

Comic Book Characters and Historical Fiction: Where Alex Beam Gets Joseph Smith's Polygamy Wrong

By Brian C. Hales

Alex Beam addresses Joseph Smith's polygamy in chapter 5 of *American Crucifixion*. From a scholarly standpoint, the chapter suffers from multiple weaknesses including the predominant use of secondary sources, quoting of problematic evidences apparently without checking their reliability, ignoring of historical data that contradicts his position, promotion of narrow and often extreme interpretations of available documents, and going beyond the evidence in constructing conclusions.

I've been told that later chapters in *American Crucifixion* are generally historically accurate. Unfortunately, Beam's treatment of the Prophet and the practice of plural marriage is so egregious and problematic, that after reading the chapter, observers will unalterably identify Joseph Smith as an adulterer, hypocrite, and fraud. When Joseph is later killed in a firestorm at Carthage, the reader may lament the injustice, but they really do not care because Beam has firmly established that Joseph was a scoundrel who probably deserved to die anyway. To me Beam's version of Nauvoo plurality reads like historical fiction describing comic book characters who do illogical things. Beam has classified his book as "popular non-fiction," and affirms that non-fiction works should be accurate and truthful. Accordingly, Beam's book and his claims about its accuracy create a paradox.

One of the greater weaknesses in Chapter 5 is Beam's tendency to repeat secondary sources. There he quotes Linda King Newell and Valeen Avery eight times; Richard Van Wagoner three times; and Richard Bushman, George D. Smith, Fawn Brodie, and Todd Compton twice each. In addition, he cites Michael Quinn, Andrew Ehat, Robert Flanders, Marvin Hill, and Rocky O'Donovan. Admittedly, plural marriage is a complex topic and citing the opinions of authors who have written books and articles on the subject is to be expected. However, Beam seems to take the practice to the extreme, unworried about the apparent risks. What if the secondary sources are overly biased for or against Joseph Smith or what if they misrepresent the reliability of some statement or conclusion? The secondary sources he quotes reflect those weaknesses (see below), which are only compounded when further filtered through Beam's storytelling.

Unfortunately, the voice of the plural marriage participants is almost entirely missing in Beam's reconstruction. The total number of primary sources referenced by Beam is nine,¹ with only one being an actual Nauvoo polygamist (Helen Mar Kimball).² The view of the Nauvoo polygamist is important, not only for balance but also for accuracy. At one point, Beam writes: "Smith's

¹ Included are the *History of the Church* (4), *Times and Seasons* (4), Nauvoo City Council Minutes (3), William Clayton's journal (2), Helen Mar Kimball's *Why We Practice Plural Marriage* (1), Joseph Smith's Journal (2), William Law's Journal (2), Charlotte Haven (1), and the *Salt Lake Tribune* (1).

² The journals of Joseph Smith and William Clayton are quoted for historical events, but no discussion of their motives for entering plural marriage is included anywhere.

hypocrisy concerning polygamy was breathtaking” (102). Beam comfortably declares that Joseph Smith could have behaved hypocritically to the level of “breathtaking,” but apparently Nauvoo polygamists could not detect it. Beam places himself as an investigator possessing great discernment who, looking back over 170 years, could detect “breathtaking hypocrisy” in Joseph’s actions that apparently was not discerned by Nauvooans like Brigham Young, John Taylor, Eliza R. Snow, Zina Huntington, and other polygamy insiders. This reconstruction is less plausible because it is certain that most of those Church members would not have stayed with Joseph had they viewed him as Beam portrays. Even Fawn Brodie acknowledged: “The best evidence of the magnetism of the Mormon religion was that it could attract men with the quality of Brigham Young, whose tremendous energy and shrewd intelligence were not easily directed by any influence outside himself.”³ By ignoring the views of believing Nauvoo polygamists, Beam frees himself to reconstruct Joseph’s actions unhampered by the reality that those men and women experienced. But Beam does this at the risk of creating historical fiction.

When defending his use of secondary sources, Beam declared that he found no need to re-invent the wheel.⁴ It might be argued that it is impossible to produce an accurate text without going to the primary sources for analysis. Below are a few brief observations regarding the documentary problems found in Chapter 5 of *American Crucifixion*.

1. Beam correctly wrote that plural wife Mary Elizabeth Rollins reported that she was sealed to Joseph Smith for “time and eternity” (83). What is not shared is that her declaration occurred after the temple sealing ceremonial language had been standardized to use that language. However, when directly asked about her supposed polyandrous relationship in 1905, she clarified: “My husband did not belong to the Church. I begged him and pled with him to join but he would not. He said he did not believe in it, though he thought a great deal of Joseph. . . . After he said this, I went forward and was sealed to Joseph *for eternity*” (italics added).⁵ Several other evidences from Mary support it was a non-sexual “eternity only” sealing.⁶ However, this information is not provided and Beam later asserts that “time and eternity” sealings included sexuality, so readers could generally conclude that Joseph and Mary experienced conjugal relations and that Joseph practiced sexual polyandry. To date, however, no unambiguous supportive evidence has been provided by authors who write that the Prophet engaged in polyandrous sexuality. Neither have any such advocates addressed the important contradictory evidences.⁷

³ Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York, 1971), 126–27. Joseph Johnson writing in 1885 disagreed: “He [Brigham Young] must have been an idiot, or thought he was addressing idiots.” Joseph Johnson, *The Great Mormon Fraud*, (Manchester: Butterworth and Nodal, 1885), 17.

⁴ Alex Beam, Comments during recording of podcast with John Dehlin, June 9, 2014.

⁵ Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Remarks” at BYU, April 14, 1905, copy of original signed typescript, Vault Mss 363, fd 6, HBLL, BYU, 7.

⁶ See Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:421–37.

⁷ See Brian Hales, “Sexual Polyandry,” *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy* (website), accessed June 14, 2014,

2. When referring to the Joseph Smith–Fanny Alger union, Beam wrote:

Joseph had been confiding his thoughts about plural marriage to his most trusted confederates throughout the 1830s. It seems that Joseph was practicing polygamy without benefit of clergy during that time (85).

By ignoring important evidences that show that a marriage ceremony was performed between Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger in the mid-1835,⁸ Beam portrays Joseph as an adulterer, not a polygamist, in the 1830s. However, the evidences of a marriage are significant and deserve consideration by any serious scholar.

3. Beam treats Benjamin Winchester’s 1889 account accusing Joseph Smith as reliable (85). Benjamin did not reside in Nauvoo and was not a polygamy insider. He was a difficult personality and had a stormy relationship with Joseph Smith and the Quorum of the Twelve. Joseph once accused him of telling “one of the most damnable lies” about him.⁹ He was reprimanded several times and eventually excommunicated.¹⁰ These observations do not mean Winchester was inevitably unreliable, but his interactions with Joseph were limited, and it can be shown he had significant biases. As a primary witness against the Prophet, Winchester’s believability would be greatly strengthened with additional supportive testimony, which Beam does not provide and which does not seem to exist.

4. Beam wrote:

In 1835, rumors of Mormon polygamy were so intense that the Saints’ general assembly issued a statement asserting, “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” (85).

Beam falls into the antagonists trap here because he cannot find any private or public complaints of polygamy against Joseph Smith or the Church in 1835 (or the years previous), so he must quote a denial issued by Church authorities as evidence. Oliver Cowdery wrote in the *Messenger and Advocate* in 1836: “It would be a Herculean task to point out the innumerable falsehoods and misrepresentations, sent out detrimental to this society. The tales of those days in which Witches were burnt, and the ridiculous inconsistencies of those who directed the building of the funeral pyre, could be no more absurd than the every-day tales, relative to the conduct and professions of

<http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/faq/sexual-polyandry/> .

⁸ Levi Ward Hancock Autobiography with additions in 1896 by Mosiah Hancock, 63, CHL; cited portion written by Mosiah, (Ms 570, microfilm). Andrew Jenson Papers [ca. 1871–1942], MS 17956; CHL, Box 49, Folder 16, documents 1–2.

⁹ “Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: Minutes of Meetings” on *New Mormon Studies: A Comprehensive Resource Library*, CD-ROM (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates), 1998.

¹⁰ Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smit*. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 381.

the ‘Mormons.’”¹¹ I would challenge Beam to find any published or private accusation of polygamy against Joseph Smith or the Church during that period. The statement “rumors of Mormon polygamy were so intense” is going beyond the evidence.

5. Beam wrote:

Nonetheless, defectors and apostates were reporting Joseph’s scandalous views to the world. “Old Joe’s Mormon seraglio” quickly became a stock phrase in the nation’s newspapers, despite the Saint’s heated denials (86).

By positioning this quote next to discussions from 1835 and 1838, Beam implies such claims were common during that era. However, this statement was first made by the notorious John C. Bennett in July of 1842. If Beam wants to defend Bennett as reliable, I’d be happy to be a respondent. The eastern newspapers may have picked up Bennett’s line, but they were also incredulous regarding Bennett’s overall claims, apparently more incredulous than Beam.

6. Beam wrote:

In a famous incident, Emma is supposed to have surprised Joseph and another mansion lodger, the raven-haired poetess Eliza Snow, kissing on a second-floor landing. With her children begging her not to harm “aunt Eliza,” Emma grabbed Snow by the hair, then threw her down the stairs and out into the street (89).

Here Beam’s scholarship approaches irresponsibility. He quotes Brodie and Newell and Avery, but presents the event with less reservation than they expressed. Importantly, he ignores several more recent analyses including my own that shows that available documents are contradictory and describe impossible details.¹² For example, Beam states the alleged altercation occurred in the “mansion,” but Eliza never lived in the mansion and the physical description of the Homestead (where she did live for a time) stairwell demonstrates it could not have occurred there. Also, there is no evidence Eliza was ever pregnant. Beam addresses none of these issues, instead repeating secondary sources of dubious accuracy.

7. Beam wrote that Eliza admitted she had been “the Prophet’s wife and lover” (89). He provides no documentation but obviously missed Eliza’s 1877 letter to RLDS missionary Daniel Munns where she flatly denied having ever been Joseph Smith’s “carnal” wife but freely acknowledged that there were “several ladies now living in Utah who accepted the pure and sacred doctrine of plural marriage, and were the bona fide wives of Pres. Joseph Smith.”¹³ During the June 9 podcast interview, my wife Laura addressed this lack of evidence, which apparently was an

¹¹ Oliver Cowdery, Editorial, *Messenger and Advocate* 3, no. 1 (Oct 1836): 395.

¹² See Brian C. Hales, “Emma Smith, Eliza R. Snow, and the Reported Incident on the Stairs,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 63–75.

¹³ Eliza R. Snow to Daniel Munns, May 30, 1877, Community of Christ Archives; emphasis in original.

unacceptable question because both Dehlin and Beam felt it was confrontational, but I wondered about their willingness to provide *documentary transparency*. .

8. Beam also cites a “gentile visitor from Carthage” who asked Emma Smith:

“Mrs. Smith, where does your church get the doctrine of spiritual wives?” Emma’s face flushed scarlet, the guess reported, and her eyes blazed with fury. “Straight from hell, madam” (89).

Evidently, this is a favorite phrase because Beam quoted it in his talk at MHA. Unfortunately, the quotation is problematic. It is from a 1916 periodical *The Bellman* in an article written by Eudocia Balwin Marsh, where she quotes her sister word-for-word in a conversation that allegedly occurred over 70 years earlier.¹⁴ It is problematic because Emma did not learn of plural marriage until the spring of 1843. At that time, the marriages were kept very secret. The quote is very late and secondhand and the likelihood that Emma would have admitted to the clandestine religious practice and condemned it as described is less plausible.

9. Beam quotes Don Carlos Smith as saying: “Any man who will teach and practice the doctrine of spiritual wifery will go to hell: I don’t care if it is my brother Joseph” (89). The quote is from a 1890 recollection from apostate Ebenezer Robinson¹⁵ and contradicts an account from Mary Ann West, who lived with Don Carlos’ wife Agnes after his August 7, 1841, death in Nauvoo. West recalled in 1892: “She [Agnes] told me herself she was [married to Joseph Smith]. . . . She said it was the wish of her husband Don Carlos that she should marry him [Joseph].”¹⁶ Either Beam’s research was inadequate to uncover this additional credible and pertinent evidence, or he knew of it and his biases prompted him to not include it. Regardless, “spiritual wifery” was not a term Joseph used to refer to plural marriage.

10. Beam cites a popular notion that cannot be reliably traced to Joseph Smith or any subsequent leader: “The larger the family that gathered to greet the Second Coming, Joseph taught, the greater the heavenly exaltation of all concerned” (91). Joseph never encouraged men to marry as many wives as possible in the hope that each wife would bring “greater heavenly exaltation.” This is speculation presented as a documented teaching.

11. Beam incorrectly states that Joseph Smith married Sylvia Session in early February 1842 (91–92). This interpretation portrays the Prophet as practicing sexual polyandry, but the timeline is not documentable and is contradicted by important evidences that had been published prior to Beam’s beginning his research for the book.¹⁷

¹⁴ Quoted in Eudocia Balwin Marsh, “When the Mormons Dwelt Among Us,” in *The Bellman*, April 1, 1916, 375.

¹⁵ Ebenezer Robinson, *The Return* 2, no. 7 (July 1890): 302; see also 2, no. 6 (June 1890): 287.

¹⁶ Mary Ann West, deposition, Temple Lot transcript, respondent’s testimony (part 3), pages 521–22, questions 679, 687.

¹⁷ See Brian C. Hales, “The Joseph Smith – Sylvia Sessions Plural Sealings: Polyandry or Polygyny,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 19–28.

12. Beam states that Joseph Smith “did want to marry the Kimball’s fourteen-year-old daughter” Helen Mar Kimball (92). This is going beyond the evidence. Every known account states that Heber C. Kimball, Helen’s father initiated the relationship. It is pure speculation to say Joseph “wanted” or otherwise sought to marry Helen.

13. One of Beam’s more inflammatory statements is: “Apparently no one had prepared her [Helen Mar Kimball] for what Joseph would do to her when they were alone” (93). This insinuation of sinister and/or sexual behavior is pure fiction because there is no evidence Joseph and Helen were *ever* alone and available documents support the marriage was never consummated.¹⁸

14. Beam quotes Helen Kimball using a secondary source:

“I would never have been sealed to Joseph, had I known it was anything more than a ceremony,” Helen later told her mother. “I was young and they deceived me, by saying the salvation of our whole family depended on it” (93).

Here Beam inaccurately reports that the conversation occurred between Helen and her mother Vilate Kimball. However, the actual source is Catherine Lewis, an anti-Mormon writer who was the first woman to describe the Nauvoo Temple ceremony in an exposé in 1848.¹⁹ The quotation is problematic in several ways including the idea that Helen would ever have used accusatory language against her parents or Joseph Smith at that time or at any time in her life.

15. Beam’s treatment of Joseph’s interactions with Sarah Pratt is remarkably one-sided (94). Evidence is strong that Sarah was sexually involved with John C. Bennett and that Joseph tried to intervene to help Apostle Orson Pratt, who was serving a mission in England. Beam ignores these details, and as a consequence, he fails to adequately portray the entirety of events. Instead, he opts to discuss a very narrow selection of available evidences in order to portray Joseph as immoral.

16. Beam’s discussion of Joseph and the Laws, William and Jane, is even more exaggerated than that of Sarah Pratt. As I have exhaustively documented in my *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: History and Theology*, five different scenarios regarding their interactions can be supported, depending upon the evidence an author chooses to cite. In that publication, I warn future writers like Beam: “Authors who choose to report on the relationship between the Prophet and the Laws are wise to not selectively quote any one set of historical data to the exclusion of the contradictory documents.”²⁰ Obviously Beam was unaware of my warning, but it was issued precisely to authors like him who choose to selectively cite the historical record in order to form a story that is apparently to their liking, but it is at best incomplete and at worst deceptive.

¹⁸ Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:286–98.

¹⁹ Catherine Lewis, *Narrative of Some of the Proceedings of the Mormons; Giving an Account of their Iniquities* (Lynn, Mass: by the author, 1848), 19.

²⁰ Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 2: 221; see 221–31.

Beam begins his discussion of the Laws stating plainly: “Joseph tried to seduce the wife of his second counselor, William Law” (94). Is there evidence to support this? Yes, an entry in Law’s journal: “He [Joseph] has lately endeavored to seduce my wife and has found her a virtuous woman.”²¹ Beam quotes this but fails to inform his audience that the line is crossed out. What is the significance of the strikeout? We don’t know, but good scholarship requires divulging this detail. Is there evidence to contradict the accusation? Yes, a contemporaneous journal entry from Alexander Neibaur records that Jane approached Joseph.²² In addition, Law’s son said if Joseph had tried to seduce Jane, his father would “have shot his head off. No man can be more delicate and conscientious about the relations of husband and wife and more apt to be terrible in such a case, than my father.”²³

17. Beam alleges that by May of 1843, “Polygamy was rapidly becoming the worst-kept secret in Nauvoo” (98). To support his view, he quotes non-member Charlotte Haven who learned that George J. Adams had married a plural wife in England. She wrote “I cannot believe Joseph will ever sanction such a doctrine.” In fact, Adams was not a polygamy insider and his behavior had nothing to do with authorized polygamy secretly being practiced in Nauvoo at the time. While authors may choose to ignore the difference between authorized plural marriage and other unauthorized relationships, Joseph Smith taught unauthorized unions were not valid and were considered adulterous (see D&C 132:7, 18). Adams was promptly brought before the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve on May 27, 1843. There he apparently confessed the sin of adultery and was forgiven. Minutes from the meeting record Joseph Smith as saying: “Brother Adams . . . has started anew, and let all present hold their tongues and only say that Elder Adams has started anew.”²⁴ Importantly, Associate Church President Hyrum Smith did not learn about the principle of plural marriage until the day just before George J. Adam’s trial.²⁵ Similarly Second Counselor William Law did not learn of it until the middle of 1843.²⁶ In other words, Beam alleges that “polygamy was rapidly becoming the worst-kept secret” in Nauvoo in May of 1843, yet Hyrum Smith and William Law were either unaware or had just barely learned of it. In light of their lofty Church callings and their closeness to the Prophet, one wonders how far the alleged rumors had actually spread.

18. Beam also includes an even more dubious claim regarding Joseph Smith and Robert D. Foster’s wife (100). He recounts a late anti-Mormon accusation but fails to reference all pertinent

²¹ Lyndon W. Cook, *William Law* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Co., 1994), 53. In the typescript, the entry is crossed out but apparently clearly legible.

²² Alexander Neibaur, Diary, May 24, 1844, Church History Library.

²³ “The Law Interview,” *The Daily Tribune, Salt Lake City*, July 31, 1887.

²⁴ “Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: Minutes of Meetings,” *New Mormon Studies: A Comprehensive Resource Library*, CD-ROM (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1998).

²⁵ George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 106.

²⁶ See William Law, Affidavit dated July 17, 1885. Quoted in Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy* (Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Co., 1914), 126.

documents including affidavits signed by Foster's wife that Joseph was not guilty of the charges or anything akin to them.²⁷

Summary:

I understand that journalists, like Alex Beam, are paid to write a good story and to sell books. Undoubtedly, Beam and his employers are pleased with *American Crucifixion*. Some readers are also grateful for a text that validates their *a priori* beliefs that Joseph was an adulterer, hypocrite, and/or fraud.

Nevertheless, many problems exist with Beam's reconstruction of Nauvoo polygamy. Obviously covering the topic in one chapter would be difficult, but the biases and documentary problems hamper any possibility that an accurate narrative could have resulted. Whether the remaining chapters of *American Crucifixion* are similarly problematic is unknown to me as I've had little inclination to read them.

It is probably true to say that scholars and the men and women who believe Joseph Smith was a prophet of the living God would have hoped for a higher standard of writing excellence—one that portrayed the historical record more accurately. Indeed, the prejudices and weaknesses manifested by Beam, particularly in the second half of Chapter 5, are so egregious that it is unlikely that even the most staunch of anti-Mormon writers would be able to make any suggestions to strengthen the antagonistic message found within those pages.

²⁷ Reproduced in *History of the Church*, 6:271.