

A Critique of Joseph Smith's Polygamy: “Thou Shalt not Lie” and Denials of Polygamy

Introduction

Joseph Smith denied the practice of polygamy on several occasions (I'm aware of 4 instances). He was also responsible for the publication or distribution of several additional denials (I'm aware of 3 instances). Snippets of the denials are given below¹; see [Joseph Smith's Polygamy Denials](#) for additional context.

1. [Prophet's Answers to Sundry Questions, 1838](#): “Do the Mormons believe in having more wives than one? No, not at the same time.” (Joseph had 2 wives)
2. [Times and Seasons, April 15, 1842](#): Hyrum Smith refers to the story circulating about Brotherton that she had been “shut in a room for several days, and that they had endeavored to induce her to believe in having two wives” and Joseph followed up “there is no person that is acquainted with our principles would believe such lies” (Joseph had at least 8 wives)
3. [Affidavits against Bennett, 1842](#): Heber C. Kimball swore “the affidavit of Miss Martha Brotherton is false and without foundation in truth” and Brigham Young swore that her affidavit “is a base falsehood, with regard to any private intercourse or unlawful conduct or conversation with me”. Joseph Smith [was responsible for having the document distributed](#). (BY had just married a plural wife, HCK would marry one that year, and Joseph had at least 13 wives at this time)
4. [Times and Seasons, September 1, 1842](#) “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” (Joseph Smith was editor and had at least 13 wives [John Taylor performed most editorial duties but had likely been taught by Joseph about polygamy])
5. [“On Marriage” Times and Seasons, October 1, 1842](#) “do hereby certify and declare that we know of no other rule or system of marriage than the one published from the Book of Doctrine and Covenants” (Joseph was editor, had 13 wives at this time, 2 of which signed the denial; Newel K. Whitney, who had officiated a plural marriage, also signed)
6. [Journal Entry October 5, 1843](#): “Gave inst[r]uction to try those who were preaching teaching or practicing the doctrine of plurality of wives. on this Law. Joseph forbids it. and the practice ther[e]of— No man shall have but one wife.” (Joseph had at least 27 wives)
7. [Address against Dissenters, May 26, 1844](#): “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 had at least 30 wives)

The [Joseph Smith's Polygamy site](#) argues in its section “Thou Shalt not Lie” and

¹Although only snippets are given above, the rest of this document assumes the reader has read each denial in its *complete* context.

[Denials of Polygamy](#) that Joseph Smith and others who denied polygamy were not “technically” lying because there was some way to interpret their denials that might make them truthful.

I argue that, at least for the 7 denials Joseph Smith gave directly or is directly responsible for (documented above), Joseph Smith was clearly [lying and deceiving](#) or endorsing lies and deception. None of the technicalities offered in that section are valid when examined carefully.

A preliminary note about implied context

Most of Hales’ arguments imply a context where Joseph is actively being interrogated (e.g., “could truthfully answer negatively”, “to truthfully answer ‘yes’ to the question”, “could have truthfully answered ‘no’ to the question”). In other cases, he implies that Joseph is merely withholding information (e.g., “To divulge more details than absolutely required...”).

Denials were certainly advanced because of rumors being circulated (rumors based in fact), but for these seven denials Joseph Smith had absolute control of the context in which they were delivered. Joseph Smith’s seven denials were not issued on a witness stand under interrogation. These denials were not the act of a person *withholding* information. Almost all of these were *positive, affirmative, explicit* statements about the number of wives members of the Church could have, the teachings of the Church on the topic, and/or how many wives he, Joseph, had at the time—if any ambiguity *was* present in these denials, Joseph must be held responsible for it.

The Illinois State anti-bigamy law defense

Hales writes:

Despite criticisms charging that Joseph lied when denying polygamy, the fact is that under Illinois statute, he could truthfully answer negatively because state laws prevented any person from entering into more than one marriage. A second (or third or forth) marriage could not be certified with any legal document. Hence practicing legal polygamy was an impossibility.

The 1827 Illinois State anti-bigamy law reads: “All marriages, where either of the parties had a former husband or wife living at the time of solemnizing the last marriage, shall be void” (*italics added*).

Consequently, legally speaking it was impossible for Joseph Smith or any other Nauvoo pluralist to truthfully answer “yes” to the question: “Do you have more than one wife?”

In his May 26, 1844 sermon ([full text](#) Joseph said this:

What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one

According to the law and the definition of words at that time, Joseph Smith either had seven wives (in this semantic context, 7 is a subset of the [30 documented wives he had at the time](#)) or he was “committing adultery” (i.e., sexual relationships with women to whom he was not legally married).

We are constrained by the fact that this denial was uttered in a single sentence, so there can be no question about context for the two claims made within it.

If he was using the legal context, then he didn’t have 7 wives, but he *was* “committing adultery”. If he was using the “celestial marriage” context, he was not “committing adultery”, but then *he did have 7 wives*. So, the Illinois law technicality does not exculpate Joseph in his May 26, 1844 denial.

And in general, this defense fails to cover the necessary ground with these seven polygamy denials. Most of the denials were not given with any kind of legal context in mind, but in reference to Church practices.

The Muslim polygamy vs. celestial marriage defense

Hales attempts to exculpate Joseph on the grounds that Islamic polygamy would not have been considered equivalent with “celestial marriage”:

The answer depends upon the definition of the word “polygamy.” To him, “celestial marriage” was an “order of the priesthood” that was essentially unrelated to the polygamy practices of the Turks in the Islamic world, with their harems and concubines. Therefore, it is unlikely the Prophet would have equated his teachings of “patriarchal marriage” and “eternal marriage” with their traditions.

Hales offers no evidence that Joseph Smith ever distinguished between his version of polygamy and that practiced by the Turks of the Islamic world.² Regardless, none of these seven polygamy denials hinge upon this distinction anyway. The denials speak explicitly about the nature of the relationships between men and women, so they have nothing to do with the Islamic practice of polygamy. Joseph Smith used (or approved) this verbiage: “more wives than one? No, not at the same time” (1838), “[induce her to believe in having two wives]... no person acquainted with our principles would believe such lies” (1842), “one man should have one wife” (1842), “No man shall have but one wife” (1843), “having seven wives” (1844), “one man should have one wife” (1842).

²I’m not aware of how Muslim polygamy was viewed in the 1800s, but I know that Muslims today would object to how Hales is characterizing their practice of polygamy ([example](#)). Islam (typically) limits polygamy to 4 wives, and they justify it in similar terms as Joseph did (i.e., Abraham, David, and Solomon practiced it, so it was something that a prophet *could* justly do). Given that Joseph married and then did not typically afford his wives long-term housing and equal societal respect given his first wife, it is curious that Hales would use the terms “harems and concubines” to describe Islamic polygamy (Muhammed only had 11 wives, and again, the Quran limits polygamy to 4 women) and not the marriages of Joseph and Brigham to approximately 100 women between the two of them, many of whom were not well cared for and many of which were denied societal recognition of their relationship (at least for many years).

Verbal gymnastics and the statements of other scholars

To the extent that the statements of other polygamy scholars apply (many do not seem to directly apply to Joseph's seven polygamy denials), they confirm the deceptive nature of them. Statements of these other scholars, as quoted by Hales, and a response to each follow:

John L. Brooke concluded: "A deceptive code developed, allowing the leadership to condemn 'polygamy, in the ordinary and Asiatic sense of the term,' while defending 'the Holy order of celestial marriage,' 'the true and divine order,' and the 'new and everlasting covenant.'"

John L. Brooke considered the code "deceptive". Using a deceptive code in order to deceive others is lying. Regardless, none of these distinctions plays into Joseph Smith's seven denials.

Accordingly, Joseph Smith could have truthfully answered "no" to the question: "Are you practicing legal polygamy or polygamy like Arab Muslims?" For example, on May 26, 1844, he commented: "What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one." If Joseph had looked diligently, could he have found additional legal wives? No. Could he have found additional wives according to Islamic traditions? No. He might have asked for the questioner to be more specific, and then the answer necessarily have been in the affirmative.

See the above response about how he could use one or the other context—but not both simultaneously—in order for his statement to not be a lie. In addition, he was not "answering" a question—he had total control over the context of his sermon. Finally, in his May 26, 1844 sermon he never mentions the word "polygamy" or even alludes to Muslims or Turks. His statement refers to the number of wives he had (like almost all the denials). Presumably, wives are counted the same in both "celestial marriage" systems and Islamic systems of plural marriage. The distinction is irrelevant to the May 26, 1844 sermon and all the other seven denials.

LDS scholar Danel Bachman observed: "Most of these denials stressed semantical and theological technicalities. That is, the language of the defense was carefully chosen to disavow practices that did not accurately represent Church doctrines."

Virtually every one of the seven denials claimed or strongly implied that nobody had more than one wife. Yet, everyone involved in polygamy referred to themselves as "married" and as "husband" and "wife" (see [How did Joseph Smith's wives refer to their unions?](#)). The denials use the same terms as members did in discussing celestial or plural marriage.

Todd Compton concurred: "Faced with the necessity of keeping polygamy secret, the Mormon authorities generally chose to disavow the practice, sometimes using language with coded double meanings."

Equivocation is the act of communicating with two meanings. It is deception (and a lie) when the code is used with the intent to deceive. Regardless, virtually all of Joseph’s seven denials used clear and unambiguous language and did not hinge upon coded double meanings. That much is also indicated in a careful analysis of Compton’s phrase above—if they *sometimes* used language with coded double meanings, then mostly they did not (and Joseph Smith’s seven polygamy denials do not use coded meanings).

Fawn Brodie affirmed: “The denials of polygamy uttered by the Mormon leaders between 1835 and 1852, when it was finally admitted, are a remarkable series of evasions and circumlocutions involving all sorts of verbal gymnastics.” In this, she is not incorrect.

As shown above, Joseph Smith’s seven denials almost always used clear and unambiguous language. Either Brodie is being generous, or she was not familiar with all the denials when she wrote her book. Verbal gymnastics implies that there is some manner in which we can view the statements as truthful. If “verbal gymnastics” *is* the appropriate terminology, then I am not aware of *how* the language might be twisted to that extent in order to do so. The semantic contortions offered in Hales’ article do not exculpate Joseph in his seven denials, as far as I can tell.

For the sake of argument, if we accept these as “verbal gymnastics”, then they were still being used with the intent to deceive those who heard or read the communication. That’s the [definition of deception and is a form of lying](#).

Avoiding the risk of provoking violent reaction

For this defense, Hales explains:

... Joseph knew from his experience in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1836 that plural marriage would not be easily accepted by even staunch believers and members of his own family. To divulge more details than absolutely required might risk provoking violent reactions. Apparently, that was not a risk he was willing to take.

Hales’ fallback argument is that, even if Joseph was being deceptive (which he never acknowledges), it may have been necessary since admitting that he, Joseph, was practicing polygamy might have provoked a violent reaction (it did provoke a negative reaction in 1836 when he floated the idea to his followers).

The “fear of violent reaction” argument is itself an admission that all the above arguments are unlikely to satisfy many (and Hales admits as much before quoting Brodie). Were there methods by which we could clearly establish the integrity of Joseph’s statements regarding polygamy, such a fallback would be unnecessary.

But even this defense of Joseph Smith’s denials is problematic. First, I will point out again that Joseph did not fail to “divulge” in these seven denials, he actively spoke and/or promoted statements that flatly contradicted reality.

Second, we should weigh his decision to advance these denials in light of the serious consequences they had for others. How many people sacrificed all they had to journey from Europe under the impression (given by these denials and other explicit denials of polygamy published by Church leaders in Europe) that the Mormons did not practice polygamy? And how are we to view the defamation of Martha Brotherton's character by Joseph and other leaders? Did Martha deserve to have her name slandered for merely speaking the truth about her experience with Mormon leaders? Was Joseph concerned about the violent reactions that might have been provoked against her? Apparently not.

Thirdly, was the threat to life because of Joseph's practice of polygamy, or was it because of his (and other leaders) lying about the polygamy? A variety of non-monogamous marriage systems—each no more outrageous than polygamy—were practiced by several groups in Joseph Smith's time (e.g., Cochranites, Oneida Community). Although they experienced some friction with the law, most were able to practice their marriage ideals relatively uninhibited. This raises the question as to whether the Latter-day Saints could have practiced their system of celestial marriage with less friction had they openly acknowledged that is what they were doing? Did the cover-up generate more outrage than the crime, so to speak?

Finally, Joseph misled others about polygamy in less dramatic situations where threat to life was clearly not imminent (for example, having the Partridge sisters sealed to him a second time [in order to avoid divulging the first sealings to Emma](#)).

Ultimately, it is fair to view this last argument in light of the principles of honesty taught to new members of the Church [in the Gospel Principles manual](#):

People use many excuses for being dishonest. People lie to protect themselves and to have others think well of them. . . .

These excuses and many more are given as reasons for dishonesty. To the Lord, there are no acceptable reasons. . . .

Appendix

Text of “Polygamy Denials?” on April 13, 2017

[This is the first half of the document; The last half deals with obeying the laws of the land and is not addressed here]

“Thou Shalt not Lie” and Denials of Polygamy

During Joseph Smith's lifetime, the Prophet and other Church leaders issued several denials regarding the practice of polygamy.^[1]

“Polygamy” means “poly” or “many” and “gamy” means “marriages.” Combined they mean: “many marriages.”[2]

Despite criticisms charging that Joseph lied when denying polygamy, the fact is that under Illinois statute, he could truthfully answer negatively because state laws prevented any person from entering into more than one marriage. A second (or third or forth) marriage could not be certified with any legal document. Hence practicing legal polygamy was an impossibility.

[Image of The Revised Code of Laws with the following text in it: The REVISED CODE OF LAWS, OF ILLINOIS, ENACTED BY THE FIFTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY, AT THEIR SESSION HELD AT VANDALIA, COMMENCING ON THE FOURTH DAY OF DECEMBER, 1826, AND ENDING THE NINETEENTH OF FEBRUARY, 1827. PUBLISHED IN PURSUANCE OF LAW]

The 1827 Illinois State anti-bigamy law reads: “All marriages, where either of the parties had a former husband or wife living at the time of solemnizing the last marriage, shall be void” (italics added).[3]

[Image with the following text: DIVORCES [In force Jan. 12, 1827; Fraudulent marriages declared void] AN ACT amending the law concerning Divorce. Sec. 1. Be it enacted by the People of the State of Illinois represented in the General Assembly, That all marriages, where either of the parties had a former husband or wife living at the time of solemnizing the last marriage, shall be void; and any woman or maiden, who shall be duped or deceived into such subsequent marriage, shall be restored to all the rights she would have had, if such marriage had not taken place, and may sue for and recover damages for such fraud, as in cases of breach of marriage contract. [DIVORCES 181]]

In other words, any person with a legal spouse could not be married to another according to state statute. Any subsequent ceremonies would be “void” from a civil perspective. A man or woman could never be legally married to two spouses.[4]

Consequently, legally speaking it was impossible for Joseph Smith or any other Nauvoo pluralist to truthfully answer “yes” to the question: “Do you have more than one wife?”

Perhaps a more pertinent question is whether Joseph Smith practiced polygamy from a religious standpoint. The answer depends upon the definition of the word “polygamy.” To him, “celestial marriage” was an “order of the priesthood”[5]

that was essentially unrelated to the polygamy practices of the Turks in the Islamic world, with their harems and concubines. Therefore, it is unlikely the Prophet would have equated his teachings of “patriarchal marriage” and “eternal marriage” with their traditions.

John L. Brooke concluded: “A deceptive code developed, allowing the leadership to condemn ‘polygamy, in the ordinary and Asiatic sense of the term,’ while defending ‘the Holy order of celestial marriage,’ ‘the true and divine order,’ and the ‘new and everlasting covenant.’”[6]

Accordingly, Joseph Smith could have truthfully answered “no” to the question: “Are you practicing legal polygamy or polygamy like Arab Muslims?” For example, on May 26, 1844, he commented: “What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one.”[7]

If Joseph had looked diligently, could he have found additional legal wives? No. Could he have found additional wives according to Islamic traditions? No. He might have asked for the questioner to be more specific, and then the answer necessarily have been in the affirmative.

LDS scholar Danel Bachman observed: “Most of these denials stressed semantical and theological technicalities. That is, the language of the defense was carefully chosen to disavow practices that did not accurately represent Church doctrines.”[8]

Todd Compton concurred: “Faced with the necessity of keeping polygamy secret, the Mormon authorities generally chose to disavow the practice, sometimes using language with coded double meanings.”[9]

Denying polygamy on a technicality may not satisfy some observers. Fawn Brodie affirmed: “The denials of polygamy uttered by the Mormon leaders between 1835 and 1852, when it was finally admitted, are a remarkable series of evasions and circumlocutions involving all sorts of verbal gymnastics.”[10]

In this, she is not incorrect. However, Joseph knew from his experience in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1836 that plural marriage would not be easily accepted by even staunch believers and members of his own family. To divulge more details than absolutely required might risk provoking violent reactions. Apparently, that was not a risk he was willing to take.

1. See Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. *The Words of Joseph Smith: Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980, 26), 377 (May 1844 [Sunday Morning]); *History of the Church*, 6:411. For other general denials of the practice of polygamy see: “Apostacy,” *Millennial Star* 3, no. 4 (August 1, 1842): 74; Parley P. Pratt, “Fragment of an Address, by P. P. Pratt,” *Millennial Star* 6 (July 1, 1845): 22–23; [anon], “Who is the Liar,” *Millennial Star* 12 (January 15, 1850): 29–30; [no title], *Times and Seasons* 3 (September 1, 1842): 909; “On Marriage,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (October 1, 1842): 939–40; [H.R. Letter from Boston, Massachusetts], *Times and Seasons* 4 (March 15, 1843): 143; “Notice,” *Times and Seasons* 5 (February 1, 1844): 423; [Letter from Hyrum Smith], *Times and Seasons* 5 (March 15, 1844): 474; [Letter from “An Old Man of Israel”], *Times and Seasons* 5 (November 15, 1844): 715; E. M. Webb, “Mormonism Unveiled,” *Times and Seasons* 6 (May 1, 1845): 893–94. (back)
2. Definition: “1590s, from Late Latin *polygamia*, from Late Greek *polygamia* ‘polygamy,’ from *polygamos* ‘often married,’ from *polys* ‘many’ + *gamos* ‘marriage’ and is usually interpreted to mean one man with multiple wives.” (Accessed April 23, 2014, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=polygamy&allowed_in_frame=0.) The term also describes a woman with multiple husbands. (back)

3. The Revised Code of Laws of Illinois: Enacted by the Fifth General Assembly (State of Illinois: Robert Blackwell, 1827), 180–81. (back)
4. In addition, another state statute states that, “any minister, justice of the supreme court, judge, or justice of the peace” could perform a marriage ceremony. They also instruct that within 30 days after the ceremony, the officiator is obligated to create “a certificate of the same” and to deliver it “to the clerk of the commissioners’ court, of the county in which such marriage was solemnized.” The certificate thereafter served as an “evidence of the marriage of the parties.” The Revised Code of Laws of Illinois: Enacted by the Fifth General Assembly (State of Illinois: Robert Blackwell, 1827), 289–90. None of the Nauvoo plural marriages fulfilled this requirement. There were no records and no certificates, so the marriages could not be recognized. (back)
5. See William Clayton, *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 110. (back)
6. See John L. Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 265. (back)
7. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 377 (26 May 1844 [Sunday Morning]); *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. rev., (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960), 6:411. (back)
8. Danel W. Bachman, “A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith” (master’s thesis, Purdue University, 1975), 197. (back)
9. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 643. (back)
10. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 321. (back)