

Argument 9: Joseph Smith's Polygamy Proves False Prophet

| Introduction

Of all the criticisms leveled against the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage is among the most emotionally charged and personally difficult to address. Critics argue that the nature, secrecy, and scope of his marriages — including unions with teenagers and women already married to other men — constitute definitive proof that he was a false prophet driven by lust. This argument deserves honest, unflinching engagement because the historical evidence is complex, the moral questions are real, and superficial responses do not serve the truth.

| The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The strongest version of this argument:

Joseph Smith married at least 30-40 women. Some were as young as 14 (Helen Mar Kimball). Some were already legally married to other living men (polyandrous marriages). Many of these marriages were conducted in secret, hidden from Emma Smith and the general membership. The pattern of secrecy, the targeting of young women, the marriages to other men's wives, and the use of religious authority to obtain consent — all of this is consistent with the behavior of cult leaders throughout history who exploit their position for sexual access. A true prophet of God would not behave this way. Jesus said, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20), and the fruits of Joseph Smith's marital practices are manipulation, deception, and exploitation.

This is a serious criticism that deserves serious engagement, not deflection.

| Acknowledging the Difficulty

Before mounting any defense, intellectual honesty requires acknowledging several things:

1. **The Church has officially acknowledged the historical reality.** The Gospel Topics Essay "Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo" (published on churchofjesuschrist.org) confirms that Joseph Smith married approximately 30-40 women, that the youngest was 14, that some were married to other men, and that the practice was kept from Emma for a time.
2. **This is genuinely difficult.** Latter-day Saints should not pretend otherwise. The practice causes discomfort, and that discomfort is understandable.

3. **Modern cultural standards differ from 19th-century norms.** This does not excuse everything, but it is historically relevant context.

The question is not whether plural marriage is difficult to accept — it is. The question is whether it constitutes definitive proof of false prophecy.

| Biblical Response

Polygamy Is a Biblical Practice, Not an Automatic Disqualifier

The Bible records numerous righteous men who practiced plural marriage:

- **Abraham** — married Sarah, Hagar, and Keturah (Genesis 16:3; 25:1). Abraham is called "the Friend of God" (James 2:23) and the father of the faithful.
- **Jacob (Israel)** — married Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah (Genesis 29-30). God renamed him Israel, and the entire covenant people bear his name.
- **Moses** — married Zipporah and a Cushite woman (Exodus 2:21; Numbers 12:1). When Miriam criticized this marriage, God struck *her* with leprosy, not Moses.
- **David** — had multiple wives, and God called him "a man after mine own heart" (Acts 13:22). God condemned David for taking Bathsheba and murdering Uriah — not for polygamy itself. Through Nathan, God said: "I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom" (2 Samuel 12:8) — God Himself gave David his plural wives.
- **Solomon** — had 700 wives and 300 concubines. His sin was not polygamy per se but that his foreign wives "turned away his heart after other gods" (1 Kings 11:4).
- **Gideon** — "had many wives" (Judges 8:30) and is listed in the Hebrews 11 "hall of faith."

God directly commanded polygamy in at least one instance: In 2 Samuel 12:8, God (through Nathan) tells David, "I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom." God takes credit for giving David multiple wives.

The Law of Moses regulated polygamy without condemning it: Deuteronomy 21:15-17 provides inheritance rules for a man with two wives. Exodus 21:10 regulates the treatment of plural wives. If polygamy were inherently sinful, the Law would prohibit it, not regulate it.

The "False Prophet" Test Is Not About Personal Discomfort

Jesus said, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:15-20). The fruits of Joseph Smith's ministry include:

- The Book of Mormon — a complex, internally consistent 531-page text that has withstood nearly 200 years of scrutiny
- The restoration of priesthood authority and temple ordinances
- A worldwide church of over 17 million members
- A lay ministry and welfare system that serves millions regardless of faith

- Doctrine that reveals the nature of God, the purpose of life, and the eternal nature of families

Critics select one aspect of Joseph Smith's life — plural marriage — and declare it the defining "fruit." But the biblical test of a prophet is whether their prophecies come true (Deuteronomy 18:20-22) and whether their teachings lead people to God (Deuteronomy 13:1-3), not whether their personal practices conform to modern Western marital norms.

Biblical Prophets Were Imperfect

If personal moral failing disqualifies a prophet, the Bible has no prophets:

- **Moses** murdered an Egyptian (Exodus 2:12) and was denied entry to the Promised Land for disobedience (Numbers 20:12).
- **David** committed adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11). Yet he remained God's anointed.
- **Jonah** fled from God and was angry when God showed mercy (Jonah 1, 4).
- **Peter** denied Christ three times (Matthew 26:69-75) and was later rebuked by Paul for hypocrisy regarding Gentile converts (Galatians 2:11-14).
- **Paul** persecuted and killed Christians before his conversion (Acts 8:1-3; 22:4).

The standard critics apply to Joseph Smith — moral perfection as a prerequisite for prophetic calling — would disqualify every prophet in the Bible.

| Historical Context

Marriage Norms in 19th-Century America

- **Age of marriage:** In the 1840s, the legal age of marriage in many states was 12-14 for girls with parental consent. While a 14-year-old bride is disturbing by modern standards, it was within the legal and cultural norms of the time. Helen Mar Kimball's marriage was arranged by her father, Heber C. Kimball, a close associate of Joseph Smith.
- **The nature of these marriages is debated.** Evidence for sexual relations in many of Joseph Smith's plural marriages is ambiguous. Historian Todd Compton, whose work *In Sacred Loneliness* is the most thorough scholarly treatment, acknowledges that evidence for consummation varies significantly from marriage to marriage. Some may have been primarily dynastic or theological sealings rather than conjugal relationships.
- **Polyandrous marriages (marriages to already-married women):** These are among the most difficult to understand. Scholars have proposed several explanations: some may have been "eternity only" sealings (binding for the afterlife but not involving earthly conjugal relations), some may reflect Joseph's understanding of priesthood authority superseding civil marriage, and some remain genuinely puzzling. Honest engagement requires acknowledging that we do not fully understand every aspect of this practice.

Joseph Smith Did Not Invent Religious Polygamy

Polygamy existed in many religious traditions, including ancient Israel. The Latter-day Saint practice was understood as a restoration of the biblical pattern, commanded by God through revelation (D&C 132). Joseph Smith consistently taught that he was reluctant to practice plural marriage and did so because God commanded it:

- **D&C 132:3-4** records the Lord saying that those who receive this law must obey it or be damned. Joseph Smith told associates that an angel with a drawn sword commanded him to practice plural marriage and threatened destruction if he refused.
- Whether one accepts this explanation depends on whether one accepts Joseph Smith as a prophet. But the explanation is consistent — he did not claim to enjoy or desire the practice.

The Secrecy Question

Critics emphasize the secrecy of plural marriage as evidence of guilt. Several contextual factors:

1. **Polygamy was illegal in Illinois.** Practicing it openly would have resulted in prosecution.
2. **The public reaction was predictably hostile.** Open practice would have endangered the Saints, who had already been driven from Missouri at gunpoint.
3. **Biblical precedent for divinely commanded secrecy exists.** Nephi was commanded to kill Laban in secret (1 Nephi 4). Abraham told Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister, not his wife (Genesis 12:13). Rahab lied to protect the Israelite spies (Joshua 2:4-5).
4. **The secrecy was temporary.** The Church publicly announced plural marriage in 1852 and practiced it openly in Utah until the Manifesto of 1890.

This does not fully resolve the moral tension — particularly regarding the deception of Emma Smith. But it provides context that simple accusations of "cult leader secrecy" ignore.

| LDS Doctrinal Position

1. **Plural marriage was a commandment for a specific time and people.** It was practiced by ancient prophets, restored through Joseph Smith, and discontinued by prophetic revelation in 1890 (Official Declaration 1).
2. **The Church does not currently practice polygamy.** Members who practice it are excommunicated. The Church has been clear and consistent on this point for over 130 years.
3. **The Church has been transparent about this history.** The Gospel Topics Essays, published on the Church's official website, address plural marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo with significant historical detail and scholarly nuance.
4. **D&C 132** provides the theological framework: plural marriage is authorized only when commanded by God through His prophet. It is not a general license but a specific commandment that can be given and withdrawn.

5. **Jacob 2:27-30** in the Book of Mormon provides the governing principle: "For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife... For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things." Monogamy is the default; polygamy is the exception, permitted only by divine command for specific purposes.

| Key Scriptures

Reference	Point
Genesis 16:3; 25:1	Abraham — polygamist, "Friend of God"
Genesis 29-30	Jacob/Israel — four wives, father of the covenant
2 Samuel 12:8	God gave David his plural wives
Deut 21:15-17	Law of Moses regulates (not prohibits) polygamy
Exodus 21:10	Law of Moses provides rights for plural wives
Numbers 12:1-10	God defended Moses' second marriage; struck Miriam with leprosy
Jacob 2:27-30	Monogamy is default; polygamy by divine command only
D&C 132:3-4	Plural marriage as divine commandment
Matt 7:15-20	"By their fruits" — examine the whole ministry, not one practice
Deut 18:20-22	Biblical test of a prophet: do prophecies come true?

| Responses to Common Objections

"He married a 14-year-old!"

Helen Mar Kimball was 14 — young by modern standards but within the legal marriage age in 1840s America. Her father, Heber C. Kimball, arranged the marriage. Evidence that this marriage was consummated is absent; Helen herself later described it as a sealing for eternity. Context does not eliminate discomfort, but it does complicate the "predatory cult leader" narrative.

"He married other men's wives!"

The polyandrous sealings are among the most complex aspects of early LDS plural marriage. Some appear to have been "eternity only" sealings — binding the woman to Joseph Smith for the afterlife while her civil marriage continued. The theological framework involved priesthood authority over eternal relationships. This is admittedly difficult to fully understand, and honest engagement requires acknowledging that ambiguity.

"The secrecy proves guilt!"

Polygamy was illegal in Illinois. Biblical prophets also kept divine commands secret when public disclosure would endanger God's people. The practice was publicly declared in 1852 and practiced openly for decades. The secrecy was situational, not permanent.

"This is exactly what cult leaders do!"

This comparison assumes the conclusion. If Joseph Smith was a false prophet, his behavior looks like a cult leader's. If he was a true prophet obeying a difficult divine command — as Abraham was when commanded to sacrifice Isaac — the same behavior has a fundamentally different meaning. The question of prophetic authenticity must be settled on broader evidence (the Book of Mormon, fulfilled prophecies, the Restoration as a whole), not on this single issue in isolation.

"A true prophet wouldn't do this!"

By this standard, the Bible has no true prophets. Abraham offered his son as a sacrifice. Moses killed a man. David committed adultery and murder. Hosea married a prostitute *at God's command* (Hosea 1:2). God's commands sometimes offend human sensibilities — that is part of what makes them tests of faith.

"The Book of Mormon condemns polygamy!"

Jacob 2:27 establishes monogamy as the default, but verse 30 provides the exception: "For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people." The Book of Mormon does not categorically condemn polygamy — it restricts it to divine command. This is exactly the framework Joseph Smith operated within.

| Conclusion

Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage is genuinely difficult. Latter-day Saints should not pretend otherwise, and dismissive answers serve no one. But difficulty is not the same as disproof. The biblical record is clear that God commanded polygamy among His chosen servants, that prophets were imperfect men who sometimes acted in ways that offend modern sensibilities, and that divine commands are not always comfortable. The question is not whether plural marriage is easy to accept — it is not. The question is whether Joseph Smith's total ministry bears the marks of prophetic authenticity: the Book of Mormon, the restoration of priesthood authority, the temple ordinances, the organizational structure of the church, and the millions of lives transformed by the Restoration. Plural marriage is one chapter in a much larger story, and honest inquiry requires examining the whole.

Resources

- Church Gospel Topics Essay: Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo
- Church Gospel Topics Essay: Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah
- FAIR: Joseph Smith's Plural Marriages
- FAIR: Polyandry
- FAIR: Age of Plural Wives
- Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Signature Books, 1997)
- Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 3 vols. (Greg Kofford Books, 2013)

Addresses

- [\[\[_obsidian_research/arguments/Joseph-Smiths-Polygamy-Proves-False-Prophet|Argument: Joseph Smith's Polygamy Proves False Prophet\]\]](https://obsidian-research.com/arguments/Joseph-Smiths-Polygamy-Proves-False-Prophet/)

Related Defenses

- [\[\[_obsidian_research/defense-drafts/mormons-not-real-christians-full|Not Real Christians Defense \(Full\)\]\]](https://obsidian-research.com/defense-drafts/mormons-not-real-christians-full/)
- [\[\[_obsidian_research/defense-drafts/mormons-not-real-christians-cheatsheet|Not Real Christians Defense \(Cheat Sheet\)\]\]](https://obsidian-research.com/defense-drafts/mormons-not-real-christians-cheatsheet/)