

Joseph Smith’s Polygamy Denials

Introduction

Joseph Smith denied the practice of polygamy¹ on several occasions. He was also responsible for the publication or distribution of several additional denials. A complete listing of early Church leader polygamy denials up to 1850 is [available here](#).

A few notes:

- Hyperlinks 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 that transcript also contains a link to the original source hosted by LDS affiliated sites where available.
- Denials are tagged with **OWN WORDS** (5 occurrences), **RESPONSIBLE FOR** (3 occurrences), or **POSSIBLY AWARE OF** (1 occurrence, in the appendix).²
- Emphasis is sometimes added to highlight the most relevant parts of a statement.
- 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.³
- Several denials refer to the [1835 Doctrine and Covenants statement on marriage](#).

Denials listed in chronological order

[May 5, 1838, Prophet’s Answers to Sundry Questions—OWN WORDS](#)

*Joseph Smith had 2 wives at this time.*⁴

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

²*OWN WORDS* are statements directly attributable to Joseph Smith and are highly likely to reflect the precise words he spoke on that occasion. *RESPONSIBLE FOR* means he had immediate stewardship over the contents of the publication (Times and Seasons) or directly promoted its distribution (Affidavits against Bennett). Joseph Smith was named as the Times and Seasons editor from at least [March of 1842 until October 1842](#). Peter Crawley notes that while he *was* the named editor, [John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff actually ran the Times and Seasons](#). Still, Taylor and Woodruff [were in Joseph’s inner circle](#) and had [likely been taught about polygamy by this time](#), so it stands to reason that they were acting with Joseph’s approval (either directly or indirectly). Regardless, Joseph never contradicted or corrected these statements, and there is no reason to believe he wasn’t aware of their publication. As editor he was nominally responsible for the contents of the periodical, and given his close association with Taylor and Woodruff, it seems reasonable to hold Joseph responsible for these statements. *POSSIBLY AWARE OF* is associated with a denial in the Times and Seasons that Joseph may have been aware of.

³Joseph Smith’s wife count is comprised of 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](#).

⁴Virtually all scholars agree that *some* kind of sexual relationship or marriage occurred between Joseph and Fanny Alger. The account of a marriage ceremony comes via a [later testimony from Levi Hancock](#).

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.

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 truthful. Joseph Smith had at least 8 wives when these 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

The below affidavits by Kimball and Young refer to Martha Brotherton’s affidavit, which is likely truthful, at least in its general outline. Martha’s affidavit primarily makes the claim that Joseph and Brigham attempted to persuade her that polygamy was approved of God and to become Brigham’s wife. Brigham swore to the below statement in August—two months prior he had taken Lucy Ann Decker for his first polygamous wife. Heber C. Kimball also took his first polygamous wife early in 1842. Joseph Smith called for volunteers to distribute the broadside containing these affidavits. In 1870 Brigham had Martha Brotherton sealed to him by proxy. 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 was editor of the Times and Seasons when this was published and 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

Joseph Smith was editor of the Times and Seasons when this document was published. Two of the women who signed the document were Joseph's plural wives (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 likely been taught about polygamy by this time.⁵ Joseph Smith had at least 13 wives when this was published.

... 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

⁵John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff were [original members of the Quorum of the Anointed](#) founded in early 1842. Referring to the "On Marriage" affidavit, D. Michael Quinn wrote: "The signers included Apostle John Taylor and Apostle Wilford Woodruff (who had already been taught the doctrine of polygamy by Joseph Smith)..." Also see [discussion by Mithryn](#).

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]

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.

February 1, 1844, Times and Seasons—OWN WORDS

Joseph Smith had at least 30 wives by this time. Hyrum Smith had 3 or 4 wives at this time. Brown was later excommunicated for preaching polygamy.

...an Elder of the Church of Jesus Christ, of Latter-day Saints, by the name of Hiram Brown, has been preaching Polygamy...he has been cut off from the church, for his iniquity

[Signed by JOSEPH SMITH and HYRUM SMITH]

May 26, 1844, Testimony against Dissenters—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.

Appendix-A Statements Joseph Smith may have been aware of

March 15, 1843, Times and Seasons—POSSIBLY AWARE OF

John Taylor was editor of the Times and Seasons, was in Joseph's inner circle, and had likely been taught about polygamy by this time. Taylor would take a plural wife before the end of 1843. Joseph lived in Nauvoo when this statement was published in Nauvoo. He had at least 17 wives at this time.

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 ... I remain, sir, your obliged servant, H. R.

Appendix-B Denials discussed in lds.org essay

The [Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo](#) essay on lds.org states the following about the denials (as of 2017-05-07):

The rumors prompted members and leaders to issue 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.[22] The statements emphasized that the Church practiced no marital law other than monogamy while implicitly leaving open the possibility that individuals, under direction of God's living prophet, might do so.[23]

They reference the following footnotes:

[22]: In the denials, “polygamy” was understood to mean the marriage of one man to more than one woman but without Church sanction.

[23]: See, for example, “On Marriage,” Times and Seasons, Oct. 1, 1842, 939–40; and Wilford Woodruff journal, Nov. 25, 1843, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Parley P. Pratt, “This Number Closes the First

Volume of the ‘Prophet,’ ” The Prophet, May 24, 1845, 2. George A. Smith explained, “Any one who will read carefully the denials, as they are termed, of plurality of wives in connection with the circumstances will see clearly that they denounce adultery, fornication, brutal lust and the teaching of plurality of wives by those who were not commanded to do so” (George A. Smith letter to Joseph Smith III, Oct. 9, 1869, in Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Oct. 9, 1869, Church History Library, Salt Lake City).

Did Joseph Smith and other leaders 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, General Conference addresses, and Wikipedia).
- [Response to Hales’ challenge: “Please show me even one ‘lie’ by Joseph regarding plural marriage”](#)

Official and Apologetic explanations

- [Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo](#) (lds.org)
- [“Thou Shalt not Lie” and Denials of Polygamy](#) (Joseph Smith’s Polygamy site)
- [Joseph hid polygamy from the general Church membership](#) (FairMormon)
- [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.](#) (FairMormon)