

Joseph Smith's Polygamy in the Context of Changing American Religion and Culture

Robert M. Bowman Jr.

Perhaps the most distinctively American religious movement is Mormonism,¹ and its best-known historical and cultural feature has been the practice of plural marriage, more commonly called polygamy. Mormon polygamy was a significant social, legal, and political issue in the United States from the 1850s until the first decade of the twentieth century, and its revival in the second half of the twentieth century by various so-called Mormon fundamentalist groups, some of which have had serious clashes with the law, brought it back into the public awareness. The rapidly changing landscape of marriage and family life in American culture in the twenty-first century, most noticeable in the legalization of same-sex marriage, now features significant interest outside Mormonism in non-monogamous unions including polygamy and polyamory. An understanding of the origins of Mormon polygamy has the potential to illuminate contemporary controversies with regard to sexuality, marriage, and the family.

Mormon polygamy began with Joseph Smith (1805-1844), the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS).² Many of the facts about Joseph Smith's polygamy that the LDS Church had long suppressed were acknowledged in 2014 in an important article on its official website.³ This paper places Joseph Smith's polygamy in the context of his life, teachings, and activities as the founder of Mormonism⁴ and in the broader

¹ "Mormonism" here refers to the entire stream of Mormon or Latter-day Saint religious tradition that originated with Joseph Smith when he published the Book of Mormon. Thus, Mormonism includes but is not limited to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which is headquartered in Salt Lake City.

² The most important published studies of the subject, all of them by LDS writers, are Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997); *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2010); and Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013).

³ "Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo," unsigned article (Oct. 22, 2014), <https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>.

⁴ Notable biographies of Joseph Smith include the following works: Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, with the assistance of Jed Woodworth (New York: Knopf, 2005), a generally frank study by a faithful LDS historian; H. Michael Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2005), a critical, careful assessment by a non-LDS Christian scholar; and Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), a penetrating, detailed study by an agnostic scholar.

context of changing American religion, culture, and values in the first half of the nineteenth century.

BEGINNINGS OF THE MORMON MOVEMENT

Joseph Smith Jr.⁵ was born December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Vermont, to Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith. Both parents were primitivists or “seekers,” a movement of disaffected Protestants who regarded all denominations as having fallen away from original, true Christianity. Primitivists ran a gamut of beliefs from deism and universalism (Joseph Sr. as a young adult had helped start a Universalist society) to a kind of proto-Pentecostalism that looked for miraculous manifestations of varying kinds as precursors to the Second Coming. Both Joseph Sr. and Lucy reported having had dreams or visions portending judgment on Christendom and suggesting hope of salvation for their family.

After several moves and much hardship in Vermont, the Smith family moved to Palmyra in upstate New York in the winter of 1816-17. In an unpublished autobiographical account written in 1832, Joseph claimed that between the ages of twelve to fifteen (i.e., during his years in Palmyra) he had become convinced that there was no true church on the earth—a notion that he clearly could have picked up at that age from his parents. For most of their years in the Palmyra area, Joseph’s family was unchurched, though they read the Bible and attended some revival meetings. Revivalist preaching was a major characteristic of the Second Great Awakening, which was so intense in upstate and western New York during the first three decades of the nineteenth century that the region became known as the Burned-Over District.⁶ Joseph was drawn particularly to the Methodist tradition, which had recently emerged as the largest and fastest-growing Protestant denomination.

In 1820 the Smiths purchased a hundred-acre farm in neighboring Farmington, later renamed Manchester. In addition to laboring on the farm, Joseph and other men in the family dug for buried treasure on their property and occasionally elsewhere. In 1822, during one such dig at a nearby farm, Joseph obtained a small, smooth stone that he thereafter used frequently as a divining instrument in searching for buried treasure. His reputation with this so-called “seer stone” was such that in late 1825 he was hired by Josiah Stowell to use that stone to guide a company of men in searching for a lost silver mine near Harmony, Pennsylvania. It was during that expedition that Joseph met Emma

⁵ For the sake of simplicity and following LDS convention, hereafter references to “Joseph” refer to Joseph Jr.

⁶ See especially Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950).

Hale, with whom he eloped in January 1827. Emma was to remain Joseph's one legal wife until his death in 1844.

In late 1827, shortly after assuring his father-in-law Isaac Hale that he was giving up treasure-hunting, Joseph claimed that an angel had entrusted to him some gold plates that had been buried near his Manchester home. The plates, he said, contained an account of Israelite peoples who had lived in the ancient Americas and who were the ancestors of the American Indians. After some setbacks including the loss of a sizable manuscript, in 1829 Joseph dictated to scribes (mainly a schoolteacher named Oliver Cowdery) what he said was a translation of a portion of the plates. The work proceeded quickly in the home of David Whitmer, one of Joseph's closest supporters. When others were permitted to witness Joseph dictating the translation, they observed him doing so using his seer stone. He would place the stone inside a hat, bury his face in the hat (supposedly to block outside light), and dictate aloud words he claimed he could see on or in the stone by the power of God.⁷ During the two years Joseph said he had the gold plates, no one else saw them until just before he finished his translation, when eleven men from his family and circle of supporters, mostly from the Whitmer family, were apparently allowed to see them briefly. On March 26, 1830, the first copies of the Book of Mormon went on sale, and on April 6 Joseph and a handful of other men formally established what they initially called the Church of Christ.

During this early period (1828-1830), Joseph's basic theology appeared to be fairly typical of primitivist Christians of the time. His doctrine of God was a roughly traditional (if not consistent) view of God as one infinite, transcendent Creator existing eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.⁸ His view of salvation and the Christian life was largely Methodist though with some relatively modest differences. His understanding of the church and of eschatology was dominated by two related ideas: the primitivist call for the restoration of lost elements of biblical religion and experience, and the belief that the people of God, including American Indians who had lost touch with their Israelite heritage, were now to be gathered into the restored church in preparation for the imminent Second Coming.

Joseph's view of marriage also appears to have been quite traditional during this early period. For example, 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). The passage characterizes polygamy as generally undermining the "chastity of women" and for that reason sinful

⁷ See further Robert M. Bowman Jr., "Joseph Smith's Seer Stone" (Grand Rapids: Institute for Religious Research, 2015), <http://mit.irr.org/joseph-smiths-seer-stone>.

⁸ LDS theology continues to use the term *Holy Ghost* for the third member of "the Godhead," normally preferring that term over *Holy Spirit*.

except in the unusual circumstance of God commanding it to produce children. This “loophole” was probably meant to explain such incidents in the Bible as Abraham siring Ishmael by his wife’s maid Hagar. Nothing in Joseph’s early teaching or revelations hints at the future institution of polygamy among the Latter-day Saints.

A NEW COMMUNITY

Mormon theology and religion underwent almost constant change during Joseph’s fourteen years as the founding Prophet of the LDS Church. The chronology of these changes corresponded approximately to the changes in the Church’s home base as the community moved westward. From 1831 to 1846 the Saints settled and were displaced in Kirtland, Ohio (1831-37), Independence, Missouri (1831-33), Clay County, Missouri (1833-36), Far West, Missouri (1836-39), and Nauvoo, Illinois (1839-46).⁹

The westward migration of the LDS community was not an isolated occurrence. The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of westward expansion as the new nation of the United States acquired territories and quickly grew from 16 mostly Atlantic seaboard states to 31 states, including all of the states east of the Mississippi River, four states on the west banks of the Mississippi, Texas, and California. Not only individuals and families, but also religious and ethnic communities, were part of this westward expansion. The colonial heritage of persecuted and oppressed Europeans seeking sanctuary in America continued to inspire the formation and movement of such communities.

From the very beginning, the Saints sought to establish themselves not just as a “church” but as a fully self-defined community with its own economic, social, political, and religious values and institutions. In this regard the Mormons were far from unique, as scores of such communities—many of them “utopian” in some sense—have dotted American society from colonial days to the present.¹⁰ Within the first century of American history “there were over one hundred utopian communities in the United States,” many of which took a distinctive approach to matters of sexuality.¹¹ These communities also felt free to engage in all sorts of experimentation culturally, theologically, religiously, and socially. This experimentation included such varied approaches to marriage and sexuality as celibacy (the Shakers and less radically the Amana Church Society) and

⁹ A helpful reference for following the nineteenth-century movements of the Mormons is *Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History*, ed. Brandon S. Plewe (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2012).

¹⁰ See the survey in William L. Smith, *Families and Communes: An Examination of Nontraditional Lifestyles* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999).

¹¹ Leslie J. Harris, *State of the Marital Union: Rhetoric, Identity, and Nineteenth-century Marriage Controversies* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 89.

pantagamy (the Oneida Community), a system in which “every woman is considered the wife of every man and every man is considered the husband of every woman.”¹²

KIRTLAND

From 1831 to 1837, when the Church was based mainly in Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph's doctrine of God evolved into a kind of ditheism. The first signs of this doctrinal evolution came in Joseph's work on an inspired revision of the King James Version, which he had started in 1830. A doctrinal primer produced by Joseph and his associates entitled *Lectures on Faith* (1835) taught that the Father and the Son were two separate personages that shared the Holy Ghost as their common “Mind.” A majority of Joseph's modern revelations, which the Church compiled in a collection entitled *Doctrine & Covenants*, were produced during this period (D&C 1, 41-112, 134, 137). These revelations included an 1833 affirmation of monogamy, still found in the LDS scriptures, stating 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” (D&C 49:15-16).

Almost immediately after settling in Kirtland, Joseph and his associates set their sights on land near the Mississippi as their intended permanent residence, what they expected would become a new “Zion.” A site in Independence, just east of the Mississippi in Jackson County, Missouri, was dedicated in August 1831 for the building of a temple where the Saints would gather. Two years later, however, the Mormons were driven out of Jackson County, settling temporarily in Clay County, and the temple was never built. As that situation was developing, Joseph laid plans to build a temple in Kirtland, which was dedicated in 1836. The existence of two separate centers of Mormon community led to a more complex (and authoritarian) form of church organization and was one of the factors that created tensions among the leadership that came to a boil in 1837. In that year, Joseph founded a banking company that quickly failed in the wake of a nationwide economic panic. Over two dozen Mormons, including Joseph's first supporter Martin Harris, were excommunicated, and many others quit the Church.

In March 1838 Joseph and other Kirtland Mormons moved to Far West, Missouri, where the Mormons in Clay County had already relocated. Shortly thereafter two more of Joseph's original inner circle of supporters, David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery, were

¹² Smith, *Families and Communes*, 58. See further Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias: the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), and Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), and Foster's earlier works on the same subject; and more recently Stephen C. Taysom, *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds: Conflicting Visions, Contested Boundaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

excommunicated. The reason for Cowdery's excommunication is of some importance in sorting out the origins of Joseph's polygamy.

FANNY ALGER

One of the issues that contributed to discord among the brethren in Kirtland and Far West was a sexual relationship between Joseph and a teenage girl named Fanny Alger who was living in his Kirtland home as Emma's maid. The date is uncertain, due to the secretiveness of the relationship, but it took place sometime between late 1832 and 1835.¹³ Perhaps surprisingly, LDS historians do not dispute the sexual relationship between Joseph and Fanny; instead, they generally interpret it as the first of Joseph's plural marriages. This explanation received official sanction in the 2014 article on the Church's official website.¹⁴

The claim that Fanny was Joseph's first plural wife originated with testimonies of a few Utah Mormons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵ These testimonies are suspect because of their very late date (some forty to seventy years after the fact) and because they are secondhand accounts from Mormons who at the time were committed to the belief that polygamy had been divinely mandated by God through Joseph Smith.

The earliest and most reliable available evidence in the matter comes from Oliver Cowdery, who wrote a letter to his brother Warren in January 1838 criticizing Joseph's relationship with Fanny. In April 1838, Cowdery was actually excommunicated for denigrating Joseph's character "by falsely insinuating that he was guilty of adultery."¹⁶ Notably, the accusation was not rebuffed by any appeal to the principle of plural marriage. Mormons generally claim—again based on later testimonies from Utah Mormons—that Joseph had received a revelation of the principle of plural marriage in 1831 and had shared it with at least some trusted associates then or shortly thereafter.¹⁷ Had he done so, these associates surely would have included Cowdery; yet Cowdery denounced Joseph's relationship with Fanny Alger as adultery, and no one seems to have

¹³ Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 26-33, prefers the earlier date, Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 1:99-106, the later date.

¹⁴ "Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo," LDS.org.

¹⁵ Both Compton and Hales argue that Fanny Alger was Joseph's first plural wife based on these late testimonies from Utah Mormons. See Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 28-33; Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 1:107-119.

¹⁶ Quoted in Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 1:141.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:85-91, 106, 183-84.

been aware of the principle at the time. Indeed, as LDS scholars have admitted,¹⁸ Joseph's own legal wife Emma did not consider his relationship with Fanny to be a marriage and did not even know about plural marriage until 1842 or 1843. As we will see, the evidence shows that Joseph did not start practicing plural marriage until 1841.

NAUVOO

The arrival of Joseph Smith and the influx of more Mormons into Missouri intensified conflict there. Various concerns animated Missourians against the Mormons including their growing numbers and potential political power, their religious claims, and their favorable disposition toward abolitionism. Missouri had been admitted into the Union in 1821 as a slave state after much rancorous debate in the famous "Missouri Compromise," and Missourians were thus deeply suspicious of any group that might challenge the status quo. Mormon leader Sidney Rigdon gave a speech on July 4 warning non-Mormons of a "war of extermination" in which one side or the other would be destroyed if mobs disturbed the Mormons again. Predictably, the disturbance came and a three-month war ensued. On October 27, 1838, Gov. Lilburn Boggs issued an executive order calling for the Mormons to "be exterminated or driven from the State if necessary." Four days later, Joseph and other Mormons were arrested and eventually imprisoned for about six months in Liberty Jail in Clay County.

In April 1839, Joseph escaped and traveled to Illinois, where most of the Missouri Mormons had fled. They quickly began buying up property in the city of Commerce, which they renamed Nauvoo ("beautiful"). The Mormons obtained a strong city charter for Nauvoo that gave them a relatively free hand there, and Joseph was emboldened to initiate radical changes. In 1841, construction began on a temple in Nauvoo, which was to have very different functions than what had been envisioned earlier in Kirtland. In 1840 Joseph had already introduced the concept of baptism for the dead, which was to become one of the two main functions of the new temple. The other main function was a new "endowment" ceremony that was first conducted in the Nauvoo temple in May 1842. The endowment drew many of its ritual elements from the Freemasons, which Joseph had joined two months earlier.

In addition to the secret rituals of the temple, Joseph's radical changes in Nauvoo included developing his theology into an overt form of polytheism. In 1842 he published the Book of Abraham, largely a revision of select chapters in Genesis including a recasting of Genesis 1-2 as teaching the organizing of the world by a plurality of Gods. In two of

¹⁸ Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 34-35; Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 1:96-97, 120-22; 2:38-41; Brian C. Hales, "Stretching to Find the Negative: Gary Bergera's Review of *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: History and Theology*," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 6 (2013): 175 (165-90).

his last sermons in 1844 before his death, Joseph taught that God the Father had once been a mortal man on another planet subject to his own divine father and had attained Godhood according to principles that made Godhood also attainable for people on this earth. The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were now said explicitly to be three Gods, not one, as both the Book of Mormon and Joseph's early revelations had affirmed.

Joseph's ritual and theological innovations were both related to his most controversial innovation at Nauvoo: the practice of plural marriage.

PLURAL MARRIAGE IN NAUVOO

The 2014 LDS.org article on Joseph's plural marriage admits some important facts that have long been known by non-Mormon critics and LDS scholars but that until recently were unknown to rank and file members. These admissions, behind which stands solid historical scholarship by some LDS scholars, may be taken as facts¹⁹:

- "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."
- 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."

¹⁹ For these admitted facts, see "Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo," LDS.org. The LDS sect formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), which now calls itself the Community of Christ, denied that Joseph Smith practiced or condoned plural marriage at all. The RLDS Church was founded by Joseph Smith III, whose mother Emma Smith denied that Joseph had ever practiced polygamy. There are still some in the RLDS tradition who espouse this revisionist theory, which does not appear to have sound historical reasoning on its side. See especially Richard and Pamela Price, *Joseph Smith Fought against Polygamy*, 2 vols. (Independence, MO: Price Publishing, 2000, 2014); all of its chapters and additional articles are online at <https://restorationbookstore.org/jsfp-index.htm>.

These minimal facts provide a framework within which disputed issues may be addressed.

The Timeframe of Joseph's Plural Marriages

As explained earlier, LDS scholars and leaders now generally identify Fanny Alger as Joseph Smith's first plural wife. Doing so allows them to claim that the "principle" of plural marriage had been revealed to Joseph early in his ministry as a prophet and to clear Joseph of the charge of adultery in the case of his relationship with Fanny, which everyone agrees was of a sexual nature. We have already shown, however, that the evidence does not support this interpretation. Joseph's closest associates, including his wife and his principal scribe, viewed the relationship as adulterous, and no one in the LDS movement seems to have known anything about plural marriage before about 1841.

Although Joseph's plural marriages were kept secret from the public and even from most Mormons—including his wife Emma for at least part of the time—they were formalized in ceremonies, however clandestine, with one or more witnesses. Some records were kept for most of these ceremonies, called sealings, so that for most of them the dates are known.

If Joseph had come to the position in the early 1830s that the Lord wanted him to practice plural marriage, he was apparently slow to act on it. Scholars have identified at most only one other woman whom Joseph might have claimed as a plural wife in Kirtland. Lucinda Pendleton Morgan Harris, the wife of George Washington Harris, may have been one of Joseph's dozen or more plural wives who were already married to other men. The date when this "plural marriage" took place is unknown, and indeed the evidence for the relationship is quite thin, but if it happened at all it was probably about 1841.²⁰ Thus, the evidence simply does not support the claim that Joseph was taking plural wives when he was living in Kirtland in the 1830s.

The earliest known plural marriage of Joseph Smith was to Louisa Beaman, a 26-year-old single woman, on April 5, 1841. Joseph took 33 or so plural wives between April 1841 and November 1843. Thus, all of the known plural marriages to Joseph took place in Nauvoo. This is consistent with the fact that Joseph had a much freer hand in Nauvoo than in Kirtland and with the fact that he felt free to introduce other radical changes in the

²⁰ Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 49-50, argues that the plural marriage was contracted in 1838. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 1:58-67, more credibly argues for 1841, while also cautioning that the evidence is insufficient to justify confidence that it took place at all.

community's practices and doctrine during the same period. Most likely, then, the union with Louisa Beaman was the first of Joseph's polygamous unions.

Six months after Joseph was sealed to Louisa, he began taking more plural wives. The first "wave" of these unions took place in a ten-month period between October 1841 and August 1842, when Joseph was sealed to a dozen women (possibly thirteen). Following another six-month hiatus, Joseph was sealed to eighteen or nineteen more women in a second wave lasting about ten months, from February to November 1843 (see Table 1 for a list of the plural wives).

Polyandrous Unions

By far the most shocking aspect of Joseph Smith's polygamy is the fact that about a dozen of his plural wives were legally married to other men for at least part of the time. In ten documented cases (excluding the uncertain case of Lucinda Harris mentioned above), Joseph was sealed to a woman who was already married. In the case of Sarah Ann Whitney, Joseph was sealed to her in 1842 while she was a single, 17-year-old girl, but the following year she was married by law to Joseph Kingsley, apparently to cover up her plural marriage to Joseph.

All but three of Joseph's unions with married women took place during the first wave of plural marriages. Indeed, all but two of Joseph's plural wives from that first wave were either married or widows. Sarah Ann Whitney was also the only teenage girl among the plural wives in the first wave. Joseph did take two more married women as plural wives at the beginning of the second wave, and thereafter only one more. This phenomenon of a woman having more than one husband at the same time is called *polyandry*.

Three explanations are offered in the LDS.org article for Joseph's sealings to married women: (1) to form "eternal bonds" across families; (2) to comply with the requirement to practice plural marriage without actually having sexual relations with the women; and (3) to give women whose husbands were not faithful Mormons the promise of celestial blessings. (In point of fact, no more than three or four of the husbands of the eleven or twelve known polyandrous plural wives were non-Mormons at the time.²¹) The article in effect concedes that these explanations are guesses at best.

The point of these guesses is to suggest that whatever the real reason was, Joseph may not have had sexual relations with any of the married women. It is plausible to suppose that Joseph did not have sexual relations with all of his plural wives, a supposition that is especially reasonable in the case of those polyandrous and other plural wives who were

²¹ Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 84.

much older (five of them, including three married women, were between the ages of 47 and 58). However, the evidence shows that Joseph probably did so with at least several of them.

Two particularly clear examples are Zina Diantha Huntington Jacobs and Sylvia Sessions Lyon. Zina, age 20 at the time of sealing, was Joseph's second plural wife, and she remained married to her legal husband Henry Jacobs and bore him a son a few years later.²² 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.²³ Sylvia was 23 years old when she was sealed to Joseph in 1843. 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.²⁴

Plural Wife	Date	Age	Husband	Other Relations
1. Louisa Beaman	4/5/41	26		
2. Zina Diantha Huntington (Jacobs)	10/27/41	20	Henry Bailey Jacobs	sister of Presendia, stepsister of Emily and Eliza Partridge
3. Presendia Lathrop Huntington (Buell)	12/11/41	31	Norman Buell	sister of Zina, stepsister of Emily and Eliza Partridge
4. Lucinda Pendleton Morgan Harris (uncert.)	1841 (?)	40	George W. Harris	
5. Agnes Moulton Coolbrith (Smith)	1/6/42	33		widow of Don Carlos Smith
6. Mary Elizabeth Rollins (Lightner)	2/42	23	Adam Lightner	
7. Patty Bartlett (Sessions)	3/9/42	47	David Sessions	mother of Sylvia
8. Marinda Nancy Johnson (Hyde)	4/42	27	Orson Hyde	
9. Elizabeth Davis (Durfee)	before 6/42	50	Jabez Durfee	
10. Sarah M. Kingsley (Howe Cleveland)	before 7/42	53-54	John Cleveland	

²² Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 1:255.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1:349-54.

²⁴ Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 181-85, contra Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 1:354-64; and see further Robert M. Bowman Jr., "Joseph Smith's Polyandrous Plural Marriages" (Grand Rapids: Institute for Religious Research, 2014), <http://mit.irr.org/joseph-smiths-polyandrous-plural-marriages>.

11. Delcena Johnson (Sherman)	before 7/42	37		widow of Lyman R. Sherman; sister of Almera
12. Eliza R. Snow	6/29/42	38		sister of Lorenzo Snow
13. Sarah Ann Whitney (Kingsbury)	7/27/42	17	Joseph Kingsbury (1843)	
14. Martha McBride (Knight)	8/42	37		widow of Vinson Knight
15. Sylvia Porter Sessions (Lyon)	2/43	23	Windsor Lyon	daughter of Patty
16. Ruth Vose (Sayers)	2/43	33	Edward Sayers	
17. Emily Dow Partridge	3/4/43 (or 5/11/43)	19		sister of Eliza, stepsister of Zina Diantha Huntington
18. Eliza Maria Partridge	3/4/43 (or 5/11/43)	22		sister of Emily, stepsister of Zina Diantha Huntington
19. Flora Ann Woodworth	Spring 43	16		
20. Hannah Ells	Spring 43	29-30		
21. Almera Woodard Johnson	4/43	30		sister of Delcena
22. Lucy Walker	5/1/43	17		
23. Sarah Lawrence	5/43	17		sister of Maria
24. Maria Lawrence	5/43	19		sister of Sarah
25. Helen Mar Kimball	5/43	14		Heber C. Kimball's daughter
26. Elvira Annie Cowles (Holmes)	6/1/43	29	Jonathan Holmes	
27. Rhoda Richards	6/12/43	58		
28. Desdemona Fullmer	7/43	32-33		
29. Olive Grey Frost	Summer 43	27		sister of Mary Ann
30. Mary Ann Frost (uncert.)	Summer 43	34		sister of Olive; divorced wife of Parley P. Pratt
31. Malissa Lott	9/20/43	19		
32. Nancy M. Winchester	1842/43	14-15		
33. Fanny Young Carr Murray	11/2/43	56		Brigham Young's sister (widowed)

Teenage Plural Wives

The pattern of women selected to be Joseph's plural wives changed dramatically in the second wave. He began in February 1842 in a similar fashion with two married women, but then began taking mostly young unmarried women, including eight teenage girls, as plural wives. Two of these girls, Helen Mar Kimball and Nancy Maria Winchester, were just 14 years old at the time of their sealing.²⁵

Mormons make somewhat of a fair point when they argue that one should not judge the propriety of Joseph's marrying teenage girls by the standards or norms of the twenty-first century. It is quite true that American women (and men) married at younger ages two centuries ago than they do today. Seven of Joseph's plural wives were aged 16 to 19, and young women marrying at such ages was quite common and acceptable in the first half of the nineteenth century throughout most if not all of the United States. Fourteen years of age was the minimum legal limit for girls to be married in Illinois, so while marriage to a girl of 14 would not of itself be illegal, it was rare. Of course, marriage to *two* girls of that age by a 37-year-old man who already had twenty or so "wives" would certainly have been illegal and definitely would have been regarded as socially offensive by the standards of the day.²⁶

Mormon scholars now concede that Joseph engaged in sexual activity with many of his plural wives. Although it is not known if he did so with the two 14-year-old girls, he presumably intended to do so at some point. The evidence shows that Joseph probably had sexual relations with all or nearly all of his other seven teenage plural wives (the ones ages 16 to 19).²⁷ Thus, it is fair and reasonable to conclude that Joseph regarded *all* of his teenage plural wives, including the two 14-year-old girls, as wives in the full sense, including the right and potential for sexual relationships.

Denial and Deception

Although the 2014 LDS.org article admits that Joseph Smith tried to keep his plural marriages a secret, it does not acknowledge that Joseph lied about them. It asserts that

²⁵ Nancy turned 15 on August 10, 1843. The date of her sealing to Joseph is unknown but could not have been any later than November 1843. More likely she was married before July. See Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 606; Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:298 n. 97; Craig L. Foster, David Keller, and Gregory L. Smith, "The Age of Joseph Smith's Plural Wives in Social and Demographic Context," in *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy*, ed. Bringhurst and Foster, 154 (152-83).

²⁶ Brian Hales indirectly admits the problem when he comments that "with the exception of the two fourteen-year-olds (Helen Mar Kimball and Nancy M. Winchester), the ages of these women were not necessarily eyebrow-raising." Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:289.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:285-87.

Joseph and his associates issued “carefully worded denials that denounced spiritual wifery and polygamy but were silent about what Joseph Smith and others saw as divinely mandated ‘celestial’ plural marriage.” However, denials of polygamy could only be reasonably interpreted as denials of plural marriage, “celestial” or not. A footnote in the article claims, “In the denials, ‘polygamy’ was understood to mean the marriage of one man to more than one woman but without Church sanction.” No one, however, was accusing Joseph of taking plural wives “without Church sanction.” Thus, when Joseph or the LDS Church denied that he practiced polygamy, such denials would mean the same thing as denying that he was practicing plural marriage. The argument that the extralegal unions were celestial marriages when sanctioned by the Church but grossly immoral without that sanction was paralleled by the Oneida Community founded in upstate New York in 1848. Its members contrasted their pantagamy with the sexuality of other “free love” groups that they said practiced “whoredom” rather than true “marriage.”²⁸

The October 1, 1842 issue of the LDS Church newspaper *Times and Seasons* devoted a couple of pages to denying that Joseph taught or practiced polygamy. It quotes from a section of the LDS scripture Doctrine & Covenants entitled “On Marriage,” which stated:

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 explicit statement affirming monogamy as the rule of the LDS Church appeared in what was at the time section 101 of Doctrine & Covenants. That section, first published in 1835, was not removed until 1876, when Mormon polygamy had become public knowledge in Utah. Although Joseph had not introduced the practice of plural marriage in 1835, he had committed adultery with Fanny Alger, which may have led to the inclusion of the statement. In any event, in 1842 this statement was quoted and affirmed despite the fact that at the time Joseph had taken thirteen or fourteen plural wives. The newspaper follows the quotation by explaining, “We have given the above rule of marriage as the only one practiced in this church.” In support two “certificates” are quoted, one by a group of men and the second by representatives of the Ladies’ Relief Society. The latter certificate was signed by Emma Smith and two of Joseph’s known plural wives, Eliza R. Snow and Sarah M. Cleveland.²⁹

LDS author Stanley B. Kimball put the matter plainly: “In Nauvoo plural marriage was never openly practiced, taught, or admitted. In fact, to prevent wholesale apostasy over

²⁸ Harris, *State of the Marital Union*, 93.

²⁹ “On Marriage,” *Times and Seasons*, Oct. 1, 1842, 939-40.

such a radical doctrine, the teaching was not only kept secret but was officially denied."³⁰ Joseph denied having plural wives as late as a month before he died:

I had not been married scarcely five minutes, and made one proclamation of the Gospel, before it was reported that I had seven wives. I mean to live and proclaim the truth as long as I can. This new holy prophet [William Law] has gone to Carthage and swore that I had told him that I was guilty of adultery. This spiritual wifeism! Why, a man dares not speak or wink, for fear of being accused of this.... A man asked me whether the commandment was given that a man may have seven wives; and now the new prophet has charged me with adultery.... What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one.³¹

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. However, at the time Joseph had what he and Mormons after him called *plural wives*, and he had engaged in sexual relations with many such plural wives. Therefore, his statement that he could "only find one" wife was a deliberate deception.

Persuading the Saints

Joseph Smith made three different kinds of claims to persuade the women and their family members to accept the "principle" of plural marriage. First, he sought to convince them that his own motivation was religious, not sexual, by explaining that he was pursuing the plural marriages reluctantly under orders from the Lord. Over twenty different accounts have been identified that report Joseph stating that an angel had appeared to him repeatedly with a sword drawn, threatening destruction if he did not obey the divine mandate.³²

Second, Joseph sought to persuade women to become his plural wives by offering them an incentive: their doing so would assure their exaltation or full salvation and that of their families. For example, in a revelation he issued on July 27, 1842, he told Newel K. Whitney "thus saith the Lord" that his agreement to seal his daughter Sarah Ann to Joseph would be rewarded "with honor and immortality and eternal life to all your house, both old and

³⁰ Stanley B. Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 94, cited in Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:204-205.

³¹ Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Brigham H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1957), 6:410-11; bracketed words in original.

³² Brian C. Hales, "Encouraging Joseph Smith to Practice Plural Marriage: The Accounts of the Angel with a Drawn Sword," *Mormon Historical Studies* 11/2 (2010): 55-71.

young.”³³ 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.”³⁴

Third, Joseph claimed that plural marriage was an honorable practice of Old Testament saints such as Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon, and that it was being “restored” as part of the great latter-day program of restoration. This explanation resonated with Mormons who had already accepted the supposed reinstatement of other facets of Old Testament life, including the priesthood orders of Aaron and Melchizedek, as part of the “restitution of all things” promised in the Bible (Acts 3:21 KJV).

All three of these claims were brought together in a revelation Joseph gave that was recorded on July 12, 1843, though not made public until after the Saints had settled in Utah.

Abraham received concubines, and they bore him children; and it was accounted unto him for righteousness, because they were given unto him, and he abode in my law; as Isaac also and Jacob did none other things than that which they were commanded; and because they did none other things than that which they were commanded, they have entered into their exaltation, according to the promises, and sit upon thrones, and are not angels but are gods.... I am the Lord thy God, and I gave unto thee, my servant Joseph, an appointment, and restore all things. (D&C 132:37, 40)

In this revelation, Joseph’s radical departure from traditional Christian doctrine is bound up with his radical departure from traditional Christian values. Polygamy is grounded in polytheism, as those Saints who accept the principle of plural marriage are promised that they will be exalted to the status of gods.

The fact that so many women and even some parents accepted these claims can only be understood in the context of Mormons’ zealous faith in Joseph Smith. Faithful Mormons regarded Joseph as the prophet par excellence and revered him—as they do today—in a manner comparable to the way Muslims revere Muhammad. From their perspective, Joseph’s story of the angel proved his motivations were pure and honorable, and his promises of eternal reward were powerful incentives. Their confidence in Joseph is

³³ H. Michael Marquardt, *The Joseph Smith Revelations: Text & Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 315, spelling and punctuation regularized. For obvious reasons, this revelation was never included in Doctrine & Covenants, though ten other revelations referring to Newel are found there.

³⁴ Quoted in Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 499.

illustrated by a statement made by LDS apostle Jedediah Grant in Utah ten years after Joseph's death:

If Joseph had a right to dictate me in relation to salvation, in relation to a hereafter, he had a right to dictate me in relation to all my earthly affairs.... If such a man of God should come to me and say, "I want your gold and silver, or your wives," I should say, "Here they are, I wish I had more to give you, take all I have got."³⁵

On the other hand, some of the Saints saw these claims as manipulative and concluded that Joseph was an unscrupulous individual. Many Mormons were provoked to open dissent by plural marriage and by other developments in Nauvoo. A group led by dissident William Law obtained indictments in nearby Carthage against Joseph Smith and on June 7 published an exposé about him entitled the *Nauvoo Expositor*. Three days later, the Nauvoo city council had the press destroyed. Responding to the threat of arrest, Joseph declared martial law, but on June 25, facing a potentially disastrous response from the state militia, Joseph and his brother Hyrum surrendered and were jailed in Carthage, where they were charged by the state with treason. Two days later, a mob of about two hundred men stormed the jail. Hyrum and Joseph were both shot and killed. Despite Joseph's use of a pepper-box pistol in self-defense, Mormons regard him as a martyr, sealing his testimony with his own blood.

JOSEPH SMITH'S POLYGAMY IN RETROSPECT

Joseph's personal motivations or real intentions in practicing plural marriage continue to be understood in sharply different ways. Although to a great extent these differences are reflective of differing assumptions or presuppositions that people bring to the subject, that is not the end of the matter. In recent years some previously faithful Mormons have had their presuppositions challenged by learning about such troubling issues as Joseph's polygamy.

It is easy enough for non-Mormons to conclude that Joseph was a scoundrel who manipulated the women and their families in order to satiate his own lusts. That may be partly correct while not being the whole answer. Perhaps we simply do not have enough information to make confident judgments as to what motivated Joseph to do what he did.

What can be known and understood is why the practice of plural marriage came to be accepted in a community with cultural and religious roots that were deeply monogamous. America itself was a kind of grand experiment in which the freedoms of religion and expression were the preeminent values. As people explored what to do with

³⁵ *Journal of Discourses*, 2:13-14.

those relatively new freedoms, virtually everything was subject to being viewed in new ways. The fervor of the Second Great Awakening gave energy to the primitivist impulse to “restore” true Christianity by rethinking everything and starting from scratch. Restorationism virtually demanded novel doctrines as well as novel practices. A charismatic figure who confidently asserted that the Lord was inspiring him to overthrow traditional beliefs and values was just the sort of individual some people were looking to follow. If Joseph Smith was one of the most colorful and successful such figures, he was by no means the last.

This paper places Joseph Smith's polygamy in the context of his life, teachings, and activities as the founder of Mormonism and in the broader context of changing American religion, culture, and values in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Robert M. Bowman Jr. is an evangelical Christian apologist, biblical scholar, author, editor, and lecturer, and the president of the Institute for Religious Research (IRR.org), based in Cedar Springs, Michigan. He has lectured on biblical studies, religion, theology, and apologetics at Biola University, Cornerstone University, and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. The author of over 60 articles and the author or co-author of 18 books, Dr. Bowman holds the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in biblical studies from Fuller Theological Seminary and South African Theological Seminary.

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