

The LDS Church Addresses Joseph Smith's Polygamy

Robert M. Bowman Jr.

<http://mit.irr.org/lds-church-addresses-joseph-smiths-polygamy>

In response to pressure from its own members to address various controversial issues that call its core claims into question, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has published 14 articles on its official website LDS.org since late 2013. Most recently, four new articles about Mormon polygamy by unnamed LDS scholars were posted on the website on October 22, 2014. One of these articles, which discusses Joseph Smith's polygamy,¹ is the focus of this special report.

What Is No Longer in Dispute

The article admits some important facts that have long been known by non-Mormon critics and LDS scholars² but that until now the LDS Church has tried to keep from rank and file members:

- “Joseph Smith married multiple wives and introduced the practice to close associates.” A footnote comments that Joseph had between thirty and forty plural wives.
- Joseph had sexual relations with some of his plural wives. A footnote even admits that “it is possible he fathered two or three children with plural wives.”
- Joseph had sexual relations with Fanny Alger, a teenager living in his house as Emma's maid in the early 1830s.
- The youngest plural wife, Helen Mar Kimball, was 14 years old when she was “sealed” to Joseph.
- “Joseph Smith was sealed to a number of women who were already married,” about twelve to fourteen of them, whose husbands were still alive and legally wed to them at the time.
- Joseph and those around him tried to keep his practice of plural marriage secret, even issuing explicit though “carefully worded” denials of “polygamy.”

Although the LDS Church admits these facts, several issues are not adequately addressed.

Fanny Alger: Adultery, Not a Plural Wife

The article identifies the first of Joseph's plural wives (not counting his legal wife Emma) as Fanny Alger, a girl between 16 and 19 years old who lived in his home as a maid (between 1833 and 1836). Some Utah Mormons at the end of the 19th century did speak of Fanny as Joseph's plural wife. Against these testimonies, which are suspect because of their very late date, the following facts show that Joseph's relationship with Fanny was almost certainly not a plural marriage but rather simple adultery:

- Emma threw Fanny out of their house when she found out about her and Joseph.

- Emma did not and could not consider the relationship a marriage, since Joseph never told Emma about the concept of plural marriage until about 1842, six to nine years after the affair.
- Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris, two of Joseph's closest associates, also considered the relationship to have been simply adulterous. Cowdery wrote a letter to his brother Warren in January 1838 referring to "a dirty, nasty, filthy affair of his [Joseph's] and Fanny Alger's."
- Formal "sealings" of women as Joseph's plural wives probably did not begin until 1841 (all, or all but one, of Joseph's plural wives were sealed 1841-1843), five to eight years after the affair.

Emma, Oliver, and Martin's testimonies are far more reliable, since they were all far closer to Joseph in the early 1830s than any of the Mormons who much later claimed it was a plural marriage.³

Joseph's Teenage Plural Wives

Among Joseph's plural wives were nine teenagers (not counting Fanny Alger), including two 14-year-olds (Helen Mar Kimball and Nancy Maria Winchester). Although it was legal for girls to marry at 14, it was not normal and would have been criticized in most circumstances, even apart from polygamy.

Evidence is available showing that Joseph, when he was about 37, probably had sexual relations with all or nearly all of the seven plural wives that were 16 to 19 years old.⁴ The LDS Church, anxious to deny that Joseph had sexual relations with a 14-year-old girl, claims that "Helen Mar Kimball spoke of her sealing to Joseph as being 'for eternity alone,' suggesting that the relationship did not involve sexual relations." However, what Helen said was that she "thought" it would be "for eternity alone"—indicating that after she was sealed to Joseph she found out otherwise.⁵ It is fairly clear that Joseph regarded *all* of his teenage plural wives as wives in the full sense, including the right and potential for sexual relationships.⁶

Taking Other Men's Wives

The most shocking aspect of Joseph's polygamy is the fact, admitted in the LDS.org article, that a dozen of his plural wives were legally married to other men (called *polyandry*). The article offers various justifications for Joseph taking these married women as his wives, giving the impression that no sexual activity was involved. However, the evidence shows that Joseph had sexual relations with several of them⁷:

- Zina Huntington Jacobs commented in her autobiography, "I made a greater sacrifice than to give my life, for I never anticipated again to be looked upon as an honorable woman by those I dearly loved."⁸ She would hardly have been concerned about such dishonor if all she had done was agreed to be "sealed" to Joseph Smith "for eternity." The "sacrifice" clearly implied that the union with Joseph was at least intended to include sexual relations.

- Mary Elizabeth Rollins gave a signed statement in 1902 affirming that in 1842 Brigham Young had sealed her to Joseph “for time and all eternity,”⁹ meaning that it could include sexual activity.
- In a deathbed confession in 1882, Sylvia Sessions Lyon told her daughter Josephine, who was born in 1844, that Joseph Smith was her father. This fact is now widely acknowledged.¹⁰ Since Sylvia remained married to her husband Windsor Lyon and lived in his home until his death in 1849, the evidence shows conclusively that Joseph had sexual relations with her while she was still married.¹¹

Denials of Polygamy

Although the article admits that Joseph Smith tried to keep his plural marriages a secret, it does not acknowledge that LDS scripture rejected polygamy and that Joseph repeatedly denied practicing it:

- The Book of Mormon quotes God as saying, “there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none,” unless God commands it to “raise up seed unto me” (Jacob 2:27-30). Since Joseph did not take plural wives to raise up seed (he had just two or three children by his thirty to forty plural wives), his polygamy was contrary to the Book of Mormon.
- The 1833 LDS scripture Book of Commandments stated that “marriage is ordained of God unto man: Wherefore it is lawful that he should have one wife, and they twain shall be one flesh” (BC 52:16-17). This statement remains in the scripture Doctrine & Covenants today (D&C 49:15-16).
- The 1835 edition of D&C included the following statement in section 101: “Inasmuch as this church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy: we declare that we believe, that one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband, except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again.” This statement was not removed from D&C until 1876, when Utah Mormons were openly practicing polygamy.
- In response to the question, “Do the Mormons believe in having more wives than one?” Joseph responded in 1837, “No, not at the same time” (*Elder’s Journal*, July 1838).
- In May 1844, a month before he died, Joseph denied having plural wives: “What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one.”¹²

Joseph’s statement that he could find only one wife might be parsed as a technically accurate, “carefully worded denial” inasmuch as he had only one *legal* wife. Of course, no one claimed that Joseph had multiple legal wives. For the preceding three years he had taken over thirty *plural wives* and had engaged in sexual relations with over a dozen of them, including wives of other men, resulting in the births of at least two or three children. Therefore, his statement that he could “only find one” wife was in context a lie. Moreover, his polygamy was in direct violation of what he and the LDS scriptures (most of which *he wrote himself*) had stated for over a decade was the official teaching of the LDS Church.

Manipulation and Plural Marriage

Mormons who admit that Joseph had plural wives and that he had sexual relations with some of them commonly argue that he did so reluctantly under orders from the Lord. In fact, this rationalization goes back to Joseph himself: as the LDS article notes, Joseph claimed that an angel appeared to him with a sword threatening his destruction if he did not obey the divine mandate. While faithful Mormons may take this story seriously, it is just the sort of manipulative claim that an unscrupulous religious leader might use to coerce young women and their parents into agreeing to secret polygamous unions.

Another manipulative claim that Joseph used to persuade women to become his plural wives—and to persuade their families to go along with it—was that doing so would ensure the exaltation or full salvation of the women and their families. Joseph did not present this idea as his own, but as divine revelation. He did this, for example, in a revelation he issued on July 27, 1842, giving instructions to Newel K. Whitney concerning the ceremony to seal his daughter Sarah Ann to Joseph.¹³

Similarly, Helen Mar Kimball recalled that Joseph had told her, “If you will take this step, it will ensure your eternal salvation and exaltation and that of your father’s household and all of your kindred.” She then commented, “This promise was so great that I willingly gave myself to purchase so glorious a reward.”¹⁴ In effect, Joseph practiced a form of spiritual bribery to coerce this 14-year-old girl into becoming his “wife.”

Joseph’s Polygamy Was Nothing Like Old Testament Polygamy

In defense of the claim that Joseph was commanded to practice plural marriage, the LDS article asserts that “in biblical times, the Lord commanded some of His people to practice plural marriage,” citing Abraham’s union with Hagar as an example. The argument derives from Joseph Smith, who stated in LDS scripture that the Lord commanded Abraham and other Old Testament saints to take plural wives (D&C 132:1, 34-37; see also vv. 49-51, 57, 65). This claim finds absolutely no support from the Bible itself.

Rather, God *tolerated* or at most *permitted* polygamy. In the case of Abraham, the Bible actually conflicts with Joseph’s interpretation of the matter. According to Genesis, Abraham’s sexual union with Hagar was an idea proposed by his wife Sarah, not something the Lord commanded Abraham to do (Gen. 16:2-5).¹⁵

Polygamy is consistently presented throughout the Old Testament in an unflattering way:

- Adam and Noah, both of whom were in their day the patriarchal heads of all humanity, are portrayed as monogamists (Gen. 2:21-25; 7:7).
- The first polygamist is identified as Cain’s descendant Lamech, who “took two wives” and who told them that he would take violent, excessive revenge on anyone who hurt him (Gen. 4:19-24).
- Abraham’s sexual union with Hagar is presented as Sarah’s ill-considered idea, as just explained.

- Abraham's son Isaac had only one wife, Rebekah, contrary to the claim made by Joseph Smith that God had justified Isaac in having many wives and concubines (D&C 132:1).
- Esau, Isaac's older, unbelieving son, was a confirmed polygamist (Gen. 26:34-35; 36:1-3).
- Jacob, Isaac's younger son, had intended to marry only Rachel but was tricked into marrying her sister Leah first (Gen. 29). Then Jacob was manipulated by his two wives, who were competing with one another for his affection, into siring children for them by their maidservants (Gen. 30).
- Contrary to Joseph Smith's claim that Moses had plural wives (D&C 132:1, 38), the Bible mentions only one wife of Moses, Zipporah (Exod. 2:21; 18:2).
- David's and Solomon's many wives (Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, 1 Kings 11:3) violated the Law of Moses, which warned kings of Israel not to have many wives lest the kings' hearts be turned away from the Lord (Deut. 17:17).¹⁶

The New Testament teaches that God expects followers of Jesus Christ to be either single or monogamous. The apostle Paul includes being "the husband of one wife" on lists of character qualities expected of someone who serves in Christian ministry (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). "Marrying" a woman while she was another man's wife—as Joseph did with at least a dozen women—was nothing less than adultery (Romans 7:2-3). Joseph's practice of polygamy represents not a "restoration" of a good thing but a reversion or step backward to a bad thing—and a clear violation of New Testament teaching.

Finally, nothing in the polygamy of any figure in the Old Testament in any way justifies or validates Joseph's specific practice and understanding of plural marriage:

- Joseph claimed that God commanded polygamy on certain occasions—contrary to the Bible.
- Joseph's plural wives included at least one mother and daughter, Patty and Sylvia Sessions. The Bible explicitly prohibits such marriages (Lev. 18:17).
- Joseph's plural wives included three pairs of sisters—Zina and Presendia Huntington (both married), Emily and Eliza Partridge, and Maria and Sarah Lawrence. The Bible explicitly forbids a man to take a woman and her sister as wives (Lev. 18:18).
- Joseph's plural marriages were done in secret and against the law of the land. This was of course not the case with the Old Testament polygamists.
- Joseph's plural wives included at least a dozen women who had living, legal husbands. There is absolutely no biblical precedent or justification for this practice.
- Joseph lied about practicing polygamy even while his own scripture denounced the practice; no biblical patriarch, prophet, priest, or king did that.

The LDS Church's commendable admissions regarding Joseph Smith's polygamy, forced upon it by the wide availability of the facts through the Internet, fall short of genuine transparency on the matter. Joseph's plural marriages involved sexual relations with married as well as unmarried women, on the basis of false claims of a divine mandate, and included behaviour that was both illegal and immoral. As these facts become more widely known, Joseph's polygamy will trouble more and more thoughtful Mormons.

NOTES

1. “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo,” <https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo>. See also <https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-the-church-of-jesus-christ-of-latter-day-saints?lang=eng>.
2. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997); Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013).
3. <http://mit.irr.org/joseph-smith-and-fanny-alger>.
4. Hales *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:285-87.
5. *Ibid.*, 2:295.
6. <http://mit.irr.org/joseph-smiths-teenage-plural-wives>.
7. <http://mit.irr.org/joseph-smiths-polyandrous-plural-marriages>.
8. Quoted in Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 81; Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:254 (spelling has been regularized here).
9. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:265.
10. *Ibid.*, 1:349-54.
11. Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 181-85, contra Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:354-64.
12. Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1902), 6:410-11.
13. H. Michael Marquardt, *The Joseph Smith Revelations: Text & Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 315.
14. Quoted in Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 499.
15. <http://mit.irr.org/abraham-hagar-and-joseph-smiths-polygamy-mormon-use-of-abraham-precedent-plural-marriage>.
16. <http://mit.irr.org/polygamy-of-david-and-solomon>.