joseph wasn't commanded to kill; he was commanded to unite—and, implicitly, to multiply and replenish. His unlawful actions tended toward the creation of life, though they also led toward the destruction of many family relationships. His tale's tendency toward life seems almost like we're getting our wish that the story of a subjective relationship with God be a less violent one. Joseph breaks foundational social rules, many hearts, and many relationships, but it is because he is uniting while Abraham was destroying. We aren't headed toward a sacrificial altar; we're headed toward (let's not mince words or metaphors) a marriage bed.

Joseph's story is also more compelling because he actually *does the deed*. Abraham is stopped before he commits the sacrifice. But Joseph is not. An angel does not step out at the last moment to halt the nuptials. In fact, he seems to be standing behind the couple, wielding a flaming sword (the closest thing an angel has to a shotgun). Abraham gets to go home with a living son, and Joseph gets to go home with a new wife, but also with the hordes of problems that would plague him (and his people) for the rest of his short life.

Joseph's story seems more honest to me. The person who comes into the most intimate relationship with God isn't necessarily the person who is happy and prosperous. We need only consider the story of Jesus to understand that. That's where Joseph's story finally transcends Abraham's. Joseph made the "sacrifice." And the consequences followed. What is it to be in a subjective relationship with God? You find yourself beyond good and evil. You find yourself in a relationship with a being so great, so incomprehensible that no one outside the relationship can understand or judge it. That is its beauty. It is only you and God: an

ultimate connection with everything that was, is, and will be. Including everything and everyone. You are not separate. You are one. You are not gone from existence, life, or relationship: you have become sealed to it all. But that is also its danger. The only thing you're guaranteed from your intimate relationship with God is an intimate relationship with God. Prophets die, sometimes horribly. But if you have that relationship, that's all you need.

At this point, it is tremendously hard not to go back to the *content* of Joseph Smith's polygamy story. It's hard not to say, "Hold on, you're saying that Joseph Smith's subjective relationship with God nullifies all the pain and destruction he caused? All you have to do is say, 'God told me to do it,' and you're off the hook? Are you saying that Joseph Smith had an intimate relationship with God while he was ruining the intimate relationships of so many other people?"

These are totally legitimate questions if the *content* of the story matters. But in this context, the content matters only insofar as it serves to *eject* us from the story. Once it has done its job, the content drops off like the booster rocket from a space shuttle. Joseph's actions propelled us out of the narrative, and now we must leave them in order to explore our own possibilities in the divine.

Yes. If we met Joseph on the road to take a fourteen-year-old wife, we would do all in our power to stop him. The pain resulting from the way he practiced polygamy is real. It will never stop being real. I'm not trying to justify him in any way. I am not arguing that he was allowed to do what he did because he was in a subjective relationship with God. I am talking only about how these two stories *work*. How they symbolize aspects of an intimate relationship with God. The stories are confusing when their *content* takes the spotlight, when we don't see them as pointing to concepts that are galactically foreign to our experience and assumptions. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Probably the most compelling thing about Joseph's theology is his insistence on our radical agency. The agency of a human soul is so complete, so utter, that one-third of God's children could choose Satan over Jehovah *while in the presence of God* (Abraham 3:28). We are the irrevocable creators of our souls. We forge ourselves choice by choice. There is no limit to the heights we can reach or the abysses we can plumb. We can become gods: beings that have penetrated every secret, connected with every soul, experienced every atom. But we are almost always trapped inside nice stories that preach nice morals and bring us to nice endings. But these stories stop significantly short of revealing our potential. We are like people who have never seen the Milky Way because the city lights tower above us. These lights make us think we know the way. They show us paths to known destinations. But that is not what Joseph's theology was about. That is not what Jesus was trying to teach. Sell everything you have, they said. Leave your family. Let the dead bury their dead. Pluck out your eye. (Each a horrifying metaphor.) Stop at *nothing* to reach that god-spark inside of you.



Both of the stories I've talked about have been about men. But there are similarly structured stories involving women. For example, Laura Brown's character in Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* (or its luminous film adaptation). And just to let you know: spoiler alert. Laura Brown is a 1950s housewife with a dotting husband, a new suburban home in southern California, a beautiful (though intense) little son, and a daughter on the way. But it is evident from the very beginning that Laura is burdened by some malaise, one that becomes so onerous she comes very close to killing herself. But at the end of the movie, we find out that a few months after giving birth, Laura had boarded a bus and gone to Canada, never seeing her family again.

Laura Brown's abandonment of her family is unthinkable to me. "Monstrous," as one character put it. Her actions are so far removed from my experience and thoughts that I cannot imagine what would motivate her to do such a thing. And the story never gives me any help. I've watched the movie at least half a dozen times and have found only one hint as to what might have motivated Laura Brown. At the end of the movie, a much older Laura tells another character, "I had a choice between life and death. I chose life." No particulars, no details, no backstory. We just have to take her word for it. For a long time, I felt that this was a weakness in the story, but now I see it as a strength.

Abraham's story is the same: he has a doting wife, a tent in the sunny desert, and a beautiful son. But he is weighed down by a burden so onerous that he comes very close to killing his son. Why does he try to perform such a monstrous act? The story gives us only one hint: because God commanded it (without giving a reason why). Abraham had to choose between obeying and disobeying the life force of the universe. And he chose to obey it. But he gives us no particulars, no details, no backstory. We just have to take Abraham's word for it. Joseph had to take more wives. Why? Because he was commanded to by an angel with a flaming sword. These stories all have the same structure. My reaction to Abraham's story is the same as my reaction to Laura Brown's and Joseph Smith's. It's unthinkable. But as we have seen, there are many unthinkables strewn throughout the scriptures.

Is it worth sacrificing money to become one with life? Is it worth sacrificing a job, a boat, a car, social status? These stories careen past those banal questions without even a glance. They take us right to the edge of the cliff and push us off. How great is the worth of one soul? So great that Laura Brown left her young family to bring hers into the light. So great that Abraham made his only son into a sacrifice. So great that Joseph Smith broke hundreds of hearts.

Those who have ears, let them hear past these monstrous metaphors and into their structures.

Jesus did not teach the parable of the person who put off becoming one with God until the next life. He did not praise the rich or the successful or the powerful. He didn't even teach kindness or tithing or humility or the Word of Wisdom or modest dress codes: he taught *atonement*. Becoming one with God: something beyond the grasp of every human mind. Something no one has ever been able to capture in any art. Something we can only ever point toward.

In many ways, what “happens” in a story is secondary. Its content is beside the point. What the story *does* is the most powerful thing about it. Most stories want to tell *us*. But there are a few that are structured in such a way that they try to violently eject us from themselves and let us see a symbol of a connection with the indescribable Divine. To let us feel for a moment an inkling of what it's like to be connected with God. The same God who—so long ago, so recently, still—wades deep into matter unorganized and brings forth a brand new story.