

# **Early Mormon Polyandry**

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December 22, 2004

<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

**Table of Contents**

Introduction ..... 2

The Mormon Position ..... 2

Why Understanding Smith's Sexual Practises is Important ..... 3

Joseph Smith's Sexual Practises in Context..... 4

Which Explanation of Smith's Sexual Activities Make the Most Sense?..... 6

Painful Learning ..... 7

Conclusion ..... 7

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What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one. Joseph Smith

## Introduction

The statement above was made during the course of a sermon Joseph Smith preached on May 26, 1944 in response to accusations that had been swirling around him for years with respect to his sexual practises. At the time, he had numerous wives – likely over thirty – and for that reason is thought of as a polygamist. He justified countless deceptions of this sort on the basis that the people were not ready to know about God's will for him and them – that only those who practise polygamy under the authority of Mormon leaders like Smith would live in the highest part of heaven with God. Some of Smith's apologists have noted that technically speaking he was not lying since he was not legally married to any of the women who he claimed as his "spiritual" wives. This kind of deceptive hair splitting is what made Bill Clinton infamous. And, as noted below, Joseph Smith and Bill Clinton likely have other things in common as well.

While polygamy is something most Mormons these days are aware of and have rationalized in one way or another, it is much more disturbing for them when they hear that Smith caused himself to be "married" to a number of women who were already married to other men, and that in some cases their husbands were sent away on Mormon missions as Smith began to court their wives. "Polyandry" is the correct term for this kind of relationship. That is the state of a woman who is married to more than one man.

I served as Bishop of a Mormon congregation, am well educated, was considered to be well-read regarding Mormon doctrine and history, and made it to age 44 without hearing of the Mormon practise of polyandry. I have sat with close friends and relatives during the last two years on several occasions and watched them flat out deny that Smith could have married the wives of other men, particular after sending their husbands on missions for the Mormon Church as noted above. This is information that Mormon leaders have gone to great lengths to suppress, and have been remarkably successful in that regard.

What follows is an attempt to provide some basic background regarding Smith's sexual practises, to consider the best arguments that Mormon apologists mount in defence of those practises, and then to ask some questions to help bring this issue into focus for those who are still inclined toward acceptance of the Mormon justification for these events.

## The Mormon Position

First, we should allow the Mormon camp to state their position in its best light. An recent article published by the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research ("FAIR") can be used for this purpose. It is found at: <http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/polyandry.pdf>, is titled "A Tale of Two Marriage Systems: Perspectives on Polyandry and Joseph Smith" and is authored Samuel Katich. For a more complete and scholarly treatment of this subject, I would recommend Todd

Compton's fine book "In Sacred Loneliness" (see <http://www.irr.org/mit/sacredlon.html> for an online summary) or Richard Van Wagoner's "Mormon Polygamy: A History".

In a nutshell, Katich acknowledges that the relationships in question existed, that they were likely sexual, and that Smith felt justified in making his own rules outside of the laws that governed the United States in those days. Katich justifies Smith's behavior on the basis of Mormon theology, as it was created by Smith on the basis of authority he said God gave to him. This theology included the idea that a woman could leave her husband if he was unlikely to provide salvation in the Celestial Kingdom, and unite herself in marriage to a man who could so provide. This gave Mormon leaders – with Smith at the head of the pack – a tremendous competitive advantage in the mating game. He seems to have made large scale use of this advantage. Brigham Young even bragged about this. He said:

“I could prove to this congregation that I am young; for I could find more girls who would choose me for a husband than can any of the young men.” (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 5, page 210)

I note that in a conversation I recently had with a modern Mormon fundamentalist leader who practises polygamy he told me that he never asks women to marry him, they ask to be married to him. He also noted, without seeming to be aware of the irony in what he said, that in his community dating and “competition” for spouses was forbidden because it would produce chaos. So, the leader of community who controls most of its resources finds that many women wish to be married to him. What a coincidence, both in Young's day and in today's Mormon polygamist communities.

Katich also notes that Smith used the spectre of polyandry to test the loyalty of his followers. That is, if he asked them to give up their wives and they agreed to do so, they had passed some kind of Abrahamic obedience test. Those who study cult behaviour have thoroughly documented this type of personal boundary breaching behaviour as part of the cult conditioning process (see for example Steven Hassan, "Releasing the Bonds" and "Combating Cult Mind Control"). First small things are taken from the recruit. Then intrusions on personal autonomy gradually become greater. And finally, in many cases, sexual acts of one kind or another are required as the final show of faith and submission to the leader or the institution which he or she represents. The commission of these acts so compromises personal boundaries that it is often difficult to recover autonomy from those who have violated an individual in this way. While Smith is not known to have had homosexual sex to break down boundaries, and he let his closest associates off the hook at the last minute after asking for their wives, the fact that he used conditioning tools of this kind puts him into elite company from a cult-leader point of view.

FAIR exists for the sole purpose of defending the Mormon point of view, and it soft shoes around a lot of evidence that in my view is both relevant and essential to the questions it discusses. But, at least it gets a good deal of the important data out on the table for discussion. It presents, in my view, a kind of minimum standard of understanding and rationalization for people who want to be faithful to Mormonism, but do not want to be ignorant of events that are foundational to it whether we like it or not.

### **Why Understanding Smith's Sexual Practises is Important**

Information related to how Joseph Smith actually lived and persuaded those who followed him will become more common as a result of the bicentennial of his birth, coming next year. The article found at

[http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2004/12/19/smith\\_bicentennial\\_renewing\\_debate\\_over\\_mormon\\_founder/](http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2004/12/19/smith_bicentennial_renewing_debate_over_mormon_founder/) is typical of what will come out regularly during the course of the next year. In it, Richard Bushman, a Columbia University historian and former Stake President to whom Mormon historians often refer as setting the standard of scholarship and faith, indicates that he finds it "unsettling" that Joseph was married to the wives of other men. And yet he believes. Why this is the case is an interesting question that is too big to be addressed here, and is addressed in an essay titled "Do Smart Mormons Make Mormonism True?" at <http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

How and why polyandry came into being, and why information concerning it was carefully collected and preserved at one point in LDS history, and then almost completely suppressed later, are in my view essential to an understanding of what Mormonism is. And, the kind of person Joseph was and why he was as attractive as a leader is also important in that regard. If he was God's prophet, and did lie, and did justify having sex with other men's wives on a basis that seems as unjustifiable then as now, these are facts that in my view are essential to understanding the nature of what it means to be a prophet in the Mormon conception of things, since all prophets since Smith have been pale reflections of him.

Hence, I regard it as a healthy thing for the LDS community that information of the type I am here providing is becoming more mainstream. It makes no sense, in my view, to hide one's head in the sand respecting these issues. We are adults and should not need to pretend that important things were other than they were. And the better understood these things become in the non-Mormon community, the more foolish Mormons who are unaware of them will appear.

### **Joseph Smith's Sexual Practises in Context**

Perspective, here is in most other places, is essential to understanding. Hence, I will briefly frame the Mormon polyandry (and polygamy) issue in a broader context.

A common denominator of many charismatic religious movements in all cultures is that the male leader has uncommon sexual access to his female followers. This is, in fact, a common feature of most human groups - the alpha male has preferential sexual access to the females of the group. In this regard, Bill Clinton was only exceptional by virtue of the fact that he was caught in the act, so to speak. This practice is justified in myriad ways, each of which makes sense given the social and other perceived realities of the group in question. In religiously oriented groups, the justification requires a theological basis. A number of religious groups in Joseph Smith's day justified this kind of thing on different theological bases than Mormonism, but justified it nonetheless. And in some groups the leaders are protected by secrecy.

In a widely acclaimed book, "Shadow Syndromes", Dr. John Ratey of the Harvard Medical School explained one of the connections between leadership of human groups and promiscuity. Ratey described Bill Clinton as a classic mild manic depressive. In his manic phase, he would exude tremendous amounts of human energy - a kind of magnetism that would draw people into his wake. This is often the case with great leaders. But, he was prone to mild depression which in his case was manageable. Ratey also said that an occupational hazard people like Clinton face is that their magnetism makes available to them much more sexual opportunity than is the norm, and these folks hence tend to be sexually promiscuous. The same kind of analysis has been applied to artists, religious and business leaders, and others.

I read a while ago of a New Agey religious group in Edmonton, founded by John de Ruiter, a good-looking, charismatic former shoemaker who inspires and uplifts those who follow him in

many ways. I have spoken to people who have attended his sessions and they rave of his ability to "look right through you", to "bring a peace like no other by looking into your eyes", and to provide amazingly insightful personal advice without knowing much of your life's story. Those who study cult leaders indicate that the ability to create this kind of feeling is a common attribute of cult leaders, and show how through easy to learn hypnotic techniques staring into the eyes of a follower can induce a state of mind calculated to produce just the feelings described. It is not that cult leaders go to school somewhere and learn how to do this. Some people with powerful personalities find through trial and error that they have this power over people, a small percentage of them end up like de Ruiter, and an even smaller percentage, largely through the accidents of history (martyrdom; moving to a place where a religious monopoly can be created; etc.) found organizations like Mormonism, the JW's, the 7th Day Adventists, Islam and other similar religious movements. A study of the founders of each of those, and many other, religious organizations reveals striking similarities as does a study of the generations of leaders who came after the charismatic founder to create of stable and much larger organization out of the creative thunderbolts used to by that founder.

de Ruiter also, by the way, teaches that he can achieve a special kind of spiritual communion with some of his followers (all female as far as I know) by becoming sexually intimate with them. He started to preach this publicly after his wife found out that he was sleeping with some of his female acolytes. de Ruiter says that he "knows" who the women to whom he has this special bond are as he becomes familiar with his followers. He is the charismatic alpha male of his community, and he makes the rules as to what is morally acceptable in his community. Some people left him in disgust when his wife went public with her concerns about his sexual practises. But most accepted this new "leaf" in his theology just as the American people continued to accept Clinton after his indiscretions, and most Mormons continue to accept Joseph Smith's prophetic role when they find out about his unusual behaviour.

These case studies are an indication of the power of our allegiance is to those who we perceive as crucial to holding our group together. We seem to believe that our basic moral standards are more dispensable than anything that seems to threaten the foundations of our group. I recently read a book about Hitler and Mussolini (Robert Paxton, "The Anatomy of Fascism") that thoroughly explores this theme in that context.

de Ruiter's group was brought to my attention by an acquaintance who has family members who are part of it. At least one of them has the special relationship with de Ruiter noted above.

I became familiar with de Ruiter's group well before my change in belief regarding Mormonism, and remember being mildly unsettled by a newspaper article I read that concluded by summarizing a few of the many historical examples of religious leaders who claimed to be inspired by god to have sex with many of their followers. There is a rich tradition in this regard in Buddhism, the Muslim world, the Jewish world, Christianity and other religions. Joseph Smith was not mentioned in the article I read, but the parallels were obvious to me even then. I pushed that information out of my mind and did not think of it again until I began to process all kinds of other data respecting Mormonism.

I could not find the de Ruiter article I read years ago just now through Google, but did find the following which contains some of the same information. See <http://www.globalserve.net/~sarlo/Yjohn.htm> If you want to read about John de Ruiter as he and his followers like to present him to the world, see <http://www.johnderuiter.com/>. A number of pictures of him appear there. As I said, de Ruiter is a good looking guy, which helps in the religion business. His image is front and centre for that reason.

Which of the stories in the two links above do you think is most useful to people like my friend whose family member has become sexually involved with de Ruiter - the story as presented by the de Ruiter organization, or that presented by the media? Imagine yourself going forward two hundred years and finding that the now small John de Ruiter organization has grown to many millions. Would you think it fair to those who base their most important life's decisions on the words of John de Ruiter if all information of the type described in the globalserve article above had been suppressed by then? Would it smear or somehow be unfair to the memory of John de Ruiter if people were made aware of his beliefs and practises regarding sexuality? Would suppression of that information not create a misleading picture of the man whose words many revere and blindly follow? Would, perhaps, a more full understanding of how de Ruiter lived, how he made his decisions, how he treated his wife, etc. not place his words in a context essential to their understanding? And most importantly, what if de Ruiter had lied for many years about his affairs with various women before finally going public with it as the information was leaking out in any event, and then explained that he had lied because god commanded him to do so? Would that not fairly raise the question of what else he had lied about because God had told him to? Would you trust such a man if he told you that god had revealed many thing to him that required you to give up your time, money, daughters etc. to him (de Ruiter, not god)? Many who have felt the charisma of de Ruiter's presence so trust. I have met one of them. When he speaks of de Ruiter he reminds me of Mormons talking of the certainty their feelings produce in them of the divine nature of Joseph Smith's calling and Gordon Hinckley's current authority.

Which brings us back to Joseph Smith. The FAIR article concedes that it is likely that Joseph Smith had sexual relations with his wives, including those married to other men. That was an accepted feature of early Mormon polygamous life and there is no reason to believe that most of Joseph's marriages were different in that regard than the others. In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that his were the same as the others. The historians who have studied the lives of Smith's wives the most carefully believe that it is highly probable that Joseph was sexually active with at least some of them, such as Eliza Snow and Zina Huntington Jacobs. And I note as an interesting aside there is a DNA project currently underway part of the purpose of which is to test people who are descendants Joseph Smith's wives to see if any of them carry his DNA. If they do, the "sexual relations" question will be definitively settled regarding as least some of the wives.

### **Which Explanation of Smith's Sexual Activities Make the Most Sense?**

One of the interesting questions for those who follow Joseph Smith is whether the justification for his probable sexual activities with the wives of other men, as set out in articles such as the one published by FAIR, is more credible than the explanation proffered by the anthropologists - that the male leaders of human groups often find ways acceptable to their groups to justify their uncommon sexual activities. Let's ask a few questions about this issue to help bring it into focus. And, lets assume that none of the groups in question is our group.

If we see a large number of human groups in which the male leaders have more sexual partners than anyone else and either hide or justify this behaviour in some way, and they all say "god told us and only us to do this - it is immoral when anyone else does it", on what basis can we accept as "true" that explanation offered by one group while rejecting it when offered by all the rest of the groups?

If all the groups are certain of their conclusions respecting something that is manifestly uncertain, does that not say more about the nature of the phenomenon than how reliable their particular feelings of certainty are? For example, when we encounter people who are certain that their view regarding things like politics or global warming is correct and everyone else is wrong, how do we treat them? Do we not take their certainty as an indication that their judgement is unlikely to be sound? It so happens that politics, global warming and religion are all subjects that have been shown to inspire irrational certainty in many people. And, those in the grip of this kind of unreason are of course often the only ones who cannot recognize the weakness of their own position, while being more than capable of seeing the same flaw in others' reasoning (or lack of reasoning).

So, should not the expression of certainty about things that are manifestly uncertain be taken as a sign that the person expressing the certainty should not be trusted? This is how we proceed in cases of political or environment zealots. This is how we proceed regarding religious zealots of all stripes other than our own.

And finally the most important question of all, is the face that stares back at us from the mirror, and those who agree with it, the only ones that are exempt from the seemingly universal laws just described?

### **Painful Learning**

I recognize that these issues are painful to address. The philosopher Gadamer speaks of our most important learning as "undeception" - the letting go of ideas that are false and that bind us down without our knowing it. The release of those comforting bonds is terrifying, and painful. And worthwhile. This kind of deep, painful, learning provides the basis for much of our most important cultural advancement. Those who pay the price necessary to understand and reframe in more accurate and helpful terms the erroneous ideas that are part of each generation's perception of its history and current reality often lay the cornerstones of the most important parts of the next generation's cultural foundation.

Because of the Internet, this process has speeded up. People like Bushman have known about the things discussed above for decades. B.H. Roberts (See <http://www.irr.org/mit/bhrobert.html>) knew about these things and a variety of problems with the Book of Mormon almost a hundred years ago, and told those with whom he governed Mormonism in those days about his concerns. And they suppressed this information out of fear for how the average Mormon would react to it, and in hope that god would provide information that would make these issues go away. That has not happened. The more information comes forward, the more acute these concerns become and the higher the probability appears that the current version of Mormon belief requires wholesale revision if it is going to survive as a viable worldview.

Troubling information of the type in this essay is on its way to becoming part of popular Mormon culture because the Internet will force it into the consciousness of a sizable percentage of run-of-the-mill Mormons. That, in the end, will be a good thing in spite of how difficult it is for the generation that is forced to digest an enormous cultural change.

### **Conclusion**

I wish there were an easy way for Mormons to come to grips with the reality of their history and what that implies for the trustworthiness for past and prior Mormon leaders. There is not. So we have best get on with it and smile as much as we can along the way.

This process and the understanding it brings does not mean that spirituality is unimportant, God is dead, or anything like that in my view. It does, however, mean that human beings who hold themselves out as God's agents are more deeply flawed than most who follow them could have possibly imagined, and should not be trusted any more than another human being. In fact, anyone who announces him or herself as God's emissary and demands our trust on that basis should be treated with more scepticism than most other human beings who come into our lives.

While the process of letting go of false belief is painful, it opens up vistas that still stop me dead in my tracks they are so inspiring and wonderful. I hope as many of my loved ones and others will make it far enough through the hard part to see the good.