

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

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.

Then, according to the law, he was practicing adultery (note that only "open" adultery was illegal at the time, but the behavior would still have been classified as legally adulterous).

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*).

Again, if these marriages are not valid, then they were practicing adultery and could be accused of such. However, every statement we have of these women regarding these marriages suggests they considered them "marriages" and that they were Joseph Smith's "wives".

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?"

The denials cover far more ground than just the question of the legality of the practice. The women understood these to be marriages and that they were each a wife.

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 thought this way. In addition, Muslims would object to this characterization of 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 afford his wives 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, most of whom were not well cared for and many of which were never granted societal recognition for their relationship.

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 to deceive is a form of lying.

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.

We have no evidence that Joseph ever thought about Islamic polygamy in this manner. Regardless, if he were answering with these “codes” in mind, he was equivocating (which is a type of lie) and clearly deceiving his listeners (a “lie” according to the Gospel Principles manual).

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.

Virtual every denial claimed or strongly implied that nobody had more than one wife. Yet, everyone involved in polygamy referred to themselves as married and husband and wife.

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.

Denying polygamy on a technicality may not satisfy some observers.

Once a person has read all the denials, it is clear that they are deceptive, regardless of which tactics are being used.

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.

Verbal gymnastics is a synonym for doublespeak, which is equivocation. It deceived the listeners (and was used with the intent to deceive the listeners, so they were lies).

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.

This is the final hedge—Joseph couldn't avoid deceiving everyone around him because he feared for his and everyone's safety. Be that as it may, it does not alter that his (and other leaders') words were deceptive and therefore constituted a lie in their effect.