

Disgracing God to Save a Prophet

by Lori Burkman | Dec 19, 2014 | Featured, Lying, Polygamy, Sexual Abuse, Truth |
164 comments



After the explosion of polygamy news and dialogue that followed the most recent essays put out by the church, the most common thing I have seen said by members of the church defending the practice is 1: they have known this since they were very young (which usually is said to dismiss the need for a conversation about it) and 2: God commanded it and thus Joseph remains a man of impeccable moral character. I have been dumbfounded time and time again by people removing guilt from Joseph and placing it on God. This *kind of* made sense back when polygamy was always framed as “to help widows” or to “raise up seed unto Zion” because there weren’t enough men*, but it is obvious now that those white-washed scenarios were simply a sleight of hand attempt to make polygamy palatable. Polygamy was restored for the sake of restoring the ancient practice of polygamy; there is no moral or practical

rationale for it. In fact, polygamy is proven to be less effective to “raise seed” than monogamy (1); so not even that purpose holds weight*.

Joseph claimed polygamy was needed for a restoration of all things. Which other obscure practices from the dispensations of the Old Testament were restored during the restoration? The Kashrut (Jewish dietary restrictions), animal sacrifice, the Law of Moses, stonings, requisite circumcision... NOPE! But one that God *did* “need to be restored” for undisclosed reasons is one in which the Priesthood leaders get to marry as many women as they want. I’m sorry, but I’m not buying it. Not to mention, there isn’t a single place in the bible in which polygamy is commanded of God. Yes it is practiced by several prophets, but it is not divinely mandated. The most commonly-referenced story is that of Sarah and Abraham—but God’s directive is absent there as well. Sarah felt pressured to provide promised heirs that she felt she could not produce on her own, so SHE (not God) tells Abraham to take Hagar.

Genesis 16

1 Now Sarai Abram’s wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar.

2 And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

3 And Sarai Abram’s wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.

Soon after, Sarah got pregnant. It’s quite possible that the use of Hagar was never in God’s plan in the first place. The use of concubines and the norm of multiple wives was cultural in biblical times, not divinely mandated. Polygamy and concubines existing in the OT aren’t a big surprise since women had no rights and were treated like property in general.

So why do I say polygamy was for “Polygamy’s sake?” Polygamy nearly ruined early Mormonism (and continues to plague it); early Mormons were rightfully branded as untrustworthy liars for nearly a century. Joseph’s polygamy and his lies surrounding it were a leading motivation for those who sought to murder him. So, so much pain and anguish could have been avoided during the restoration had polygamy never entered the scene. It demoted women to tally marks in an eternal harem, it caused countless children to not have a constant father figure in their home, and created unthinkably complicated and harmful family dynamics. It hindered the acceptance of

Mormonism by would-be converts and was a major cause the saints were expelled from their homes and ultimately had to seek refuge by settling in Mexico territory (what would become UT). With all of the emphasis the current church puts on "one man, one woman" marriages and the unchanging importance and divinity of a strong nuclear family- the LDS church is still somehow insisting that God is the sole entity to blame for the travesty of requisite polygamy to gain full exaltation (2).

But for many Mormons, polygamy is their greatest source of cognitive dissonance. In fact, 86% of Mormons believe polygamy is morally wrong. So that means that the majority of Mormons believe that at times, God will require immoral actions from us if it suits His will. That, or they don't believe polygamy ever came from God. But how does that even work? I would like to outline the scenarios as to how and why polygamy was part of the restoration:

- Option 1: Joseph was a prophet of God who had a vision or insight into what we now know of families and sealings and he completely misinterpreted it and polygamy was the result. God knew that it would one day be rectified by a later prophet (60 years later), and people do have their free agency to believe or accept things, so God let it stand until it could be corrected at a later point in time. This paints a lackadaisical deity, but at least he's not a misogynist.
- Option 2: It's also possible that Joseph was an upstanding prophet of God up until this point in time, but the power got to his head and he abused it. It's very plausible that he became a fallen prophet when he chose to frame his marital indiscretions as divinely-mandated polygamy, blaming God for his debauchery and thus forfeiting his own responsibility for his actions. He died unexpectedly the year after he finally came clean to Emma about the wives he'd had behind her back. The practice and duplicitous, deceitful nature of polygamy was also one of the the leading causes of why the mob killed Joseph. So when it is stated that the Lord would remove a prophet should he ever lead the people astray, Joseph's untimely death could easily be seen as exactly that happening.
- Option 3: Joseph wasn't ever a prophet called of God, but was a man who wanted desperately for God to speak to the earth again and decided to make that happen on his own accord. After gaining power under this guise, he coveted women, was caught in extramarital acts, and the best way to frame it to his followers was to say it was commanded by God.

There is one more option, and it is the option to which the most recent essays by the

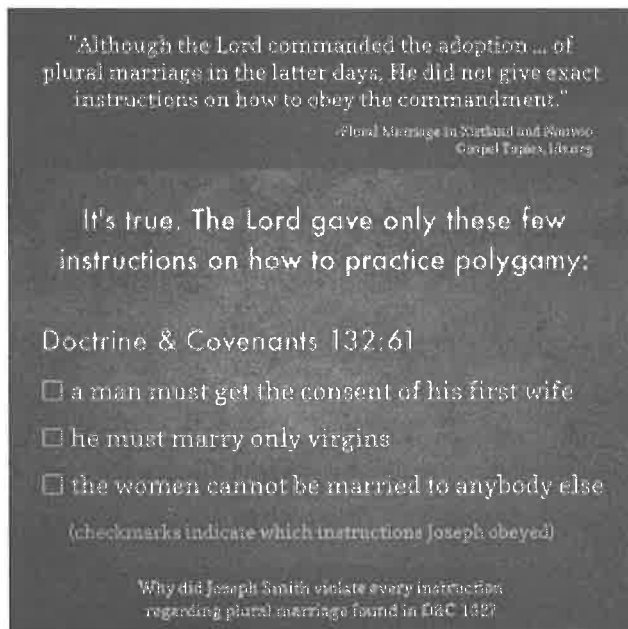
church has chosen to continue to subscribe. This option is that Joseph was a prophet whose "private and public character was unimpeachable" whom God forced under threat of eternal death to espouse anywhere from 9-22 wives BEFORE ever even telling Emma about it (a total of somewhere between 33-40 total)(3); the majority of these women being people who were Emma's best friends or people she was caring for in their home. We are to accept that God sent an angel with a flaming(4) sword down several times to tell Joseph (only to Joseph, never to Emma) that Joseph would be destroyed unless he took on several wives; 11 of whom were already married to apostles or to other men. Never mind that such a commandment more or less removes Joseph's agency and thus further paints a deity that cares little for his own laws or plan of salvation.

Emma rejected polygamy when she finally was exposed to it and only acquiesced for a short time in which approved of a set of additional wives for her husband. This "approval" of polygamy was demanded of her in order for her to receive her temple endowment. Soon after, she rejected the practice again and even denied the practice's existence after Joseph's untimely death. We are to believe that God cared nothing for the sanctity of Emma and Joseph's marriage, the importance of honesty, or for the feelings or importance of women in general- in particularly that of Emma- a woman who had been a dedicated wife and servant of the restoration.

And there are the more tawdry age gaps which suggest he was preying on people too young to understand the commitment. The church's essay's covert wording when speaking of Hellen Mar Kimball's marriage to Joseph is so purposefully misleading; it is laughable. It states Hellen "was sealed to Joseph several months before her 15th birthday. Marriage at such an age, inappropriate by today's standards, was legal in that era, and some women married in their mid-teens". You know, because the legality of a 38 year old marrying a "let's do what we can to not call her a fourteen year old" is the only basis to oppose such an action? By pointing out it wasn't illegal to marry someone who was only 14, the essays try to frame this as okay or normal? But the frequency of 14-year old marriages in the early 1800s was <1%; which is comparable to what it is today. Yes, some 14 year olds were getting married back then, but it was to 18-20 year olds- not 38 year olds. That was as weird and inappropriate then as it is now; and saying "several months before her fifteenth birthday" doesn't make it any better.

A marriage is not entered into "willingly" or "freely" if the woman is told, "If you will take this step, it will ensure your eternal salvation & exaltation and that of your father's household & all of your kindred", or ""the salvation of our whole family depended on it", or if the woman is given 24 hours to decide, or is told that her prophet will be murdered by an angel unless she consents (5). He also

approached his would-be wives in complete secrecy, telling them to tell no one. This is spiritual coercion, plain and simple, and I cannot stomach the thought that God would demand this practice of anyone. Also, to imply that such an action can ensure salvation for others is antithetical to our individual agency and the plan of salvation. Whether all of his relationships were sexual or not isn't the main point (though Helen is quoted as saying: "I would never have been sealed to Joseph had I known it was anything more than ceremony. I was young, and they deceived me" *6). The women were expected to act as though married; not to date others and not to engage in social courting. They mourned Joseph as wives would mourn and were considered widows after Joseph's death; they were robbed of their individuality and unmarried status.



The church's essay tries to excuse the ugliness of polygamy and polyandry with God not having given clear instructions. This is a God who has given insane amounts of very specific instructions on even the most mundane aspects of our lives; and yet they are implying that He was tight-lipped on how to properly go about polygamy? Never mind that D&C 132 has more than ample instructions on how it should be carried out and Joseph (and many

others) ignored the majority of them.

So this... THIS is the God of Mormonism. Those who wrote and approved the latest essays would rather have the aforementioned paragraphs be Godly-mandated acts rather than admit that Joseph more than likely got something wrong in a big way. By doing so, the LDS church is letting its women know that if it is God's will, it is fine for us to be treated like property. Also that our voice and input in our marriage is not of equal importance to that of our husbands'. We are taught that a man's worth is amplified in the hereafter by the amount of wives and offspring he has and that we are simply the producers of an exalted man's offspring. That if a Priesthood leader tells us God's will for us, that we are to acquiesce faithfully; no matter the extent of sexual impropriety of the request or mental pain it would cause. If not, we can justifiably face destruction (D&C 132:52). These are all things I learned about myself growing up as I learned about polygamy, this is the God I had to accept if I was to believe Joseph as blameless. Women square this away now by being told that no one

will ever have to practice polygamy in the hereafter if they don't wish to; but I think that the thousands of women who were spiritually coerced into the practice during its reign would disagree. For about 60 years, polygamy was the fore-running distinguishing doctrine of Mormonism and was taught as a requisite for the highest levels of the Celestial Kingdom (2). What choice were these men and women given?

I could never believe in a God for whom polygamy is a requisite to win His favor or earn eternal reward. I am enough of an adult to understand that people, even good people, fall prey to their lesser impulses. I freely recognize that all of us have tried to find a way to justify our sins so we don't have to face the fallout that would follow a true admission of our fault. I'd be willing to love Joseph despite the spiritual coercion he used to gain possession of women he desired as long as he admitted his guilt at some point. Many charismatic leaders and great activists had documented extramarital affairs: Thomas Jefferson, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Bill Clinton (the list goes on). The biggest difference is that none of those people removed their responsibility for their actions by claiming God forced them to do it. All I ask is that we are allowed to see polygamy for what it was. I ask that we can place the blame where the blame belongs: at the hands of Joseph and those who supported and perpetuated the "doctrine".

I never want to hear again that we need to overlook the ugly details of polygamy and polyandry because Joseph Smith did so many amazing things for mankind; that these unpalatable narratives are merely unworthy distractions from his amazing legacy. Joseph Smith was NOT the restoration; he was part of it. The thousands of faithful saints who believed in him sacrificed beyond reckoning- THEY deserve for their stories to be told as well. The women who gave their lives to Joseph, who were passed off as inherited wives to Brigham after Joseph's death, and the thousands of women who entered polygamous marriage against their wishes- their stories and sacrifices are equally important. The husbands were stretched beyond reason to try to provide for ridiculously large-sized families; we can't forget the hurt they must have felt in not being able to satisfy the needs of all those who depended on them both spiritually, mentally, or fiscally. By silencing their pain we do a great disservice to their sacrifice. These stories need to be told in their entirety and not just in scholarly biographies (7). This needs to be something that is carefully and openly addressed within the Church Education System in a forthright manner. If Joseph's legacy is tainted by it, then so be it; for that is the true legacy he left. Even if these stories never get the limelight in church history classes that they deserve; we at least owe it to God to remove Him from being the one to mandate this practice. No good has ever come from blaming God for the sins and follies of men; not even to save the reputation of a prophet.

1) Studies have shown that monogamous women bore more children per wife than did polygamous wives except the first. Fertility at the societal level, however, was enhanced because of the near universality of marriage among women and the abundant opportunities for remarriage among previously married women of childbearing age. L. L. Bean and G. P. Mineau, "The Polygyny-Fertility Hypothesis: A Re-evaluation," *Population Studies* 40 (1986): 67-81; Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen, *Polygamy: A Cross Cultural Analysis* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008), 62-63.

*Let's just think about this a bit—a woman can have the exact same amount of children when she has her own husband as she can if she is sharing one with other women; in fact women statistically produce more children with one husband than a shared one—so the "raising seed" is actually jeopardized by polygamy. Yes, tons of children were born into polygamous families; but that same objective could have been met with each woman having her own husband; all of the offspring would just come from more varied families. All that polygamy ensured is that the men highest in church leadership had the most women. Joseph's polygamy gained him no (certifiable) additional children and the majority of his wives were not virgins (despite the fact that being a virgin is dictated as a requisite in D&C 132). So polygamy for him, at least, it had nothing to do with rising up more seed in this life. There were MORE men than women in Utah for the duration of its polygamous years, thus causing women to have to get married at younger and younger ages so men could fulfill their polygamous quota.

The Utah Historical Society includes population statistics in their library. The source for these statistics is the United States Bureau of Census.

Utah population:

1850 total	11,380	male	6,046	female	5,334
1860 total	40,273	male	20,255	female	20,018
1870 total	86,786	male	44,121	female	42,665
1880 total	143,963	male	74,509	female	68,454
1890 total	210,779	male	111,975	female	98,804