

# “DENYING THE UNDENIABLE”: EXAMINING EARLY MORMON POLYGAMY RENUNCIATIONS

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FEW ASPECTS OF JOSEPH SMITH’S LIFE have raised more questions and emotions than plural marriage. The practice joined religion and sexuality—two hot-button topics in any age that elicited strong feelings. Skeptics thought it was a cover-up for carnal behaviors rather than a divine mandate. Joseph Smith told Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner an angel appeared in 1834<sup>1</sup> directing him to introduce and practice

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Remarks” at Brigham Young University, April 14, 1905, vault MSS 363, fd. 6, 2–3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo; Mary E. Lightner to A. M. Chase, April 20, 1904, quoted in J. D. Stead, *Doctrines and Dogmas of Brighamism Exposed* ([Lamoni, IA]: RLDS Church, 1911), 218–19. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner to Emmeline B. Wells, summer 1905, MS 282, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter Church History Library). Copy of holograph in Linda King Newell Collection, MS 447, Box 9, fd. 2, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter Marriott Library). Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Statement” signed February 8, 1902, Vesta Crawford Papers, copy, MS 125, Box 1, fd. 11, Marriott Library. Original owned by Mrs. Nell Osborne.

polygamy.<sup>2</sup> In response, he secretly married Fanny Alger in Kirtland, Ohio, probably in 1835.<sup>3</sup> In the 1840s he introduced plural marriage teachings to selected Latter-day Saints,<sup>4</sup> which included at least 115 men and women at the time of his death.<sup>5</sup>

Smith asked the participants to keep these relationships confidential, but rumors seeped out.<sup>6</sup> Poorly informed voices disseminated half-truths and even falsehoods to listening ears. Church leaders made public statements to squelch the gossip without acknowledging the private teachings and practices. Critics early and late used these statements to accuse Smith and other early leaders of lying

<sup>2</sup>None of the other eight men and women leaving statements regarding Joseph Smith's visits by an angel commanding polygamy provided a date. See Brian C. Hales, "Encouraging Joseph Smith to Practice Plural Marriage: The Accounts of the Angel with a Drawn Sword," *Mormon Historical Studies* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 55–72.

<sup>3</sup>The dating of this relationship is unknown. However, Mark Staker dates Fanny's arrival in Kirtland to mid-1833 at the earliest. (Mark Lyman Staker, email to Brian Hales, September 9, 2008.) See Don Bradley, "Mormon Polygamy before Nauvoo? The Relationship of Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger," in *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 36.

<sup>4</sup>See Hyrum Smith, discourse of April 8, 1844, Church History Library. Included on Richard E. Turley, Jr., *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2002), vol. 1, DVD no. 1, 6:1984–91.

<sup>5</sup>See Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: History and Theology*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 1:3.

<sup>6</sup>Participants were not required to promise secrecy, but discretion was undoubtedly expected. When asked in 1892: "Did you agree with Joseph Smith when he was teaching you this principle, that you would guard it as a secret?" Lucy Walker answered: "I entered into no such agreement. There was no such an arrangement." Lucy Walker Smith Kimball, deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, *Church of Christ in Missouri v. Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 70 F. 179 (8th Cir. 1895), respondent's testimony (part 3), 481, questions 729–31, Church History Library. In contrast, Emily Partridge recalled Joseph asking "me if I could keep a secret" before sharing plural marriage teachings with her. Emily D. P. Young, deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, respondent's testimony (part 3), 349–50, questions 18–22, Church History Library.

and deception. Providing context to the declarations is helpful in evaluating whether charges of prevarication are valid.

Until the 1980s, members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints used these statements to defend the position that Joseph Smith did not introduce or practice polygamy.<sup>7</sup> RLDS fundamentalist offshoots continue to advocate this interpretation.<sup>8</sup> A few dissenting voices from the Utah tradition also embrace this view.<sup>9</sup>

### DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF DENIALS

Some of Joseph Smith's denials are less controversial because they contradict inaccurate accusations. During The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' first year, some accused members of marital irregularities. The *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (Utica, New York), reported: "They [the Mormons] have all things in common, and dispense with the marriage covenant."<sup>10</sup> Joseph never advocated a community of wives so he could truthfully deny such charges.<sup>11</sup>

On several occasions Joseph Smith rebuked those guilty of sexual sins as different from sanctioned marriages (monogamous or polygamous).<sup>12</sup> According to his April 10, 1842, journal, he "preached in the

<sup>7</sup>See Alma Blair, "RLDS Views of Polygamy: Some Historiographical Notes," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 5 (1985): 16–28; Mark A. Scherer, "As Neither Apologist nor Cynic: Filling in the Gap and Keeping the Theologians Honest," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 25 (2005): 7–17.

<sup>8</sup>Richard Price and Pamela Price, *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy*, vol. 1 (Independence, MO: Price Publishing, 2000).

<sup>9</sup>See for example, Denver Snuffer, "Plural Marriage," <http://denver-snuffer.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Plural-Marriage.pdf>; anonymous, "Joseph Smith's Monogamy: Exploring a Counternarrative Regarding Plural Marriage," <http://downloads.miridiatech.com.s3.amazonaws.com/remnant/JosephSmithsMonogamy.pdf>; Meg Stout, "A Faithful Joseph," <http://www.millennialstar.org/a-faithful-joseph/>.

<sup>10</sup>J. M. H. "Editorial Correspondence," *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (Utica, NY) 2, no. 6 (February 5, 1831): 1.

<sup>11</sup>See "Communications," (Joseph Smith, Letter to the Church (from Liberty Jail), December 16, 1838) *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 6 (April 1840): 84–85.

<sup>12</sup>See Joseph Smith, Liberty, Missouri to Saints in Caldwell County, Missouri, December 16, 1838, in Dean C. Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 419–20.

grove after Elder Wm Law, had spoken, a[nd] pronounced a curse upon all Adulterers & fornicators & unvirtuous persons, & those who had made use of his name to carry on their iniquitous designs.”<sup>13</sup> Other Church leaders also issued statements refuting polygamy. I have classified these statements into five categories:<sup>14</sup>

- Wording of 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, Section CI
- Denying Polygamy was an Official Church Doctrine during Joseph Smith’s Life
- Denying John C. Bennett’s Immoralities
- Denying Polygamy Teachings and Practices that were Unauthorized
- Denying Polygamy through Technicalities

Statements in the last category are the most controversial.

The discussion below examines the declarations primarily through the eyes of the participants. Concerning the “pretzled language” that Church leaders sometimes employed in their denials, Carmon B. Hardy explained: “Statements denying plurality were phrased either to permit more than one interpretation, or to avoid directly disallowing the possibility of such marriages if correctly authorized.”<sup>15</sup> Understandably, skeptics have viewed the declarations more critically and will undoubtedly continue to do so.

#### *Wording of 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, Section CI*

On August 17, 1835, a General Assembly of the Church approved an “Article on Marriage” to include in the Doctrine and Covenants. It became section CI (101). Some authors suggest Joseph Smith did not give explicit permission.<sup>16</sup> Others believe he was aware and

<sup>13</sup>Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, vol. 2 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 50.

<sup>14</sup>Transcripts of the twenty-three denials are available at <http://mormonpolygamymdocuments.org/chart-twenty-three-polygamy-denials/>.

<sup>15</sup>Carmon B. Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1992), 365.

<sup>16</sup>See William Alexander Linn, *The Story of the Mormons from the Date of their Origin to the Year 1901* (New York: Macmillan, 1902; repr., Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 156–57; Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 36.

approved.<sup>17</sup> Either way, he quickly sanctioned it because on several occasions in 1835 and 1836, he pronounced marriage ceremonies “according to the rules and regulations of the Church of the Latter Day Saints,” referring to section CI.<sup>18</sup> This section states, “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.”<sup>19</sup> This seems to specify monogamy and disallow polygamy. It was published twice in Nauvoo in 1842 as evidence that the Church supported only monogamy.<sup>20</sup>

After the main Mormon body migrated west and embraced the practice of plural marriage, RLDS members scrutinized the section’s language. Elder Davis H. Bays pointed out in 1897:

You may have observed the ingenious phraseology of that part of the document which is designed to convey the impression that the assembly, as well as the entire church, was opposed to polygamy, but which, as a matter of fact, leaves the way open for its introduction and practice. The language I refer to is this:

“We believe that one man shall have *one* wife; and one woman *but one husband*.” Why use the restrictive adverb in the case of the woman, and ingeniously omit it with reference to the man? Why not employ the same form of words in the one case as in the other? Of the woman it is said she shall have *but one husband*. Why not say of the man, he shall have “*but one wife* except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>See discussion in Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:153–76.

<sup>18</sup>Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashhurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 114–15, 153, 165. I am indebted to Michael Marquardt for bringing these to my attention.

<sup>19</sup>1835 Doctrine and Covenants CI:4, 251; “General Assembly,” *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 11 (Aug 1835): 163; Joseph Smith et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960 printing), 2:247.

<sup>20</sup>See “Inasmuch as the public mind has been . . .,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (September 1, 1842): 909; “On Marriage,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (October 1, 1842): 939–40.

<sup>21</sup>Davis H. Bays, *Doctrines and Dogmas of Mormonism Examined and Refuted* (St. Louis: Christian Publishing, 1897), 328; italics in original.

In 1902, LDS Church President Joseph F. Smith also observed: “The declaration . . . that ‘one man should have one wife, and one woman *but* one husband,’ bears the implication that a man might possibly be permitted at some time to have more than one wife.”<sup>22</sup>

These two authors felt the statement was ambiguous without a needed qualifier: “we believe that one man should have [*only or at least?*] one wife.” Bays condemned the lack of specificity while President Smith implied it was an intended loophole.

I don’t know if the terminology was deliberate because Joseph Smith Jr. never referred to the technical aspects. Oliver Cowdery, an apparent monogamist throughout his life, wrote the article. So the language was ultimately his, but Smith may have assisted in forming the precise verbiage without Cowdery realizing the ramifications. By 1835, Smith knew that plural marriage was a practice God expected him to restore. Or the specific wording was accidental and coincidental.

*Denying Polygamy as an Official Church Doctrine  
During Joseph Smith’s Life*

Some Church leaders, when speaking on behalf of the Church, denied Joseph Smith’s secret practice of polygamy because he had not announced it as an official “Mormon” practice or Church doctrine.<sup>23</sup> This policy paralleled the introduction of other teachings and practices in Nauvoo. The temple endowment was first administered secretly to nine men on May 4–5, 1842, but was not then an official Church ritual. Joseph taught that it was designed to eventually be given to even “the weakest of the saints,” which occurred in late 1845.<sup>24</sup> Secret

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<sup>22</sup>Joseph F. Smith, “The Real Origin of American Polygamy,” *The Arena* 28 (November 1902): 494; italics in original.

<sup>23</sup>Mormon fundamentalists who continue to practice polygamy today allege that early polygamy was also exterior to the mother Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo. See Joseph W. Musser, *A Priesthood Issue* (n.p.: n.p., [1948]). For counterpoint, see Brian C. Hales, *Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations after the Manifesto*, (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 145–308.

<sup>24</sup>*JSP*, J2:55–56, 56n198. Lisle Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings: A Comprehensive Register of Persons Receiving LDS Temple Ordinances, 1841–1846* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2006).

plural marriage instructions of the 1840s became official Church teachings in 1852.<sup>25</sup>

In 1892, Wilford Woodruff explained: “Joseph Smith received a revelation from God at a very age [*sic*] of the church, which never was revealed to the church during his life, – never revealed either openly or privately to the church as a body, but were revealed to individual members of the Church . . . the whole thing was kept a secret excepting as far as it was revealed to individuals of the church.”<sup>26</sup> The lack of formal Church endorsement allowed priesthood leaders to deny polygamy as an official religious practice even though all participants were members.

The May 1837 *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* declared: “We will have no fellowship whatsoever with any Elder belonging to the quorums of the Seventies who is guilty of polygamy or any offence of the kind.”<sup>27</sup> A year later, the *Elders’ Journal* (which Joseph Smith edited) published questions including, “Do the Mormons believe in having more wives than one?” The answer was “No, not at the same time.”<sup>28</sup> In the 1830s, Church members did not practiced authorized polygamy.<sup>29</sup> Joseph Smith’s plural union to Fanny Alger in Kirtland ended in 1836.<sup>30</sup> I cannot identify any authorized polygamists at the time of the article. In Nauvoo a few leaders advanced plural marriage teachings secretly but not as formal instructions applying to all members. The official marital practice remained monogamy.

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<sup>25</sup>See Davis Bitton, “Polygamy Defended: One Side of a Nineteenth-Century Polemic,” in his *The Ritualization of Mormon History and Other Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 34–53; and his “The Ritualization of Mormon History,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 43 (Winter 1975): 67–85.

<sup>26</sup>Wilford Woodruff, deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, respondent’s testimony (part 3), 54, question 513, Church History Library.

<sup>27</sup>[Daniel S. Miles], *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio) 3 no. 8 (May 1837): 511.

<sup>28</sup>[Editorial,] *Elder’s Journal* 1 (July 1838): 43; see also [Editorial,] *Elder’s Journal* 1 (November 1837): 28.

<sup>29</sup>The dating of Lucinda Pendleton Morgan Harris’s plural marriage to Joseph Smith, if she was married at all, is controversial. See Andrew Jenson Papers, ca. 1871–1942, MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16, second document, Church History Library; Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 4; D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 587; Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:62–64, 2:284–86.

<sup>30</sup>Bradley, “Mormon Polygamy before Nauvoo?,” 47–50.

On at least two occasions, the *Times and Seasons* reprinted letters that declared the Church did not sanction polygamy. A non-member's letter published in 1841 stated that the Mormon faith "encourages no vice, nor immorality, nor departure from established laws and usages; neither polygamy, nor promiscuous intercourse."<sup>31</sup> Two years later a member "H. R." lamented: "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."<sup>32</sup>

Since the official Church position supported only monogamy, these declarations are technically true. Yet, the slowly expanding plurality undercurrent among the Latter-day Saints guaranteed that in the future observers would look back and question the overall accuracy of the declarations.

### *Denying John C. Bennett's Immoralities*

As Joseph Smith cautiously introduced plural marriage to selected members in Nauvoo in 1841 and 1842, the charismatic John C. Bennett arrived to make a complex process even more complicated. Although gifted in many ways, Bennett struggled morally. Historian Linda King Newell assessed: "There is no evidence that Bennett was hampered by either theological or ethical considerations."<sup>33</sup>

Trailing Bennett as he entered Nauvoo was his reputation as an adulterer. By mid-February 1841, Smith sent George Miller to McConelsville, Ohio, to investigate the rumors.<sup>34</sup> Four weeks later Miller reported back that Bennett, who passed himself off as a bachelor in Nauvoo, was already married and that "his poor, but confiding wife, followed him from place to place, with no suspicion of his unfaithfulness to her."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>An "Intelligent" Non-Mormon, "The Mormons," reprinted in the *Times and Seasons* 2 (October 15, 1841): 580.

<sup>32</sup>"H. R.," letter reprinted from the *Boston Bee* in the *Times and Seasons* 4 (March 15, 1843): 143.

<sup>33</sup>Linda King Newell, "Emma Hale Smith and the Polygamy Question," *Journal of the John Whitmer Historical Association* 4 (1984): 13n18.

<sup>34</sup>See Andrew C. Skinner, "John C. Bennett: For Prophet or Profit?" in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Illinois*, ed. H. Dean Garrett (Provo, UT: Department of Church History and Doctrine, BYU, 1995), 256–63.

<sup>35</sup>See Joseph Smith, "To the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and to all the Honorable Part of Community," *Times and Seasons* 3 (July 1, 1842): 839–40.

Having been the focus of numerous rumors himself, Smith did not immediately expose Bennett but privately counselled him “to desist” portraying himself as unmarried.<sup>36</sup> Smith apparently hoped that Bennett’s baptism into the Church signaled a genuine change of heart. With that in mind, Smith supported Bennett’s election as Nauvoo’s first mayor and asked him to serve as an “assistant” to the First Presidency.<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, Smith’s faith in Bennett was unjustified. During this same period, Bennett secretly introduced “spiritual wifery,” which declared that a couple could experience sexual relations so long as they were kept completely secret.<sup>38</sup> No ceremony was required and no obligations existed after the encounter.

Seeing Bennett’s apparent prominence in the Church, it is easy to understand how early researchers might have concluded that Bennett was Joseph’s confidant<sup>39</sup> and that spiritual wifery was simply another name for Joseph’s secret plural marriage teachings.<sup>40</sup> Observers who

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>See Brian C. Hales, “John C. Bennett and Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: Addressing the Question of Reliability,” *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 2 (April 2015): 131–81.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>See Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 239; Gary James Bergera, “John C. Bennett, Joseph Smith, and the Beginnings of Mormon Plural Marriage in Nauvoo,” *Journal of the John Whitmer Historical Association* 25 (2005): 52; Gary James Bergera, *Conflict in the Quorum: Orson Pratt, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 16; Gary James Bergera, “‘Illicit Intercourse,’ Plural Marriage, and the Nauvoo Stake High Council, 1840–1844,” *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 23 (2003): 65; Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 298; George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: “. . . But We Called It Celestial Marriage”* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 65, 67, 70.

<sup>40</sup>No evidence has been found supporting Church leaders considering “spiritual wifery” and celestial marriage interchangeable, but a few Church members may have confused the terms. For example, Emily D. Partridge Young observed in 1883: “In the days of Nauvoo the holy order of celestial marriage was in its infancy; it was not taught publicly, consequently the people generally did not know of it. . . . Spiritual wives, as we were then termed, were not very numerous in those days, and a spiritual baby was a rarity indeed.” Emily D. Partridge Young, “Pioneer Day,” *Woman’s Exponent*, August 1, 1883, 37.

assumed the two were the same construed Church leaders' denunciations of Bennett's iniquities as hypocritical denials of secret celestial plural marriage.<sup>41</sup> On October 15, 1843, Joseph Smith cautioned his listeners to "stop this spinning street yarn and talking about spiritual wives."<sup>42</sup> Months afterwards on May 26, 1844, he exclaimed: "This spiritual wifeism! Why, a man dares not speak or wink, for fear of being accused of this."<sup>43</sup>

Bennett later acknowledged that Joseph Smith had never personally taught him concerning eternal marriage, including eternal plural marriage. On December 7, 1843, in the *Iowa Hawk Eye*, he admitted that his "Spiritual wife doctrine" had nothing to do with "marrying for eternity," monogamously or polygamously.<sup>44</sup> Bennett's biographer, Andrew F. Smith, explained: "No primary evidence has been presented indicating that Bennett was officially involved in the evolving practice of polygamy at Nauvoo. . . . No evidence indicates that Bennett's extramarital relationships were sanctioned by Joseph Smith."<sup>45</sup> Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery agreed, writing that Joseph "neither sanctioned nor participated in Bennett's spiritual wife, doctrine."<sup>46</sup>

Bennett's spiritual wifery and Joseph's celestial marriage teachings unfolded on different timelines in Nauvoo. Due to the Nauvoo

<sup>41</sup>See *Affidavits and Certificates, Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett's Letters*, Nauvoo, Illinois, August 31, 1842, Church History Library; "Extract of a Letter from Robert D. Foster," *The Wasp* 1 (September 24, 1842); "For *The Wasp*," *The Wasp* 1 (October 15, 1842).

<sup>42</sup>Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 257.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 375–76. It is true that a few Church members adopted the term to describe celestial plural marriage (see for example Emily D. Partridge Young, "Pioneer Day," *Woman's Exponent*, August 1, 1883, 37), but Joseph Smith never did, mentioning the term only twice and in derision.

<sup>44</sup>John C. Bennett, "Letter from General Bennett," *Hawk Eye*, December 7, 1843, 1; emphasis in original.

<sup>45</sup>Andrew F. Smith, "John Cook Bennett's Nauvoo," *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* (2002 Nauvoo Conference Special Edition): 114–15.

<sup>46</sup>Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 114.

High Council’s investigations in May, spiritual wifery was fairly well publicized by the summer of 1842. In contrast, only three men had secretly entered authorized polygamy by that time and knowledge of celestial plurality among Church members was limited.<sup>47</sup>

In September, twelve men and then nineteen Relief Society members signed two separate affidavits stating: “we know of no other rule or system of marriage than the one published from the Book of Doctrine and Covenants.”<sup>48</sup> If the signatories knew of Smith’s private marital teachings, detractors may accuse them of lying, but it is clear many did not.<sup>49</sup> Less than a third knew of Smith’s teachings but all knew Bennett’s spiritual wifery immoralities.<sup>50</sup> Years later Eliza R. Snow, one of the thirty-one, wrote to Joseph F. Smith explaining the intent of the signers: “At the time the sisters of the Relief Society signed our article, I was married to the prophet—we made no allusion to any other system of marriage than Bennett’s—his was prostitution, and it was truly his, and he succeeded in pandering his course on the credulity of the unsuspecting by making them believe that he was thus authorized by the Prophet. In those articles there is no reference to divine plural marriage. We aimed to put down its opposite.”<sup>51</sup>

Authors of a Relief Society documents review book explain: “In signing the statement on marriage, these women who knew about plural marriage likely differentiated in their minds between what they saw as an inspired system of marriage, commanded by God,

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<sup>47</sup>See John S. Dinger, ed., *The Nauvoo City and High Council Minutes* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011), 415–20.

<sup>48</sup>“On Marriage,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (October 1, 1842): 939–40.

<sup>49</sup>See Jeremy Runnells, *Letter to a CES Director*, n.p., March 31, 2015, 34, 63, <https://cesletter.org/>.

<sup>50</sup>Signatories who were probably aware of plural marriage teachings include: N. K. Whitney, John Taylor, W. Woodruff, Elizabeth Ann Whitney, Sarah M. Cleveland, Eliza R. Snow, Phebe Woodruff, and Leonora Taylor. Others who signed were S. Bennett, George Miller, Albert Pettey, Alpheus Cutler, Elias Higbee, Reynolds Cahoon, Wilson Law, E. Robinson, Aaron Johnson, Emma Smith, Mary C. Miller, Catharine Pettey, Lois Cutler, Sarah Higbee, Thirza Cahoon, Ann Hunter, Jane Law, Sarah Hillman, Sophia R. Marks, Rosannah Marks, Polly Z. Johnson, Angeline Robinson, and Abigail Works.

<sup>51</sup>Eliza R. Snow to Joseph F. Smith, n.d., Joseph F. Smith, papers, 1854–1912, Church History Library.

and Bennett's practice of unlicensed bigamy or polygamy, which they believed manipulated innocent women to serve men's baser desires."<sup>52</sup>

It is ironic that John C. Bennett's spiritual wifery teachings appeared at nearly the same moment that Joseph Smith felt compelled to introduce plural marriage. A few years earlier or a few years later would have lessened Bennett's overall impact. In 1842, Joseph encountered a perfect storm as his teachings and practices about plural marriage relationships collided with Bennett's teachings and practices about sexual relationships.

*Denying Polygamy Teachings and Practices that were Unauthorized*

Important to plural marriage sealings was a regulatory doctrine that "one" man controlled the sealing authority and that all marriages, monogamous or polygamous, performed without his authorization were invalid (D&C 132: 7, 10, 18, 19). In Nauvoo, a naïve Hyrum Smith performed an eternal sealing for a monogamous couple without first receiving permission from Joseph, who was out of town. When he learned of the ceremony, he rebuked his brother and cancelled the sealing ceremony. Brigham Young referred to the incident in 1845:

Joseph said that the sealing power is always vested in one man, and that there never was, nor never would be but one man on the earth at a time to hold the —sealing power— keys of the sealing power in the church, that all sealings must be performed by the man holding the keys or by his dictation, and that man is the president of the church[.]

Hyrum held the patriarchal office legitimately . . . Hyrum was counsellor . . . but the sealing power was not in Hyrum, legitimately, neither did he act on the sealing principle only as he was dictated by Joseph ~~in every case~~ [*sic*] This was proven, for Hyrum did ~~in one case~~ [*sic*] undertake to seal without counsel, & Joseph told him if he did not stop it he would go to hell and all those he sealed with him.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Jill Mulvay Derr et al., ed., *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 143.

<sup>53</sup>Brigham Young to William Smith, "City of Joseph, August 10, 1845," in Brigham Young Collection, Church History Library; see also William Smith to Brigham Young, August 27, 1844, in Brigham Young Collection, Church History Library.

When priesthood leaders disciplined members like "Elder Solomon Freeman" in 1837,<sup>54</sup> Dr. William Campbell, alias Samuel Rogers, in 1841,<sup>55</sup> and Hiram Brown in 1844<sup>56</sup> for polygamy, they differentiated between sanctioned and unsanctioned plural unions. This struggle continues in the twenty-first century as leaders in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints attempt to distance the Church from fundamentalist polygamists who have adopted alternate priesthood lines ostensibly to authorize their ceremonies.<sup>57</sup>

### *Denying Polygamy through Technicalities*

The most controversial refutations of Nauvoo plural marriage are those that relied on verbal technicalities. During the final year of Joseph's life, both he, his wife Emma, and his brother Hyrum gave statements that are easily construed to deny polygamy.

#### EMMA SMITH AND THE RELIEF SOCIETY MARCH 20, 1844

The March 20, 1844, edition of the *Nauvoo Neighbor* printed "The Voice of Innocence from Nauvoo." The Nauvoo Relief Society accepted it and Emma Smith as president signed it. The article included three resolutions, one of which read: "while the marriage bed, undefiled is honorable, let polygamy, bigamy, fornication [,] adultery, and prostitution, be frowned out of the hearts of honest men to drop in the gulf of fallen nature, where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched!"<sup>58</sup>

This printed condemnation of polygamy may be interpreted several ways. Emma could have been covering up by assuming that celestial plural marriage was not accurately characterized as "polygamy." More likely, she used her position as president of the Relief Society to work against plural marriage, a practice she could not then support. Bathsheba Smith, wife of Apostle George A. Smith, recalled that sometime during late 1843 or early 1844: "Emma Smith said in my presence, to me and to others who were present upon that occasion, 'Your husbands are going to take more wives, and unless you

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<sup>54</sup>*Kirtland Elder's Quorum Record, 1836–1841*, edited by Lyndon W. Cook and Milton V. Backman, Jr. (Provo, UT: Grandin Book Company, 1985), 35.

<sup>55</sup>"Caution!" *Times and Seasons* 3 (December 15, 1841): 636.

<sup>56</sup>"Notice," *Times and Seasons* 5 (February 1, 1844): 423.

<sup>57</sup>See Hales, *Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism*.

<sup>58</sup>"Virtue Will Triumph," *Nauvoo Neighbor* 1 (March 20, 1844) 187.

consent to it, you must put your foot down and keep it there.’ Much more was said in regard to plural marriage at that time by Sister Emma Smith, who seemed opposed to the principle.”<sup>59</sup>

Joseph Smith and other leaders were apparently displeased by the article and the Relief Society did not meet again during the remainder of 1844.<sup>60</sup> In a May discourse, Joseph referred to the challenges he faced because of the statement: “A man asked me whether the commandment was given that a man may have seven wives; and now the new prophet [William Law] 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.”<sup>61</sup>

Even Brigham Young suggested that the Relief Society may have had a negative effect upon the events leading to Smith’s death. Just months after the martyrdom, he asked: “What are relief societies for?” and then he answered: “To relieve us of our best men. They relieved us of Joseph and Hyrum.”<sup>62</sup>

“The Voice of Innocence from Nauvoo” constitutes more of a condemnation of polygamy than a denial of its existence. As such, it is also a strong indication that the unequal practice was not universally accepted by sisters in the Church at that time.

#### HYRUM SMITH’S DECLARATIONS

As Associate Church President and Church Patriarch, Hyrum Smith was close to Joseph his brother. However, as late as May 1843, he was not in Joseph’s polygamy inner circle. Without firsthand knowledge, Hyrum used his influence to put down rumors of polygamy. On May 23, 1843, William Clayton recorded: “Conversed with Heber C. Kimball concerning a plot that is being laid to entrap the brethren of the secret priesthood [those practicing plural marriage] by Brother H [Hyrum Smith] and others.”<sup>63</sup> Before the trap was sprung, Hyrum

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<sup>59</sup>Affidavit of Bathsheba W. Smith, November 19, 1903, MS 3423, Church History Library, copied into Joseph F. Smith Affidavit Books, 2:51–54; also quoted in Joseph Fielding Smith, *Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1905), 88.

<sup>60</sup>See Derr et al., *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 12–16.

<sup>61</sup>Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 376.

<sup>62</sup>Brigham Young, Discourse, March 9, 1845 (excerpt), Nauvoo High Priests Quorum Record, 1841–1845, Church History Library.

<sup>63</sup>George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 105.

approached Brigham Young saying: “I am convinced that there is something that has not been told me.” Young then informed Hyrum: “Joseph had many wives sealed to him. I told Hyrum the whole story and he bowed to it and wept like a child and said, ‘God be praised.’”<sup>64</sup> On May 26, 1843, Clayton recorded: “Hyrum received the doctrine of priesthood.”<sup>65</sup>

Within three months, Hyrum was sealed to four plural wives.<sup>66</sup> Quickly he was in the middle of the polygamy controversies and could distinguish between authorized plural marriage and unauthorized teachings and practices. His letter in the March 15, 1844, *Times and Seasons* denounced that “a man having a certain priesthood, may have as many wives as he pleases, and that doctrine is taught here: I say unto you that that man teaches false doctrine, for there is no such doctrine taught here; neither is there any such thing practiced here.”<sup>67</sup> The denial hinges upon the phrase “a man having a *certain* priesthood,” which was easily renounced because it was inaccurate. Plural marriage only involved the most faithful Church members—the men had all received priesthood ordinations. But in Nauvoo and later in Utah, the number of plural wives permitted was not directly tied to a specific priesthood office.

Weeks later Hyrum spoke in General Conference criticizing “spiritual wifery,” declaring “No spiritual wife doctrine ever originated with me.” He also instructed: “I wish the Elders of Israel to understand it is lawful for a man to marry a wife, but it is unlawful to have more, and God has not commanded any of you to have more.”<sup>68</sup>

Unlike most of the denials I discuss here, these words were not published. Yet, if accurately reported, they suggest Hyrum may have

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<sup>64</sup>Brigham Young, October 8, 1866, *Brigham Young Addresses: A Chronological Compilation of Known Addresses of the Prophet Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Elden J. Watson, 1982), 5:52–54.

<sup>65</sup>Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 106.

<sup>66</sup>Mercy Fielding Thompson (August 11, 1843), Catharine Phillips (August 1843), Lydia Dibble (ca. August 1843) and Louisa Sanger (September 17, 1843). See Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, appendix B, no. 153.

<sup>67</sup>“To the brethren of the Church of Jesus Christ . . .” *Times and Seasons* 5 (March 15, 1844): 474.

<sup>68</sup>Hyrum Smith, April 8, 1844, discourse not published. Found on page 11 of the addendum, which begins after page 2028, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/356>.

been splitting hairs. At that time, polygamy was not a general teaching or practice and did not apply to all Church members, to all “Elders of Israel,” but privately some Elders of Israel had been instructed concerning the principle and were told God commanded the practice at that time.

Later in the discourse Hyrum taught: “If any of you dare to presume to do any such things [polygamy], it will spoil your fun . . . for a man to go into the world and talk of this spiritual wife system he is as empty as an open sepulcher.”<sup>69</sup> These are hardly comprehensive statements condemning plural marriage. Listeners might have been confused.

Two months later on June 8, Hyrum spoke at a regular session of the Nauvoo City Council and “referred to the revelation [now D&C 132], read to the High Council of the Church [on August 12, 1843], which has caused so much talk about a multiplicity of wives; that said revelation was in answer to a question concerning things which transpired in former days, and had no reference to the present time.”<sup>70</sup>

The timing could be significant because this statement seems to contradict plural marriage teachings and practices that can be documented at least to mid-May 1844. For example, Joseph authorized the plural sealing of Brigham Young and Clarissa Caroline Decker on May 8, 1844.<sup>71</sup> Apostle George A. Smith recalled in 1869: “My last conversation with him [Joseph Smith] on this subject [plural marriage] occurred just previous to my departure from Nauvoo (May 9, 1844).”<sup>72</sup> Other apostles recalled Joseph’s polygamy teachings as late as May.<sup>73</sup>

What if Hyrum’s published statement was accurate on June 8? One interpretation supports that sometime between the latter part of May and early June, Joseph Smith questioned the sacrifices polygamy demanded. This view posits that he felt inspired to initiate a change

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>City Council, regular session, June 8, 1844, Dinger, *The Nauvoo City and High Council Minutes*, 241; see also “Extra,” *Nauvoo Neighbor*, June 17, 1844.

<sup>71</sup>Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 635.

<sup>72</sup>George A. Smith to Joseph Smith III, October 9, 1869, “Journal History,” in *Selected Collections*, vol. 2, DVD no. 5.

<sup>73</sup>Amasa Lyman, “Amasa Lyman’s History,” *Millennial Star* 27 (September 2, 1865): 553; and Charles C. Rich in Joseph F. Smith Affidavit Books, Church History Library, 1:54.

in marital practices and did what Wilford Woodruff accomplished decades later by instructing the Saints that plural marriage was no longer required. Supporting this reconstruction, Stake President William Marks asserted in 1853 that “three weeks before his death” or around June 6, 1844, Joseph expressed to him the need to discontinue the practice.<sup>74</sup> Marks’s recollections are problematic in many regards, but he served as the Nauvoo Stake President and was highly respected by Church members.<sup>75</sup> It seems inconsistent for him to wholly contrive the conversation. Perhaps Joseph was killed before he could reinstitute a monogamous marital standard.

Brigham Young remembered: “Joseph was worn out with it,” adding: “I never knew that he denied the doctrine of polygamy. Some have said that he did, but I do not believe he ever did.”<sup>76</sup> Young left Nauvoo on a mission May 21, so theoretically he might not have known of any new instructions taught after that point.<sup>77</sup> Unfortunately, without additional information, I cannot discern the accuracy of Hyrum’s June 8 comments.

#### JOSEPH SMITH’S STATEMENTS

During the final nine months of his life, Joseph Smith uttered at least three statements that could be interpreted as denying polygamy. On October 5, 1843, his journal records: “walked up and down st. with scribe.—and gave inst[r]uction to try those who were preaching teaching or preaching the doctin of plurality of wives. On this Law. Joseph forbids it. And the practice ther[e]of—No man shall have but one wife[.]”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>William Marks, “Epistle,” *Zions Harbinger and Baneemy’s Organ* 3 (July 1853): 52–54 (published in St. Louis, by C. B. Thompson); *History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 8 vols. (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1967), 2:733.

<sup>75</sup>See Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 2:247–56.

<sup>76</sup>Brigham Young address, October 8, 1866, Watson, *Brigham Young Addresses*, 5:52.

<sup>77</sup>Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith and Brent M. Rogers, eds., *Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844*, vol. 3 of the Journal series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2016), 255 [May 21, 1844].; John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 106.

<sup>78</sup>*JSP*, J3:107.

Based upon this entry, some readers might envision Joseph marching through the streets of Nauvoo proclaiming to all available listeners: “No man shall have but one wife.” Other observers may extract this sentence and assert that it summarizes all of Joseph Smith’s teachings regarding the possibility of plural marriage.<sup>79</sup>

A closer look at the surrounding circumstances shows that at that time, perhaps sixty-five Church members were practicing authorized polygamy.<sup>80</sup> Having sanctioned each of their sealing ceremonies, Joseph knew of the identities of the participants.<sup>81</sup> Dozens more were aware of his celestial marriage teachings, possibly hundreds.<sup>82</sup> But in a city of eight to ten thousand, it would still have constituted a small minority.

Joseph too supervised all who were “preaching” and “teaching” authorized plural marriage. Wilford Woodruff recalled that at that time: “There was no one teaching it only under his direction.”<sup>83</sup>

I don’t believe that by October 1843 Joseph Smith had lost control of the secret practice of celestial plural marriage. The number of participants was low and no record exists that those accepting the doctrine proceeded to freelance plural unions without his authorization. It seems a public rebuke of the clandestine pluralists or of the few men he had appointed to teach others would not have been necessary even if Joseph sought to curtail plural marriage. The limited knowledge of the sanctioned teachings and ceremonies supports

<sup>79</sup>Price and Price, *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy*, 106–7.

<sup>80</sup>Male participants were Heber C. Kimball, Brigham Young, Willard Richards, William D. Huntington, Orson Hyde, Lorenzo Dow Young, Orson Hyde, Joseph B. Noble, William Clayton, Benjamin F. Johnson, Parley P. Pratt, William Felshaw, Hyrum Smith, John Smith and possibly William Smith. See Brian C. Hales, “‘He Had No Other Wife but Me’: Emma Hale Smith and Mormon Polygamy,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 37, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2017): 9–10.

<sup>81</sup>According to Joseph Smith’s teachings, valid eternal marriages, whether monogamous or polygamous, required the permission of the “one” man holding the keys of sealing authority (see D&C 132:7, 10, 18, 19).

<sup>82</sup>George A. Smith taught in 1871: “In 1843 the law on celestial marriage was written, but not published, and was known only to perhaps one or two hundred persons.” George A. Smith, August 13, 1871, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1854–86), 14:213.

<sup>83</sup>Wilford Woodruff, deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, respondent’s testimony (part 3), 56, question 536.

the likelihood that a broad declaration regarding them could have generated inquiries Joseph would have liked to avoid.

Joseph Smith’s journal states that he “gave instruction to try those” teaching polygamy. But who would have tried the false teachers? Were they to be arraigned before the Nauvoo High Council who knew firsthand of the revelation written July 12, 1843, now section 132?<sup>84</sup> Also, what “law” was referenced—Illinois statutes, Church standards, or the secret teachings of the new and everlasting covenant, which was also called a “law” (D&C 132:6, 19)?

One interpretation is that Smith was reproving spiritual wifery and unauthorized polygamy. For such perpetrators, “No man shall have but one wife” was the unalterable expectation. The historical record shows that such behaviors existed among Church members like Hiram Brown.<sup>85</sup> Their activities warranted a trial before the high council according to the standards found in Joseph’s revelations (D&C 42:75–80, 63:16).

When Joseph’s journal entry was transcribed into the *History of the Church*, the words: “On this Law. Joseph forbids it. And the practice ther[e]of—No man shall have but one wife” were expanded to read: “for, according to the law, I hold the keys of this power in the last days; for there is never but one on earth at a time on whom the power and its keys are conferred; and I have constantly said no man shall have but one wife at a time, unless the Lord directs otherwise.”<sup>86</sup>

These changes, made by Church historians presumably under Brigham Young’s direction, deleted ten words and added forty-nine.<sup>87</sup> The additional text included concepts described in section 132 (7, 10, 18), which Joseph dictated July 12, 1843.<sup>88</sup> To summarize, Joseph Smith’s October 5, 1843, journal entry contains ambiguities that will continue to spark controversy, but proper contextualization helps any interpretation.

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<sup>84</sup>Hyrum Smith read the revelation to the Nauvoo High Council on August 12, 1843. See Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 2:139–44.

<sup>85</sup>“Notice,” *Times and Seasons*, 5:423.

<sup>86</sup>Joseph Smith et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed., B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960), 6:46. See also Dan Vogel, ed., *History of Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: A Source- and Text-Critical Edition*, 8 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2015), 6:55–56, n150.

<sup>87</sup>See “History of Joseph Smith,” *Millennial Star* 22 (April 7, 1860): 214.

<sup>88</sup>Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 110.

By far Joseph Smith's most often quoted denial was on 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."<sup>89</sup> Since Joseph had been sealed to over two dozen women, this might seem to be little more than a dodge. Yet legally, Joseph Smith had only one wife. He did not commit bigamy because none of the plural marriage ceremonies invoked legal authority.<sup>90</sup> Also outwardly, Joseph only had one wife, having never publicly acknowledged his plural wives in any way. Lucy Walker remembered his promise: "Although I cannot, under existing circumstances, acknowledge you as my wife, the time is near when we will go beyond the Rocky Mountains and then you will be acknowledged and honored as my wife."<sup>91</sup> So as he was openly addressing the congregation that day, Emma was the only wife Joseph had legally or publicly acknowledged. These observations may be unimpressive, but they demonstrate an attempt to share only partial truths in the hopes that the audience would not read between the lines.

Two weeks later in a regular session of the Nauvoo City Council on June 8, 1844, Joseph declared that "he had never preached the revelation in private, as he had in public—had not taught it to the highest anointed in the church in private, which statement many present confirmed."<sup>92</sup> The revelation referred to is section 132, but the statement is confusing. According to available documents, the revelation was never "preached . . . in public," but it was taught "in private" to many individuals and groups. The reference to the "anointed . . . in the church" was accurate because plural marriage was not taught as part of the temple endowment ceremonies during Joseph Smith's lifetime.<sup>93</sup> The lack of clarity, however, suggests that

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<sup>89</sup>Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 377.

<sup>90</sup>*The Revised Code of Laws of Illinois: Enacted by the Fifth General Assembly* (State of Illinois: Robert Blackwell, 1827), 180–81.

<sup>91</sup>Lyman Omer Littlefield, *Reminiscences of Latter-day Saints: Giving an Account of Much Individual Suffering Endured for Religious Conscience* (Logan, UT: Utah Journal Co., 1888), 47.

<sup>92</sup>City Council, regular session, June 8th, 1844, Dinger, *The Nauvoo City and High Council Minutes*, 241; see also "Extra," *Nauvoo Neighbor*, June 17, 1844.

<sup>93</sup>See Andrew F. Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the Mormon Succession Question" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1982), 63.

Joseph’s actual words may have been incompletely transcribed allowing more than one valid interpretation.

### ATTEMPTS TO AVOID LYING

It is true that Joseph Smith taught “thou shalt not lie” (D&C 42:21). Defenders may note that scriptural examples exist where deceptive tactics were employed, apparently with divine sanction. Abraham introduced his wife Sarah as his “sister” to King Abimelech, not disclosing she was his wife (Genesis 20:1–7), a tactic he had implemented earlier in Egypt:

And it came to pass when I was come near to enter into Egypt, the Lord said unto me: Behold, Sarai, thy wife, is a very fair woman to look upon;

Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see her, they will say—She is his wife; and they will kill you, but they will save her alive; therefore see that ye do on this wise:

Let her say unto the Egyptians, she is thy sister, and thy soul shall live.

And it came to pass that I, Abraham, told Sarai, my wife, all that the Lord had said unto me—Therefore say unto them, I pray thee, thou art my sister, that it may be well with me for thy sake, and my soul shall live because of thee. (Abr. 2:22–25; see also Genesis 12:10–20.)

Invoking Abraham as an example of approved deception is, no doubt, a slippery slope. While it demonstrates one method to deal with the tension that can arise between governing bodies and practices believed to be commanded by God, widespread implementation could result in truth-confusion and a general loss of credibility among adherents.

Historians have generally recognized that most statements include elements designed to avoid frank lying. Fawn Brodie explained: “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.”<sup>94</sup> Admittedly it is easy to be nonplussed by the lack of transparency, which may be considered unforgivable by some, no matter the circumstances.

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<sup>94</sup>Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 321.

For others, their willingness to pass sweeping judgments may be tempered by acknowledging the difficult realities those Latter-day Saints then faced. Compressed between what was for them a divine directive that clashed with local laws and traditions, they were sometimes creative, but generally seemed sincere. When contextualized, the denials of polygamy appear to represent a singular behavior, rather than the tip of a prevarication iceberg for Joseph and the other Saints. The presence of a sinister network of illicit activities that included polygamy and was camouflaged by a web of lies has yet to be discovered. Instead, the denials rose as devout religionists chose their highest priorities in the midst of their convictions and conflicts.

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