

Joseph Smith’s Denials of Polygamy

Joseph Smith denied the practice of polygamy¹ on several occasions. In addition, he was directly responsible for the publication or distribution of several additional denials.

A few notes:

- Links to resources are provided *in-line* (these will not appear in a printed version of this document—use a PDF viewer that recognizes inline links).
- Denials are tagged with “OWN WORDS” (4 occurrences) or “RESPONSIBLE FOR” (4 occurrences).²
- Links to original source material may be found by clicking on the link found in each header. These links point to a more complete transcript of each source and these transcripts also contains links to the original sources hosted by LDS affiliated sites.
- Emphasis is sometimes added to highlight the most relevant parts of a statement.³
- The wife count is compiled from LDS apologist Brian Hales’ [Joseph Smith’s Polygamy site](#) and only uses *established* sealing/marriage dates (the actual wife count may be higher).⁴
- Several denials refer to the [1835 Doctrine and Covenants statement on marriage](#).

May 5, 1838, Prophet’s Answers to Sundry Questions—OWN WORDS

[Joseph Smith had 2 wives at this time.]⁵

Seventh—“*Do the Mormons believe in having more wives than one?*”

“*No, not at the same time.* But they believe that if their companion dies, they have a right to marry again. But we do disapprove of the custom, which has gained in the world, and has been practiced among us, to our great mortification, in marrying in five or six weeks, or even in two or three months, after the death of their companion. We believe that due respect ought to be had to the memory of the dead, and the feelings of both friends and children.

¹Sometimes a denial was focused on his individual behavior (e.g., 1844) and sometimes it was focused on Church doctrine or practice.

²*RESPONSIBLE FOR* means he had immediate stewardship over the contents of the publication (i.e., editor of the Times and Seasons) or directly promoted its distribution (affidavits against Bennett). *OWN WORDS* will include statements directly attributable to Joseph Smith and likely are to reflect closely the precise words he spoke on that occasion.

³I have tried to include as much of each statement as is contextually relevant; nonetheless, the link to transcripts of the primary source material (which contain links to original source material hosted by LDS affiliated sites) is given on each section title itself.

⁴Joseph Smith’s wife count will comprise all those to whom he was married or sealed at the time of the statement and is derived from [the most conservative estimate of well-established dates](#) for his marriages/sealings taken from [josephsmithspolygamy.org](#).

⁵Joseph never denied a relationship with Fanny Alger. Later testimony indicates [a marriage ceremony had been performed by Levi Hancock](#).

April 15, 1842, Times and Seasons—OWN WORDS

The rumor about being shut in a room for several days is almost certainly false, but the general outline of Martha Brotherton's story as contained in her affidavit is likely accurate.

[Joseph Smith had at least 8 wives on April 6 when the words were spoken.]

He [Hyrum Smith] then spoke in contradiction of a report in circulation about Elder Kimball, B. Young, himself, and others of the Twelve, alleging that a sister had been shut in a room for several days, *and that they had endeavored to induce her to believe in having two wives . . .*

Pres't. J. Smith spoke upon the subject of the stories respecting Elder Kimball and others, showing the folly and inconsistency of spending any time in conversing about such stories or hearkening to them, for *there is no person that is acquainted with our principles would believe such lies*, except Sharp the editor of the "Warsaw Signal."

August 31, 1842, Affidavits against Bennett—RESPONSIBLE FOR

These particular affidavits refer to Martha Brotherton's affidavit, which is likely correct, at least in its general outline and primarily makes the claim that Joseph and Brigham persuaded her to become Brigham's wife and taught her that polygamy was approved of God. Joseph Smith called for volunteers to distribute the broadside. In 1870 Brigham had Martha Brotherton sealed to him.

[Joseph Smith had at least 13 wives by this time.]

. . . Heber C. Kimball, who being duly sworn according to law, deposeth and saith that the affidavit of Miss Martha Brotherton, which has been published in sundry newspapers, is false and without foundation in truth, and further this deponent saith not.

. . . AFFIDAVIT OF BRIGHAM YOUNG . . . I do hereby testify that the affidavit of Miss Martha Brotherton that is going the rounds in the political and religious papers, is a base falsehood, with regard to any private intercourse or unlawful conduct or conversation with me. BRIGHAM YOUNG . . .

September 1, 1842, Times and Seasons—RESPONSIBLE FOR

[Joseph Smith had at least 13 wives by this time.]

Inasmuch as the public mind has been unjustly abused through the fallacy of Dr. Bennett's letters, we make an extract on the subject of marriage, showing the rule of the church on this important matter. The extract is

from the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, *and is the only rule allowed by the church.*

“All legal contracts of marriage made before a person is baptized into this church, should be held sacred and fulfilled. 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. It is not right to persuade a woman to be baptized contrary to the will of her husband neither is it lawful to influence her to leave her husband.”

October 1, 1842, Times and Seasons—RESPONSIBLE FOR

Two of the women who signed this document had been married to Joseph by this time (Sara M. Cleveland and Eliza R. Snow). Bishop Newel K. Whitney had performed a plural marriage of his daughter to Joseph the previous July. John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff had also been taught about polygamy by this time.

[Joseph Smith had at least 13 wives by this time.]

... 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. . .

We have given the above rule of marriage as the only one practiced in this church, to show that Dr. J. C. Bennett’s “secret wife system” is a matter of his own manufacture; and further to disabuse the public ear, and shew [show] that the said Bennett and his misanthropic friend Origen Bachelor, are perpetrating a foul and infamous slander upon an innocent people, and need but be known to be hated and despise. In support of this position, we present the following certificates:-

We the undersigned members of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and residents of the city of Nauvoo, persons of families 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,* and we give this certificate to show that Dr. J. C. Bennett’s “secret wife system” is a creature of his own make as *we know of no such society in this place nor never did.*

[Signed by 12 men, including Newel K. Whitney, John Taylor, and Wilford Woodruff. Under an almost identical statement are the printed signatures of 18 women including Sara M. Cleveland and Eliza R. Snow]

March 15, 1843, Times and Seasons—RESPONSIBLE FOR

[Joseph Smith had at least 17 wives at the time this statement was published.]

We are charged with advocating a plurality of wives, and common property. Now this is as false as the many other ridiculous charges which are brought against us. No sect have a greater reverence for the laws of matrimony, or the rights of private property, and we do what others do not, practice what we preach . . .

October 5, 1843, Joseph's Journal—OWN WORDS

[Joseph Smith had at least 27 wives by this time.]

Evening at home and walked up and down the street with my scribe. 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.

May 26, 1844, Testimony against Dissenters at Nauvoo—OWN WORDS

[Joseph Smith had at least 30 wives by this time.]

. . . I had not been married scarcely five minutes, and made one proclamation of the Gospel, before it was reported that I had seven wives. . .

. . . and he [William Law] swears that I have committed adultery. . .

. . . 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. I never had any fuss with these men until that Female Relief Society brought out the paper against adulterers and adulteresses. . .

. . . Wilson Law also swears that I told him I was guilty of adultery. Brother Jonathan Dunham can swear to the contrary. I have been chained. I have rattled chains before in a dungeon for the truth's sake. I am innocent of all these charges, and you can bear witness of my innocence, for you know me yourselves. . .

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

I am the same man, and as innocent as I was fourteen years ago; and I can prove them all perjurers.

Did Joseph Smith lie or deceive?

- [The verbiage used by Joseph Smith's wives to describe their unions.](#)
- [Definitions of words related to "lie" and "deceive" from Merriam-Webster, the Gospel Principles Manual, and Wikipedia.](#)

Official and Apologetic explanations

- [\(official\) Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo](#)
- ["Thou Shalt not Lie" and Denials of Polygamy](#)
- [Joseph hid polygamy from the general Church membership](#)
- [Polygamy, Prophets, and Prevarication: Frequently and Rarely Asked Questions about the Initiation, Practice, and Cessation of Plural Marriage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.](#)