

# ETERNAL MARRIAGE AND FAMILY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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*More than the sacred literature of any other people, the Torah is the story of family, of marriages, and not prettied-up versions, either, but the stuff of real marriages—love, romance, anger, deceit, honor, faithfulness, distrust, infidelity, companionship, intimacy. . . . Perhaps that explains why marriage becomes the ultimate paradigm for the relationship between God and the Jewish People.<sup>1</sup>*

At first thought, the Old Testament may not come to mind as a rich source from which to study marriage and its centrality to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, the words *marry* and *marriage* appear only six times in the entire volume (see Genesis 38:8; Exodus 21:10; Numbers 36:6; Deuteronomy 25:5; Psalm 78:63; Isaiah 62:5). With such apparent paucity of information on marriage in general, the Old Testament would seem even less likely to reveal much concerning eternal marriage. In fact, one of our faithful scholars commented, “I am not aware of any specific reference to eternal marriage in the Old or the New Testament.”<sup>2</sup> However,

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what the Old Testament fails to teach didactically, it often illustrates powerfully throughout its narrative.

To understand the sacred literature of the Jews, it is essential to understand that Israel's relationship to their God is seen as a marital relationship.<sup>3</sup> Historically, Judaism, marriage, and the family have been almost inextricably intertwined. In fact, marriage and family have been one of the primary defining institutions of Judaism for millennia.<sup>4</sup> Anciently as well as in modern times, it would be hard to overstate the central role of marriage and family to Judaism.

An informal review of the literature reveals that Latter-day Saint authors most frequently refer to marriage in the Old Testament in the context of plural marriage or levirate marriage. However, the Old Testament contains more about marriage than these two issues. President Brigham Young once stated, "In all my teachings, I have taught the Gospel from the Old and New Testaments. I found therein every doctrine, and the proof of every doctrine, the Latter-day Saints believe in, as far as I know. . . . There may be some doctrines about which little is said in the Bible, but they are all couched therein."<sup>5</sup> Though the Old Testament is not likely to be the first place Latter-day Saints turn for historical and doctrinal explication of eternal marriage, it has much to offer us in our effort to understand this central aspect of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

#### THE CENTRALITY OF MARRIAGE IN THE GOSPEL PLAN

Before beginning a study of eternal marriage in the Old Testament, it is important to understand how eternal marriage is central to the plan of salvation.<sup>6</sup> As the name indicates, eternal marriage had no beginning and will have no end. It is as eternal as the plan itself. As President John Taylor put it, "The principles that we believe in reach back into eternity. They originated with the Gods in the eternal worlds, and they reach forward to the eternities that are to come."<sup>7</sup> There is no shortage of statements by those we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators pertaining to the divine origin and centrality of marriage and family in the gospel plan. President Joseph Fielding Smith taught that marriage involves "an eternal principle ordained before the foundation of the world and instituted on this earth before death came into it."<sup>8</sup> Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught, "Marriage and the family unit are the central part of the plan of

progression and exaltation. All things center in and around the family unit in the eternal perspective.”<sup>9</sup> President Young taught that marriage “lays the foundations for worlds, for angels, and for the Gods; for intelligent beings to be crowned with glory, immortality, and eternal lives. In fact, it is the thread which runs from the beginning to the end of the holy Gospel of Salvation.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, President Spencer W. Kimball taught, “Family is the great plan of life as conceived and organized by our Father in heaven.”<sup>11</sup> Statements like these and countless others leave little ambiguity as to the importance of marriage in God’s plan of happiness.

With an understanding of the eternal nature of marriage and its importance in the plan of salvation, it would seem strange if the Old Testament failed to witness to these truths. Even though the words *marry* and *marriage* appear only six times in the Old Testament, the Old Testament is one of the most powerful witnesses we have of the doctrine of marriage and family. Aspects of this doctrine include the patriarchal order, covenant marriage, the sealing powers, and the gospel of Abraham as the gospel of celestial marriage.

#### THE PATRIARCHAL ORDER

The narrative in Genesis seems more centered around marriage and family than almost any other book in sacred writ. This is logical when we understand that the Church of God on the earth throughout the duration of Genesis was founded on the patriarchal order. “The patriarchal order,” writes Elder Cree-L Kofford, “refers to priesthood government by family organization.”<sup>12</sup> Genesis is the only book of scripture where the patriarchal order was the prevailing priesthood organization. This meant that not only families themselves but God’s kingdom on the earth was directed by patriarchs. Adam was not just a righteous father to his family; he was the prophet of God on the earth and the one man who held all priesthood keys necessary for exaltation. The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* states that “from Adam to Jacob, the main office of God’s priesthood was that of patriarch. Adam, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham administered the Lord’s work, established covenants between God and the faithful, recorded their teachings and prophecies, and gave special priesthood blessings.”<sup>13</sup>

Each of these men in the patriarchal office held the high priesthood.<sup>14</sup> Some have mistakenly thought that the patriarchal priesthood is a separate

priesthood in and of itself. However, the patriarchal order is a part of the Melchizedek Priesthood because all priesthood is Melchizedek.<sup>15</sup> The patriarchal order is the highest order in the Melchizedek Priesthood.<sup>16</sup> When the Melchizedek Priesthood was withdrawn from ancient Israel, the full measure of the patriarchal order was also withdrawn.<sup>17</sup> Hence, the organization of the Church from the days of Moses onward was no longer patriarchal or centered in the family. As a result, the marriage and family-centered focus of the narrative may seem less central to the story line throughout the remainder of the Bible. This does not diminish the centrality of marriage and family in the gospel or the Old Testament; it simply explains why of all books of scripture, Genesis is so highly focused around marriage and family.

The book of Genesis, however, revolves almost totally around the patriarchal order, or priesthood governance within families. It tells the story of how families, couples as well as children, established their relationship with each other and with God. The saga began with the marriage of the first patriarch, Father Adam, to Mother Eve. Their marriage set the stage for the patriarchal order and, as the patriarchal order itself, was eternal. Elder Henry B. Eyring explained that “the first marriage was performed by God in the garden when Adam and Eve were immortal. He placed in men and women from the beginning a desire to be joined together as man and wife forever to dwell in families in a perfect, righteous union.”<sup>18</sup> Thus eternal marriage became a focal point of the creation of man from the beginning of scripture. The scripture record does not detail the eternal nature of the marriages that followed. However, as President Joseph Fielding Smith taught, the plan envisioned eternal marriage as a central tenet of the Lord’s plan, not simply marriage till death do us part: “Marriage as established in the beginning was an eternal covenant. The first man and the first woman were not married until death should part them, for at that time death had not come into the world. . . . It is the will of the Lord that all marriages should be of like character, and in becoming ‘one flesh’ the man and the woman are to continue in the married status, according to the Lord’s plan, throughout all eternity as well as in this mortal life.”<sup>19</sup>

The first commandment given to Adam and Eve after their eternal marriage centered on their role as husband and wife. They were

commanded to “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Genesis 1:28). This commandment is central to the plan of salvation as well as the patriarchal order. All things in the plan depended on Adam and Eve fulfilling this commandment. In fact, our understanding of the nature of this command is crucial in helping us understand why the Fall is essential to the Lord’s plan for mankind. The commandment to multiply and replenish the earth was given before it was even possible to be fulfilled. Until the Fall, Adam and Eve were not capable of having children (see Moses 5:11). President Wilford Woodruff taught that “Adam and Eve came to this world to perform exactly the part that they acted in the Garden of Eden; and I will say, they were ordained of God to do what they did, and it was therefore expected that they would eat of the forbidden fruit in order that man might know both good and evil by passing through this school of experience which this life affords us.”<sup>20</sup> To those familiar with the restored gospel, this makes perfect sense. Mankind’s salvation is completely dependent on men and women marrying for eternity and inviting children into their homes and hearts whom they will then have the responsibility to lead and guide through eternity. All of this is part and portion of the patriarchal order.

Of course, Adam and Eve were not the only married couple spoken of in the book of Genesis. After Adam and Eve’s fall, we watch as they begin their family and try to bind their children not only to themselves but to God. With sadness, we read the story of their children Cain and Abel. Cain becomes a sad example of an unrighteous father as sure as Adam is our first and possibly best example of a righteous patriarch. On the one hand, we see the result of Cain’s iniquity through his wife, children, and grandchildren as they are cut off from the Lord. On the other hand, we see the results of Adam and Eve’s righteousness in the lives of Seth and his posterity.

Another powerful example of the patriarchal order is Noah. We mourn with Noah and his wife as the posterity of Adam and Eve (and likely most of Noah’s posterity) refuse to come unto Jehovah and be saved. Those of Noah’s posterity who did hearken to their patriarch entered the ark to escape the coming destruction: Shem and his wife, Japheth and his wife, and Ham and his wife. Interestingly, as soon as these couples disembarked from the ark, they were again commanded to

multiply and replenish the earth (see Genesis 9:1). From Noah, the book of Genesis follows the patriarchal line through Shem to Joseph, great-grandson of Abraham. The story of Abraham (whom two-thirds of the world reverences as the prime example of a patriarch) is the story of family. Abraham—whose very name, “father of the faithful,” reminds us of God and family—married Sarah, and they built their relationship with each other and with God. We next see Abraham and Sarah guide their birthright son, Isaac, into his own marriage with Rebekah, and the saga continues as we watch Isaac and Rebekah guide their son Jacob into marriage. The remainder of the book of Genesis is dedicated to the story of Jacob’s marriages to Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah and the story of their children, the twelve sons (soon-to-be tribes) of Israel. Hence the entire book of Genesis revolves around the patriarchal order and its role in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is important to remember that the patriarchal order will continue through all eternity. Though not used as the central organizational order of the Church from the days of Moses onward, it was restored in the last dispensation through the Prophet Joseph Smith (see D&C 110). Elder Kofford taught that “the patriarchal order will be the order of things in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom; thus, without participation in the sealing ordinance, you simply cannot qualify for admission to that high and holy place.”<sup>21</sup> No wonder Elder L. Tom Perry taught, “There is then a particular reason why men, women, and children should understand this order and this authority in the households of the people of God, and seek to make it what God intended it to be, a qualification and preparation for the highest exaltation of His children.”<sup>22</sup>

### COVENANT MARRIAGE

The Old Testament is one of the most powerful sources from which to teach the importance of marriage in the covenant. To many in the world, the Old Testament admonition to marry in the covenant amounts to little other than a cultural issue where the Israelites were encouraged to marry other Israelites. However, those with an understanding of the doctrinal reasons for marrying in the covenant understand there is much more involved than simply marrying within one’s own culture and traditions. Marriage within the covenant allowed that covenant to

be perpetuated to the next generation. It allowed mothers and fathers to pass on not only cultural traditions but also faith in the God of Israel. Marrying out of the covenant could bring everlasting consequences. Where better to teach that than from the Old Testament?

The events leading up to the Flood are a powerful witness of the dangers of marrying out of the covenant. The book of Genesis tells us that the sons of God were marrying the daughters of men. The book of Moses account of the same story tells us that the sons of men were marrying the daughters of God. What becomes clear from the story is that those who were in the covenant were marrying those who were out of the covenant. President Joseph Fielding Smith explains:

Because the daughters of Noah married the sons of men contrary to the teachings of the Lord, his anger was kindled, and this offense was one cause that brought to pass the universal flood. You will see that the condition appears reversed in the Book of Moses. It was the daughters of the sons of God who were marrying the sons of men, which was displeasing unto the Lord. The fact was, as we see it revealed, that the daughters who had been born, evidently under the covenant, and were the daughters of the sons of God, that is to say of those who held the priesthood, were transgressing the commandment of the Lord and were marrying *out of the Church*. Thus they were cutting themselves off from the blessings of the priesthood contrary to the teachings of Noah and the will of God.<sup>23</sup>

Because the conditions on the earth were so wicked at that time, the result of marrying out of the covenant created a situation where it was impossible for Heavenly Father to continue sending his children to earth without damning them. It can be argued that these marriages out of the covenant made it impossible to reverse the tide of violence and corruption then sweeping the earth. A righteous home is the greatest bulwark God has on earth to hold back the tide of evil. When those who were born in the covenant married those who were already absorbed in the evil that surrounded them, their children were no longer afforded the opportunity to be raised in a home where they would be taught the gospel and nurtured in the ways of God. The consequence was that “the end of all flesh

is come before me, for the earth is filled with violence, and behold I will destroy all flesh from off the earth” (Moses 8:30).

Besides the events leading up to the Flood, the examples of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob further reinforce the importance of marriage in the covenant. When the time came for Isaac to marry, Abraham made his servant swear that he would not take a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites but that he would go back to Abraham’s kindred and choose a wife from among them (see Genesis 24:1–4). Endogamous marriages, or marriage within one’s social or familial group, served many cultural purposes, including easier couple adjustment as well as keeping land, cattle, and other properties within the family.<sup>24</sup> However, as is made clear through the narrative, the servant who was assigned to find Isaac a wife clearly saw his work in religious or spiritual terms. He petitioned God to grant him success, sought miraculous intervention, and received that intervention on behalf of not only Isaac but also Abraham. From Laban and Bethuel’s reaction to Abraham’s servant’s narrative, they clearly saw divine intervention in the process as well. From the gospel’s perspective, none of this is surprising because the main purpose of this mission was to find a wife for Isaac, who was a member of the Lord’s covenant people.

We see the story repeated with Isaac and Rebekah’s concern for Jacob’s and Esau’s marriages. In Genesis 26, Esau marries Judith and Bashemath, both Hittites. The scriptures state that Esau’s marriages out of the covenant “were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah” (Genesis 26:35). In Genesis 27:46, Rebekah said to Isaac, “I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth: if Jacob take a wife of the daughters of Heth, . . . what good shall my life do me?” In order to make sure his son married in the covenant, Isaac strongly forbade Jacob to take a wife “of the daughters of Canaan” (Genesis 28:1) and commanded him to go to his grandfather’s house and take a wife of the daughters of Laban, his uncle.

Throughout the Old Testament, there is a strong witness of the importance of marriage in the covenant and the dangers that follow marrying out of the covenant. In Exodus 34:16, the Lord warns the children of Israel not to intermarry with the inhabitants of the land lest “thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a whoring after their gods, and make thy sons go a whoring after their gods.”

In Deuteronomy 7:3–4, Israel is commanded, “Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son. For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods.” Judges 3:6–7 relates that the Israelites “took their [Canaanite] daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons, and served their gods.” As a result of these marriages, the Israelites “did evil in the sight of the Lord, and forgot the Lord their God.”

Few stories serve as a stronger warning of the dangers of marrying out of the covenant than the saga of Samson. From his first marriage outside the covenant with a Philistine woman to his relationship with Delilah, his relationships paved the way for his downfall. The same lesson continued with Solomon. Like Samson, his beginnings were auspicious. The Lord blessed Solomon with wisdom and understanding, riches and honor, and promised him that if he would “walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, . . . then I will lengthen thy days” (1 Kings 3:14). However, as time passed, Solomon “loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites” (1 Kings 11:1). Even though the Lord had commanded Israel not to marry out of the covenant, “for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods,” Solomon chose to disobey this counsel. As a result, “his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God” (1 Kings 11:2, 4).

We next see the same lesson in the writings of Ezra. The last two chapters of Ezra tell the sad story of those who were delivered out of bondage in Babylon returning to the practice of marrying out of the covenant. Chapter 9 recounts how Ezra rent his garments and mantle, plucked off the hair of his head and beard, and sat down to mourn over these marriages. He exclaims, “O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee” (Ezra 9:6), and laments that after all of the blessings the Lord had given Israel, they again began to fall into iniquity through marrying out of the covenant. His impassioned prayer and speech had the temporary result of Israel promising to put away the wives they had married out of the covenant (see Ezra 9–10). However, by the end of Nehemiah, the prophet again had to rebuke the people and the priests for marrying “wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab” (Nehemiah 13:23). By the

end of the Old Testament, Malachi laments, “Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the Lord which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god” (Malachi 2:11).

Surely, it would be hard to find a stronger indictment against marrying out of the covenant and a stronger plea to marry in the covenant. Almost every time an individual or the people in general married out of the covenant, the result was the same. Their hearts were turned away from the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. It is no wonder the prophets mourned so dramatically and condemned so strongly marriage out of the covenant as they tried to keep Israel connected to their covenant with God.

#### THE SEALING POWERS

No discussion of marriage and family in the Old Testament would be complete without a discussion of the sealing powers. The last two verses in the Old Testament promise: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Malachi 4:5–6). This promised restoration was of such great importance that if it were not fulfilled, the entire earth would be smitten with a curse, or utterly wasted, as it reads in Joseph Smith—History 1:39 and Doctrine and Covenants 2:3. From latter-day revelation, we know that Elijah was to be sent to restore the sealing powers, the power to bind on heaven what is bound on earth. Though this restoration included the power and authority to “seal and validate *all* ordinances of the priesthood so that ordinances performed on earth are binding in heaven as well,” it is best known for conveying the authority to bind and seal families for eternity.<sup>25</sup> In fact, in reference to Malachi 4:5–6, the Prophet Joseph Smith stated that the word *turn* should actually be rendered as “bind” or “seal.”<sup>26</sup>

Malachi does not make plain the connection between the Old Testament prophet Elijah and the sealing powers. We gain some insight from a statement by Joseph Smith that “Elijah was the last Prophet that held the keys of the priesthood.”<sup>27</sup> We might wonder if the prophets who followed Elijah would have held these keys, including “such men

as Elisha, Joel, Hosea, Jonah, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Obadiah, Daniel, Habakkuk, Ezekiel.”<sup>28</sup> However, from the rest of Joseph Smith’s original statement, it is clear he did not mean no man after Elijah held that power on earth. He went on to say that “the Savior [whose birth and mortal life obviously followed Elijah] had authority and power to bestow this blessing” but did not because the house of Israel was not worthy or ready to receive it.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Elijah was not the last prophet to hold these keys but seems to be the last who exercised them in ancient times and was the one the Lord appointed to bestow those keys on others. Robert L. Millet explained, “The keys of the kingdom of God have always been on earth when the higher priesthood was on earth; there must be order in the house of God. Those keys would have been held by the Lord’s anointed after the time of Elijah. Elijah was not the last man to hold keys in the Old Testament period, since many did after him, but he was the last one in the Old Testament commissioned to return in the dispensation of the fulness of times to see to it that ‘all the ordinances may be attended to in righteousness.’”<sup>30</sup>

We have further witness of the importance of Elijah’s mission because it is one of the few prophesied events mentioned in all of the standard works. We have the fulfillment of the prophecy recorded in Matthew 17 and Mark 9 in the New Testament—the accounts of Moses and Elijah bestowing their priesthood keys on Peter, James, and John. That this was but the first part of the fulfillment is shown by Jesus Christ’s repeating the prophecy from Malachi to the Nephites in future tense in 3 Nephi 25. This, of course, occurs after Moses and Elijah had already bestowed their keys on Peter, James, and John in New Testament times. Over a millennium and a half later, Moroni repeated the promise to Joseph Smith as recorded in the Pearl of Great Price (see Joseph Smith—History 1:38–39). Joseph Smith next experienced another fulfillment of this sacred promise when Elijah appeared and bestowed the sealing powers on the Prophet and Oliver Cowdery as recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 110. It has also been suggested that there may yet be another fulfillment of the prophecy based on the words of Joseph Smith given in 1840, four years after Elijah’s coming recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 110. Robert L. Millet stated that part of the original prophecy might still be fulfilled in some future time: “Joseph Smith stated that

Elijah ‘will, before the last dispensation’—meaning, presumably, at some *future time* before the dispensation is complete—‘restore the authority and deliver the keys of the Priesthood, in order that all the ordinances may be attended to in righteousness.’”<sup>31</sup>

### THE GOSPEL OF ABRAHAM

One more connection to marriage and family from the Old Testament is referred to in Doctrine and Covenants 110. It teaches that another Old Testament prophet held keys essential to eternal families. Before Elijah came to Joseph and Oliver, a prophet called Elias came “and committed the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham, saying that in us and our seed all generations after us should be blessed” (D&C 110:12). Much has been written regarding who this Old Testament prophet might have been. The name *Elias* may sometimes refer to Elijah, though we would assume this Elias is a different person as he is referred to in the same section of scriptures using the name Elias, not Elijah. *Elias* is often used as a title instead of a proper name, referring to one who comes to prepare the way. Some have concluded that since this prophet was restoring the keys of the gospel of Abraham, he must have lived in the days of Abraham. It has been suggested that one possible candidate is Melchizedek, who ordained Abraham to the higher priesthood. President Joseph Fielding Smith believed that this Elias was Gabriel, whom Joseph Smith taught was Noah. However, even President Joseph Fielding Smith cautioned, “What prophet this Elias is that was sent to restore these keys is not definitely known.”<sup>32</sup>

More important than whom this prophet was is what he restored. What is the “dispensation of the gospel of Abraham,” and what does it have to do with the keys which Elijah restored? Elder McConkie taught that the gospel of Abraham was

The commission, the mission, the endowment and power, the message of salvation, given to Abraham. And what was this? It was a divine promise that both in the world and out of the world his seed should continue “as innumerable as the stars; or, if ye were to count the sand upon the seashore ye could not number them.”

Thus the gospel of Abraham was one of celestial marriage. . . . This power and commission is what Elias restored, and as a consequence, the righteous among all future generations were assured of the blessings of a continuation of the seeds forever, even as it was with Abraham of old.<sup>33</sup>

The gospel of Abraham included the patriarchal order spoken of above “by which the Abrahamic Covenant is perpetuated from generation to generation among the faithful. Abraham was given a promise of innumerable posterity both in the world and out of the world.”<sup>34</sup> In some way which has not been made clear, the sealing powers delivered by Elijah are connected with the keys delivered by Elias that contain the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham.

### CONCLUSION

The Old Testament might be more properly called the First Testament. It is the first testament of Jesus Christ and his gospel. Though each of the standard works is often identified with a specific time frame, location, or dispensation of the gospel, each contains sacred and precious truths which are vital to our latter-day understanding of the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though in some ways, the Old Testament may be considered the least likely to contribute to our understanding of eternal marriage and its role in the Lord’s plan, there are actually several aspects of marriage where it may inform as powerfully as any other source, ancient or modern. When it comes to understanding the patriarchal order, covenant marriage, the sealing powers as well as the gospel of Abraham, the Old Testament becomes a treasure trove of light and knowledge.

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### NOTES

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