

A Moral Critique of Joseph Smith's Secret Marriages to the Partridge Sisters



The early Mormon practice of plural marriage, particularly under the direction of Joseph Smith, raises substantial moral questions. While often shielded by appeals to divine revelation, the process by which Smith introduced, practiced, and concealed plural marriage reveals serious ethical violations. Among the clearest examples is Smith's treatment of Emily and Eliza Partridge, two sisters secretly married to him under deceptive and manipulative circumstances. Drawing from Todd Compton's *In Sacred Loneliness* and related primary sources, this essay critiques Smith's behavior through the lenses of spiritual coercion, marital deceit, breach of trust, and the invalidity of uninformed consent.

1. Spiritual Coercion and the Abuse of Prophetic Authority

A common pattern in Joseph Smith's plural marriage proposals was the invocation of divine command as a means of overcoming resistance. Women were told that the Lord had already given them to Joseph, that it was a sin to doubt, and that the entire proposition must be kept secret.[1] In the case of Emily Partridge, a nineteen-year-old living in Smith's household, the situation was especially fraught: she was fatherless, isolated from full familial counsel, and fully under the influence of the Prophet's religious authority. Joseph Smith's actions constitute a severe abuse of pastoral authority. They violate principles of informed consent, transparency, and respect for the dignity and autonomy of others.

As Compton records, Joseph “did not allow Emily to talk to her mother or sister before the marriage,”[2] effectively cutting her off from sources of wisdom and support. This practice exemplifies spiritual coercion—where consent is extracted not through persuasion, but through the pressure of claimed divine mandates. No moral system that values individual autonomy and informed choice can justify such a tactic. The imbalance of power between Smith and these young women was absolute: to say “no” was to risk defying God Himself, at least as Smith framed it.

2. Deception and Betrayal of Emma Smith

Smith’s wife, Emma Hale Smith, presents another tragic element in this moral drama. By early 1843, Smith had already secretly married numerous women, including the Partridge sisters, without Emma’s knowledge or consent. When Emma eventually relented to the principle of plural marriage, she did so only on the condition that she choose the wives herself. Joseph agreed—and was surprised when she selected Emily and Eliza Partridge.[3] To cover his tracks, Smith arranged for a second marriage ceremony, this time with Emma present.

This act was not simply a gesture of compliance with Emma’s conditions. It was a calculated cover-up. Neither Emma nor the sisters were informed that the marriage had already taken place. As Compton notes, “[Emily and Eliza] were married to Joseph Smith a second time, this time with Emma’s knowledge and consent,”[4] but the prior, secret sealings remained unknown to Emma. This was not an effort at transparency; it was deception masquerading as obedience. The fundamental marital covenant of honesty was violated, not once but twice.

3. Breach of Trust and Exploitation of the Partridge Sisters

The Partridge sisters were not strangers or outsiders—they lived in the Smith household, making Joseph a guardian figure of sorts. This domestic proximity imposed a moral duty of care, not predation. Instead, Smith initiated sexual and spiritual relationships with two sisters under his own roof, in a climate of secrecy and control. More troubling still, neither sister was aware the other had already been married to Joseph until after the second ceremony.

In Emily’s own words: “We did not know that the other was going to be married, or had been, until after it was all over.”[5] This concealment between sisters underscores the calculated nature of Smith’s method. Knowledge was deliberately withheld to prevent resistance or shared moral doubt. The lack of transparency stripped the women of their ability to make a fully informed decision—not only about plural marriage generally, but about the specific implications of sharing a husband with one’s own sister.

4. The Illusion of Consent

Modern ethics recognizes that consent is not valid if it is uninformed or coerced. In the Partridge case, both apply. Emily was not allowed to consult her family. Eliza was unaware of her sister’s identical marriage. Emma was misled into believing she was choosing the

wives for the first time. Joseph Smith controlled all information and access, manufacturing an appearance of consent from parties who were denied full knowledge of the situation.

Even within the moral norms of the 19th century, this behavior cannot be excused. Critics of polygamy at the time—including former Church members and external observers—condemned the practice not simply for its theological novelty, but for the secrecy, pressure, and emotional devastation it caused. These issues are not theological disputes—they are ethical violations.

Conclusion

Joseph Smith's plural marriages to Emily and Eliza Partridge stand as stark examples of ethical misconduct. The marriages were initiated in secret, under spiritual pressure, without full consent, and later "re-enacted" in an effort to deceive his legal wife. These actions reflect a pattern of manipulation, not revelation—a willingness to cloak personal desire in religious language, and to sacrifice the agency of women for personal gratification. Any fair moral analysis, regardless of religious belief, must confront these actions not as divine mysteries but as exploitation of young women under the pretense of divine revelation.

The historical record, especially when illuminated by testimonies like those found in *In Sacred Loneliness*, compels us to acknowledge this painful truth that Joseph Smith's ethical violations in marrying teenage sisters Emily and Eliza Partridge under the banner of religious duty represents not just a betrayal of his wife Emma, but a disturbing abuse of spiritual authority.

These secret marriages, conducted without Emma's knowledge and under the pressure of alleged divine command, illustrate a pattern of coercion, dishonesty, and manipulation that calls into question the moral legitimacy of Smith's prophetic claims.

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Footnotes

1. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 11–12.
2. *Ibid.*, 411.
3. *Ibid.*, 412.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Emily D. Partridge Young, Autobiographical sketch, Church History Library, cited in Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 412.