Kirtland and Nauvoo Polygamy

Joseph Smith was sealed to about 35 women in polygamous relationships between 1835 and 1843. His brides ranged in age from 14 to 55. Some marriages involved sexual relations while others did not.

Even though Old Testament patriarchs like Abraham, Jacob, and Moses practiced polygamy, plural marriage easily offends modern sensibilities. Joseph reported an angel commanded the practice without explaining why God required it at that time and place. Early participants considered it to be a religious sacrifice.

Verses in D&C section 132 give reasons plural marriage might be permitted including as part of a restitution of all things (40, 45), as a special trial at that time and place (51), to multiply and replenish the earth (63), and to allow all worthy members to marry and become candidates for exaltation (16–17).

Members today may worry about the future practice of plural marriage. Exalted beings receive a fulness of joy. Because the power to seal is also the power to loosen, vicarious (and living) ordinances prior to the resurrection will assure that all worthy beings are sealed in joyful eternal marriages they have chosen.

Joseph Smith’s Motives

- For Joseph and his plural wives, polygamy was a religious practice.
- Witnesses report Joseph “had his doubts” and “put off the dreaded day” as long as he could.
- Most of Joseph Smith’s first plural sealings in Nauvoo were non-sexual, eternity-only ceremonies.
- Sexual relations in his other plural marriages were apparently rare.
- None of Joseph Smith’s plural wives, including the 7 that left the Church, later accused him of abuse or declared plural marriage was a cover-up for licentiousness.
- After Emma learned of the sealings, she stayed with Joseph and maintained her testimony of his prophetic calling.

What about Sealings to Legally Married Women?

14 of Joseph Smith’s sealings were to women with legal husbands. Of these, 2 are too poorly documented to discern what happened, and 1 involved a pretend marriage.

To understand the remaining 11 relationships requires knowledge of the 3 different types of plural ceremonies performed in Nauvoo:

- **For Time-Only**
  - Just for this life
- **For Time-and-Eternity**
  - For this life and the next
- **For Eternity-Only**
  - For the next life

- The remaining 11 appear to have all been non-sexual eternity-only sealings.
- The practice of a plurality of husbands is called “polyandry,” but these 11 sealings were more like potential consecutive marriages.
- These women did not take Joseph’s name or have a marriage-type relationship with him.
- Some of the legal husbands were not active Latter-day Saints, so their wives could not be sealed to them.
- Of the 14 legal husbands, only 1 may have been on a mission when Joseph was sealed to his wife for eternity.
- None of the women or their legal husbands left any complaints against Joseph Smith.
- The Bible condemns polyandry but not Abrahamic polygamy (see Romans 7:2–3).
- All Church leaders have condemned polyandry.

What about Young Brides?

**10 of Joseph Smith’s Plural Wives were in their Teens**

- Age 14: Helen Mar Kimball, Nancy M. Winchester
- Age 16: Flora Ann Woodworth
- Age 17: Sarah Ann Whitney, Sarah Lawrence, Lucy Walker
- Age 19: Fanny Alger, Emily Dow Partridge, Maria Lawrence, Malissa Lott

**Helen Mar Kimball was 14**

- 14 year old brides were not unheard of.
- The union was arranged by Helen’s father.
- Multiple evidences support that the marriage was not consummated.
- The relationship was more like a betrothal.
- Helen later wrote books defending Joseph and polygamy.
Other Nauvoo Polygamists

- At least 115 men and women entered into plural sealings in Nauvoo prior to Joseph’s death.
- Perhaps 100–200 additional people (out of Nauvoo’s population of over 10,000) had learned about plural marriage by that time.
- Many reported dreams, visions, impressions, and even angelic visitations supporting them in their prayers to understand and accept the practice.

What about Emma Smith?

- In 1836 Emma discovered Joseph’s plural marriage to Fanny Alger and ended the relationship.
- We don’t know when Emma learned of Nauvoo polygamy; it may have been gradual, beginning with eternity-only sealings.
- By 1843 she participated in 4 plural ceremonies.
- Emma immediately struggled with the sexual implications of plural marriage.
- On July 12, 1843, Joseph dictates D&C 132 on eternal marriage including plurality.
- Emma rejected the revelation and within weeks there was talk of divorce.
- Between July of 1843 and Joseph’s June 27, 1844 death, Emma and Joseph publicly lived a monogamous life. Privately, Joseph maintained his polygamous relationships.
- A few days before Joseph’s death, he encouraged Emma to write a blessing. She penned: “I desire with all my heart to honor and respect my husband as my head, ever to live in his confidence and by acting in unison with him retain the place which God has given me by his side.”
- Emma died in 1879. She clung to Joseph to the end.

Did Joseph Smith’s Plural Marriages Include Sexual Relations?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plural Wife</th>
<th>Evidence of Sexuality</th>
<th>“Multiply and replenish” was one of the reasons for plural marriage.</th>
<th>Evidence exists for sexuality in up to 11 of Joseph Smith’s plural marriages.</th>
<th>Sexuality was uncommon.</th>
<th>No children are known to have been born to Joseph and his plural wives.</th>
<th>DNA testing has disproven paternity in every suspected case.</th>
<th>Many of Joseph’s wives were young and fertile, so offspring would have been expected if conjugal relations occurred often.</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Emily Partridge</td>
<td>Strong</td>
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<tr>
<td>All Other Plural Wives</td>
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Chronology

1831 • Revelation to Joseph Smith indicating that Old Testament polygamy as practiced by Abraham and Jacob was not sinful.
1834 • (Jul) Account of an angel visiting Joseph commanding him to restore the practice of plural marriage.
1835–1836 • A plural marriage ceremony joining Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger for time-only is performed by Levi Hancock using priesthood authority.
1836 • (Jun) People who learn of the ceremony from Fanny believe it is a genuine plural marriage. But Emma and Oliver Cowdery, who learn of it from Joseph, consider it adultery. Fanny is sent away.
1836–1841 • No plural marriage activity.
1841 • (Apr 5) Joseph Smith is sealed in the first Nauvoo plural marriage to Louisa Beaman for “time and eternity,” for this life and the next.
1842 • 3 other men enter into authorized plural marriages in Nauvoo.
1843 • (May) Emma and Joseph are sealed. Emma participates in plural marriage ceremonies uniting Joseph to 4 polygamous wives.
• (Jun) Emma struggles with plural marriage.
• (Jul 12) Joseph dictates a revelation on celestial marriage (now D&C 132). Hyrum Smith presents the revelation to Emma who rejects it.
• (Jul 13) Joseph and Emma publicly live a monogamous lifestyle for the remainder of his life.
• (Nov 2) Joseph Smith is sealed for “eternity only” to Fanny Young in his last plural marriage sealing.
1844 • (Jun 27) Joseph Smith is martyred.

Does Exaltation Require Polygamy?

• No. No prophet has declared that polygamy is required for exaltation.
• D&C 132:19–20 promise exaltation to worthy monogamous couples.