

Response to LDS Essay: Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo

By Eric F. Nelson

The LDS Church published an [essay](#) on October 22, 2014, discussing its polygamist past. One of the first thoughts I had while reading the essay was “people have been accused of being anti-Mormon and even disciplined by the Church for discussing some of the information contained in the essay.” Consider the following:

- 1. Age of Wives:** The essay acknowledges that Joseph’s youngest wife, Helen Mar Kimball, was only 14-years-old when she married Joseph. (The essay does not mention that he also married Nancy Winchester when she was 14.) The essay, however, sugarcoats the circumstances surrounding Joseph’s marriage to Helen. Helen didn’t want to marry him, but she reluctantly agreed when Joseph the prophet offered her and her entire family eternal salvation and exaltation if she would become one of his wives. After marrying Joseph Smith, Helen indicated that she was deceived as to what the polygamous relationship would entail. Initially, Helen thought her marriage to Joseph Smith was only dynastic. But to her surprise, it included a sexual component. Helen confided to a close friend in Nauvoo: “I would never have been sealed to Joseph had I known it was anything more than ceremony. I was young, and they deceived me, by saying the salvation of our whole family depended on it.” (*Mormon Polygamy: A History* by LDS member [Richard S. Van Wagener](#), p. 53.)
- 2. Polyandry:** The essay admits that Joseph married numerous women who were already married to other men. The essay seems to excuse the practice by stating that several of his polyandrous marriages were for “eternity only” (suggesting no sexual component), while failing to mention that other polyandrous wives said their marriages were for “time and eternity” and included sex (e.g. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner). The essay also fails to mention that of Joseph’s approximate 34 wives, 11 of were married to other living men at the time they married Joseph. Of those 11 married women, at least eight were married to active LDS men. On several occasions, Joseph called these men on missions shortly before or shortly after marrying their wives (sometimes in secret). For example, Joseph called Apostle Orson Hyde on a mission to dedicate Israel and, while Hyde was away, Joseph secretly married his wife, Marinda Hyde, without Orson’s knowledge.
- 3. Joseph Lied About Polygamy:** The essay tacitly acknowledges that Joseph Smith and subsequent leaders lied about polygamy, both to Church members and to outsiders. The essay, however, suggests that Joseph concealed his polygamist relationships “because of the sorrow it would bring to his wife Emma.” But the essay omits some important details. For example, [D&C 132: 61](#) (the revelation on polygamy) states that men engaging in polygamy should obtain the consent of their first wife. Joseph Smith, however, did not follow the rules of his own revelation, as he took plural wives without seeking consent. Emily Dow Partridge (among many others) testified that she and her sister were married to Joseph without Emma’s consent. Later, Joseph had a second, sham marriage performed to the Partridge sisters after Emma agreed that he could marry two women if she got to pick them (and she happened to pick the Partridge sisters, who were already married to Joseph).

Joseph did not only lie to Emma, he lied to many others about polygamy on numerous occasions. Here is one example: In 1844, Joseph preached a sermon and said, “I had not been married scarcely five minutes and made one proclamation of the gospel before it was reported that I had seven 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.” (Joseph Smith, [History of the Church, Vol. 6, Chapter 19, p. 410-11.](#)) At the time he made this statement, Joseph had over 30 polygamous wives.

The secrecy of the marriages and Joseph’s private and public denials are not congruent with honest behavior. Emma was unaware of most of these marriages. Most church members did not know what was going on behind the scenes as polygamy did not become common knowledge until 1852 when Brigham Young revealed it in Utah. Joseph Smith did everything he could to keep the practice in the dark.

- 4. Joseph Had Sex with His Polygamist Wives:** The essay acknowledges that Joseph likely had sex with his polygamist wives. In fact, the essay states that the primary purpose of plural marriage was “to raise up seed unto God,” which obviously requires sexual intercourse. The historical record overwhelmingly supports this admission. For example, the following women have all admitted (and in some instances signed affidavits) to having sexual relationships with Joseph: Sylvia Sessions (Lyon), Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Prescindia Huntington, Melissa Lott, Louisa Beaman, Emily Partridge, Eliza Partridge, Almera Johnson, and others.

Although "raising up seed" is a common reason given for LDS polygamy, it seems to be a strange, if not indefensible, explanation. A woman can presumably have far more children (to say nothing of emotional support) if she is married to one husband rather than sharing her husband with many women. Brigham Young, for example, had at least 55 children by 29 wives; had those wives not all shared Brigham Young as a husband they likely would have produced far more than 55 children. The only conceivable way polygamy could produce more children than through a traditional marriage would be if there was a shortage of men. However, census records show that there were always more men than women in Utah during the relevant time period.

- 5. Joseph Practiced Polygamy Prior to Receiving Sealing Power:** The essay states that Joseph married Fanny Alger in the mid-1830s. Historians have definitively stated that the marriage, if one ever occurred, took place between 1833 and 1835. (LDS historian, Richard Bushman, said “There is evidence that Joseph was a polygamist by 1835.” (*Rough Stone Rolling*, p.323.)) This is significant because the sealing power was not restored until April 1836 when Elijah appeared to Joseph and conferred the sealing keys upon him. Thus, Joseph's marriage to Fanny Alger was not only illegal, it could not have been performed by anyone with the sealing power. The evidence suggests that any sexual relationship Joseph may have had with Fanny can only be characterized as adulterous.

- 6. Fanny Alger and Evidence of Adultery:** The essay states that Joseph’s first plural wife was Fanny Alger. For obvious reasons, the essay does not provide any of the controversy surrounding Joseph’s relationship with Fanny. Fanny was a servant in the Smith home and became very close to the family. Shortly after she turned 16, rumors began circulating that Joseph was engaging in an affair with her. Warren Parrish, the secretary of Joseph for a period of time, told Benjamin Johnson that he and Oliver Cowdery knew the report of an affair between Joseph and the girl to be true, for they “were spied upon and found together.” (Letter from Benjamin Johnson to George Gibbs, 1903; Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet, pp. 103-104.) Oliver Cowdery was upset upon discovering Joseph’s relationship with Fanny and believed it was adulterous. In a letter dated January 21, 1838, Cowdery wrote: “When he [Joseph Smith] was there we had some conversation in which in every instance I did not fail to affirm that what I had said was strictly true. A dirty, nasty, filthy affair of his and Fanny Alger's was talked over in which I strictly declared that I had never deviated from the truth in the matter, and as I supposed was admitted by himself.” (Letter written by Oliver Cowdery

and recorded by his brother Warren Cowdery; see photograph in *The Mormon Kingdom*, vol. 1, page 27.) Cowdery never retracted this statement and was later excommunicated, in large part, because of his accusation.

Notably, it was only after Cowdery discovered Joseph's relationship with Fanny that Joseph first began to secretly teach and institute the "doctrine" of plural marriage.

- 7. Polygamy is Doctrinal:** The essay indicates that polygamy was practiced by the early saints because it was commanded by God and that the doctrine was revealed to the church through Joseph Smith. The essay's assertion is curious in light of Gordon B. Hinckley's comments when asked about polygamy on the Larry King Live show on September 8, 1998.

Larry King: "You condemn it (polygamy)?"

Gordon B. Hinckley: "I condemn it, yes, as a practice, because I think it is not doctrinal. It is not legal. And this church takes the position that we will abide by the law. We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, magistrates in honoring, obeying and sustaining the law."

- 8. Ancient Practice of Polygamy:** The essay suggests that plural marriage was commanded by God in Old Testament times and that Joseph's introduction of polygamy was a "restoration of the biblical practice." The only scriptural reference provided in the essay in support of this assertion is Genesis 16: 1-3. The cited passage, however, never states or even implies that God commanded Abraham (or anyone else for that matter) to practice polygamy. Rather, the scripture states that because Sarah could not bear children, Sarah told Abraham to take her handmaiden, Hagar, so that Hagar would bear him children. Simply stated, there is no biblical evidence suggesting that God has ever commanded or sanctioned polygamist unions.
- 9. Nauvoo Expositor:** The information contained in the Church's essay is, in large part, the same information that caused Joseph Smith to destroy the [Nauvoo Expositor](#). The Expositor's main charge was that Joseph had adopted plural marriage and was secretly participating in the practice. Joseph, however, vehemently denied the charges and, based upon that denial, ordered the destruction of the printing press.
- 10. Ambiguity of Commandment:** The essay states that "although the Lord commanded the adoption—and later the cessation—of plural marriage in the latter days, He did not give exact instructions on how to obey the commandment." This statement seems odd on a variety of levels. Why would God reveal the exact dimensions of the ark to Noah, give Nephi exact instructions as to how to construct a ship, provide Joseph Smith with detailed revelations on the structure and organization of the Church, but fail to provide adequate instructions as to the practice of plural marriage, which so deeply affects the lives of its participants?

Regardless, the essay's statement is not accurate. [Doctrine & Covenants 132](#) sets forth a number of rules and details governing the practice of polygamy. Joseph, however, did not comply with many of these rules. For example, the D&C 132 only allows polygamy under the following circumstances: plural wives must be virgins at the time of the union and the man must give his first wife the opportunity to consent to the union. Also, the new wife (who must be a virgin) must be completely monogamous after the marriage or she will be destroyed (D&C 132: [41](#) & [63](#)).

Joseph did not follow the foregoing rules. Specifically, Joseph married 11 women who were already married to other men. Clearly, they were not virgins as required by the Doctrine and Covenants. In fact, Zina Huntington had been married seven-and-a-half months and was six months pregnant with her first husband's baby at the time she married Joseph. Moreover, the fact that Joseph entered into polygamists unions with married women clearly demonstrates that these polyandrous wives were not monogamous with Joseph. Nearly all of these polyandrous wives continued living with their first husbands even after marrying Joseph. Finally, as has previously been discussed, Joseph did not ask for Emma's consent prior to taking most of his plural wives.