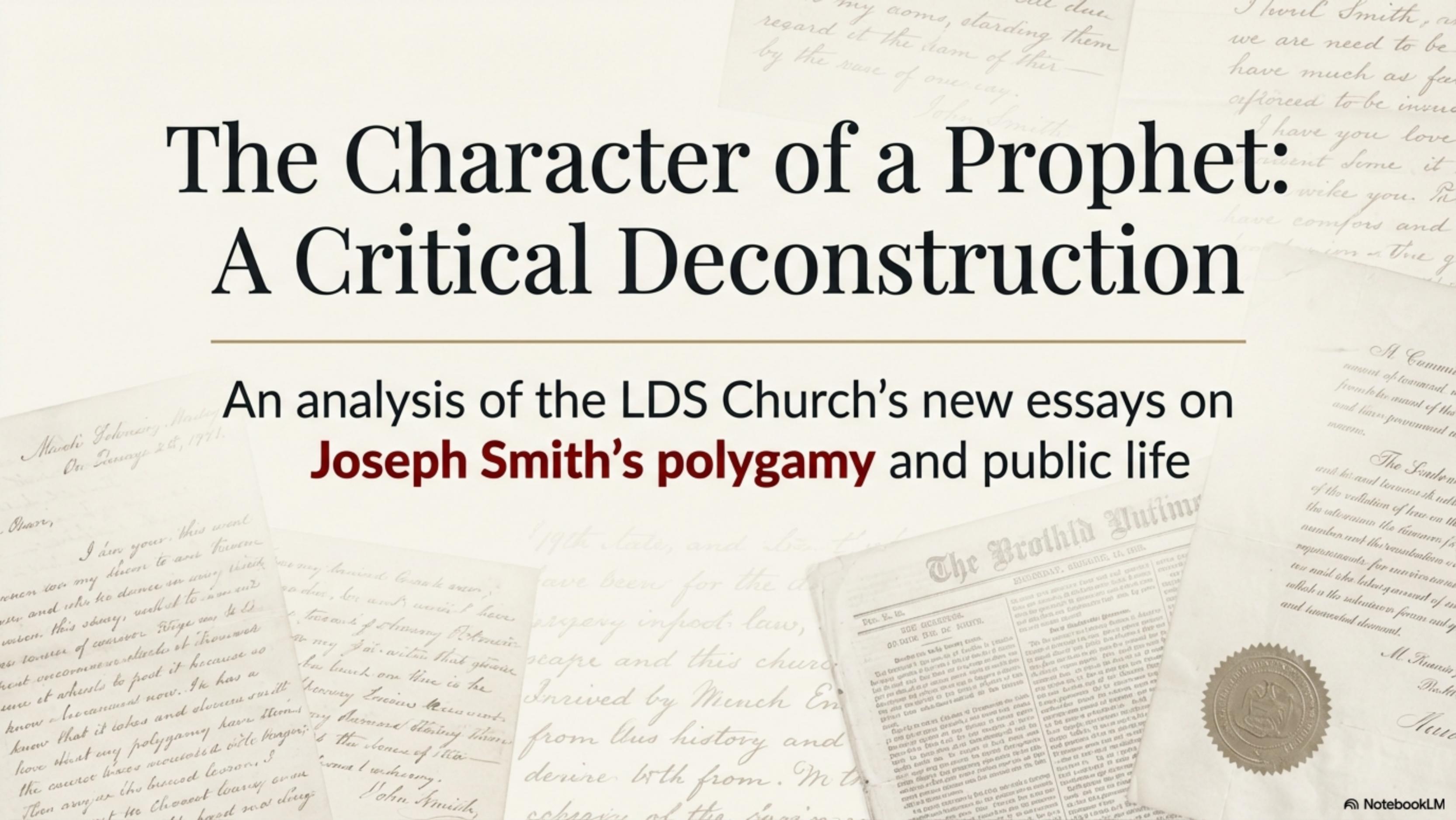


The Character of a Prophet: A Critical Deconstruction

An analysis of the LDS Church's new essays on
Joseph Smith's polygamy and public life



A New Narrative for a Troubled Past

In 2025, the LDS Church released new Gospel Topics pages to “improve its transparency” around its history, specifically covering:

- * The Book of Mormon Translation
- * Plural Marriage
- * The Character of Joseph Smith

This presentation deconstructs the official narrative presented in these essays, comparing the Church’s claims against the historical and documentary evidence discussed by contemporary researchers and critics. The core question: Is this transparency, or a new layer of spin?



The Claim of Consent

THE CLAIM

From the Church Essay

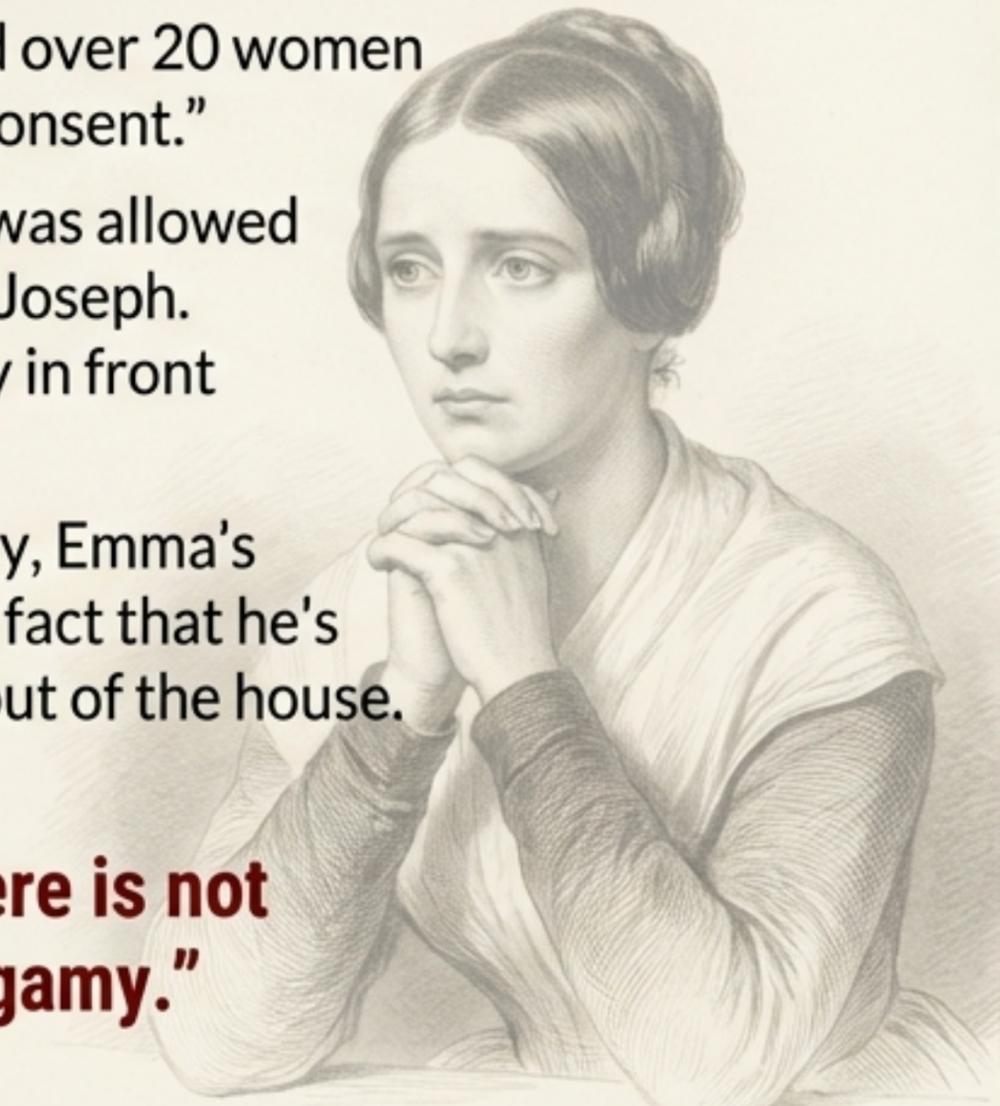
“Emma opposed plural marriage except for a short period of time when she consented to at least four of her husband’s plural ceilings... Emma and Joseph remained deeply committed to one another.”

THE EVIDENCE

A Deconstruction

- **Concealment:** Joseph had already married over 20 women behind Emma’s back before seeking her “consent.”
- **Deception:** The two Partridge sisters she was allowed to “pick” were already secretly married to Joseph. He then staged a sham marriage ceremony in front of her.
- **Rejection:** Within a month of the ceremony, Emma’s “consent” vanished. Unable to “handle the fact that he’s bedding these two girls,” she drove them out of the house.

“All of it goes to his character that there is not honesty in any of the practice of polygamy.”
– Sandra Tanner



Consent Under Threat of Destruction

The essay frames Emma's brief agreement as a personal choice amidst "emotional turmoil." However, the Church's own scripture reveals the coercive pressure she faced.

Key Exhibit

Doctrine & Covenants 132:54

"And I commanded mine handmaid Emma Smith to abide and cleave unto my servant Joseph, and to none else. But if she will not abide this commandment **she shall be destroyed**, saith the Lord; for I am the Lord thy God, and will destroy her if she abide not in my law."

Critical Questions

- Why would God wait until after Joseph had married 22 other women to deliver this ultimatum to Emma?
- Is a choice made under threat of destruction a genuine choice? Does this align with the character of Jesus Christ as presented in the New Testament?

From “Emotional Turmoil” to “Harsh Measures”

The official narrative softens the marital conflict. However, contemporary accounts, including one from Joseph’s own scribe, suggest it escalated beyond arguments.

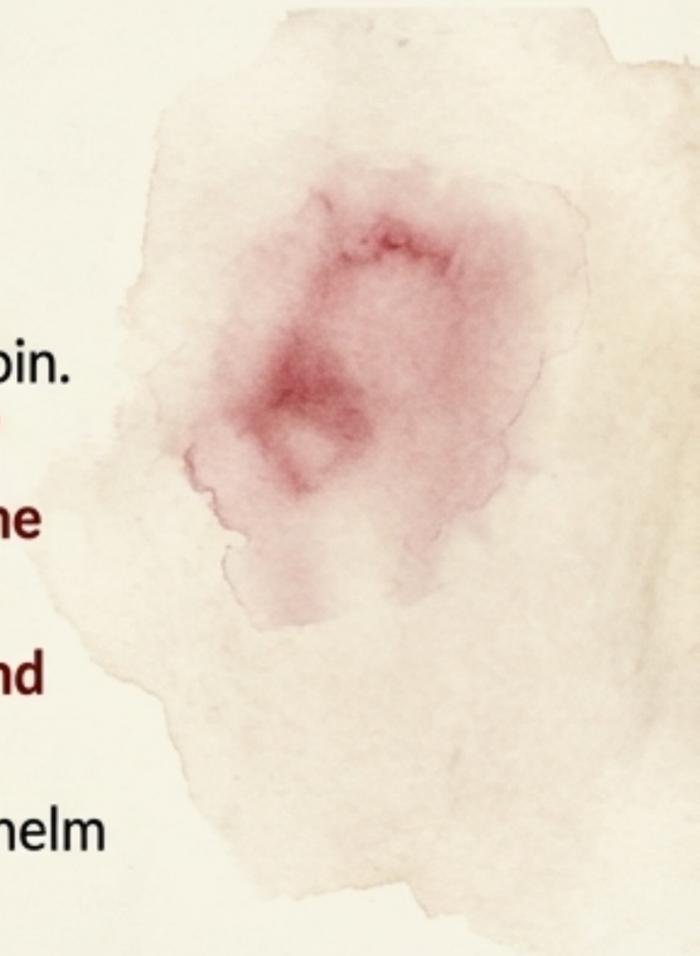
Story 1: The Gold Watch Incident



- Emma discovered 16-year-old Flora Woodworth, one of Joseph’s plural wives, with his gold watch.
- After a heated argument, Joseph’s friend William Clayton recorded in his journal that Joseph **“had to employ harsh measures to stop her.”**
- Source: *Mormon Enigma* by Newell and Avery.

Story 2: The Cabin Confrontation

- Steward Richard Rushton Jr. recounted Emma finding Joseph with the Partridge sisters in a cabin.
- Emma returned **“crying bitterly,”** showing Rushton **“the mark of the blow on her cheek”** and stating, **“Joseph jumped up in a rage... and struck me a horrid blow.”**
- Source: *Mormon Portraits* by Wilhelm Wyl.



Context

While apologists dismiss some sources, these accounts align with Clayton’s journal and a cultural context where physical force by husbands was more accepted.

A Righteous Practice or a Hidden Roster?

“If these were righteous marriages, why aren’t they listed out? ...if you want me to accept that Joseph was an honorable man of God only obeying God’s revelations, then you should be proud of the list.”

Sandra Tanner

The Facts

- As of 2025, the LDS Church has never published a comprehensive, official list of Joseph Smith's wives.
- Researchers like Todd Compton and Fawn Brodie have compiled lists, but there is no official institutional acknowledgment.

Why the Hesitation?

A list would make the problematic details undeniable:

- **Polyandry:** Approximately 12 wives were already married to other living men.
- **Teen Brides:** Approximately 10-12 were teenagers, including one who was a few months shy of her 15th birthday.

Key Takeaway

Publishing a detailed list with names and dates *‘makes the women real’* and the timeline of a *‘one a month club’* very difficult to justify.

The Official Portrait: “A Man of Character”

The Claim (From the Church Essay)

“Thousands of people who knew Joseph Smith testified that he was a prophet of God... **While Joseph was a remarkable prophet and a man of character, he was also human.**”

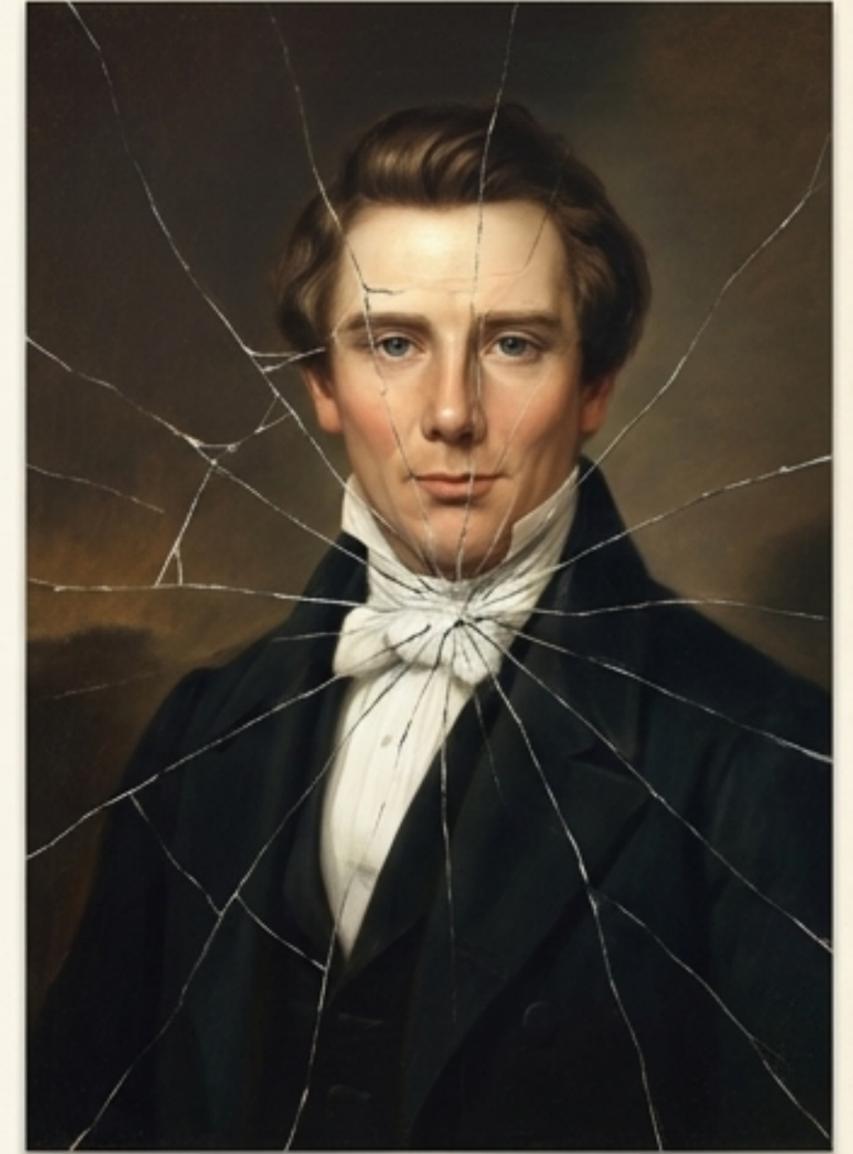
The essay dismisses many accusations as “slander” or based on ‘incomplete grasp of historical sources.’

The Deconstruction

Bandwagon Fallacy: Citing “thousands of followers” is not proof of divine calling. Leaders from Warren Jeffs to L. Ron Hubbard have had thousands of devoted followers.

Pre-loaded Assumptions: The argument rests on **accepting his claims** (e.g., translating the Book of Mormon, restoring priesthood) as fact. **If these are not accepted, “you’re just left with a man who did some terrible stuff.”**

The ‘Human’ Defense: The essay uses “he was also human” to excuse actions that go far beyond common flaws and into patterns of deception and abuse of power.



Open Acknowledgement vs. Active Concealment

The Claim (From the Church Essay)

“Joseph recognized his weaknesses and acknowledged them openly. He even published revelations in which God rebuked him for his mistakes...”



The Historical Record

- Joseph only acknowledged flaws when they were already public knowledge. For his most serious transgressions, he practiced concealment.
- **Case Study 1: The Fanny Alger Affair.** He denied the relationship and excommunicated his top aide, Oliver Cowdery, for having the “audacity to accuse the prophet of adultery.”
- **Case Study 2: Polygamy.** He repeatedly lied in public and in print. In a famous speech, he declared:

“What a thing it is to be accused of having seven wives when I can only find one.” *← “At the time of this statement, he had 30 to 40 wives.”*

21 Criminal Cases: Persecution or a Pattern?

The Claim

The essay states Joseph was a defendant in 21 criminal cases, but suggests most were “due to lack of evidence” or “prejudice.”

The Reality

An analysis of the charges reveals recurring patterns of conflict with the law.

The Charges Against Joseph Smith

Financial Crimes & Deception (5+ Charges)



Examples: Disorderly Person/Glass Looking (1826), Conspiring to Murder Grandson Newell, Perjury (1844)

Violence & Threats (4 Charges)



Examples: Assault & Battery (1835, 1843), Threatening Judge Adam Black (1838)

Treason & Civic Disruption (6 Charges)



Examples: Treason against Missouri (1840, 1841, 1843), Destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor (1844), Treason against Illinois (1844)

Moral Crimes (1 Charge)



Example: Adultery and Fornication (1844)

The breadth and nature of these charges demonstrate a consistent pattern of behavior that cannot be simply dismissed as religious persecution.

The Kingdom of Nauvoo

The Claim

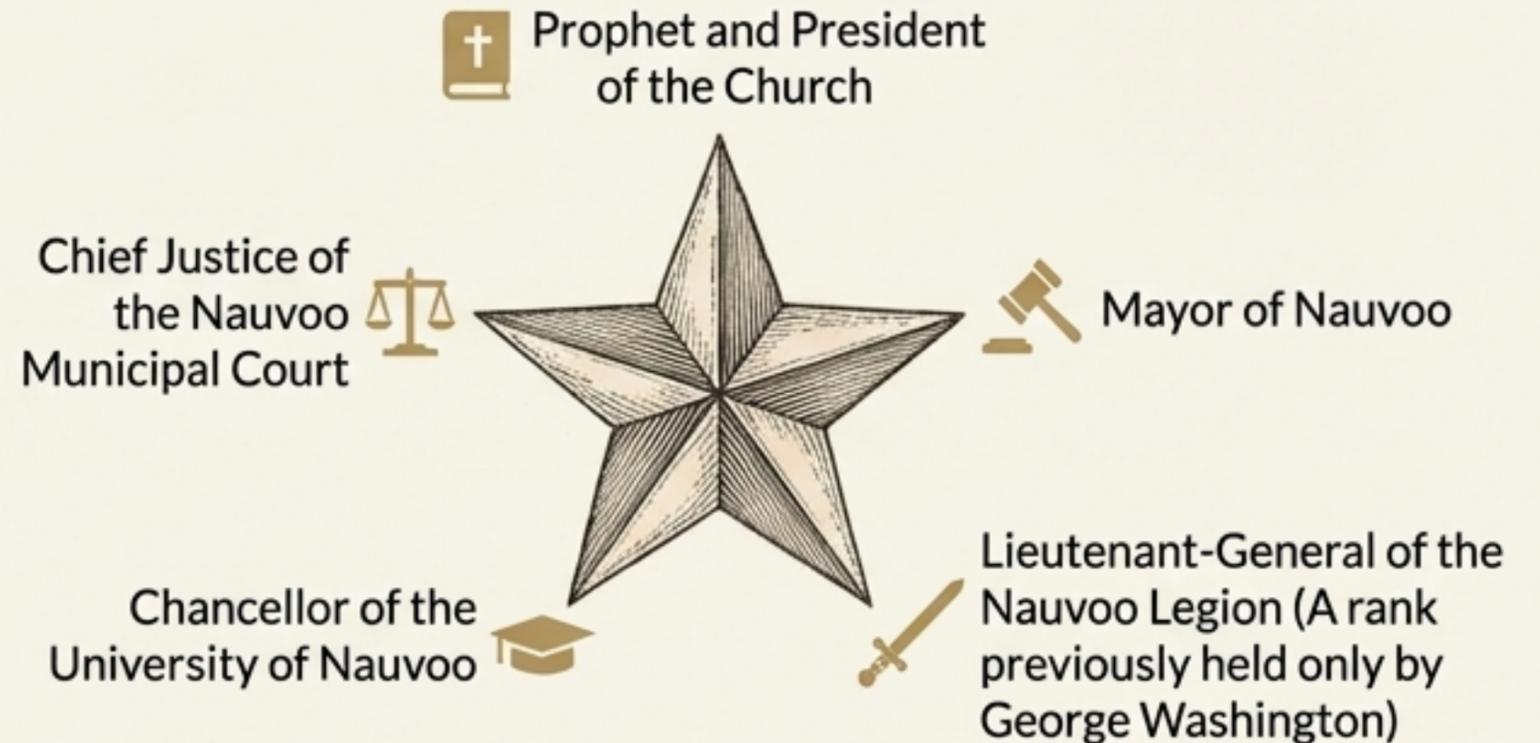
The essay frames the “mingling of religious and civic authority” as something “the saints viewed differently” from their critics.

Extraordinary Powers

- The Nauvoo Charter granted him the authority to command a militia (the Nauvoo Legion) that was nearly half the size of the U.S. Army.
- He controlled the municipal court and could issue writs of habeas corpus to prevent his own arrest by outside authorities.
- He was privately crowned “King of the Kingdom of God” by the Council of 50.

The Evidence

Joseph Smith consolidated an unprecedented amount of power in himself.



Critics' fears were a rational response to the creation of a theocratic city-state with its own army, led by a man who placed himself above the law.

An Institutional Inheritance

The modern Church's essays exhibit the same character traits—a pattern of selective truth-telling, misdirection, and downplaying inconvenient facts—as its founding prophet.

“It's almost like the Mormon church has borrowed their character and their ethics from Joseph... even in the discussion of polygamy and Joseph Smith's character they're going to leave things out and be deceptive but in some ways they come by it honestly because they learned their morals and ethics from their founding prophet.” – John Dehlin

Examples of Inherited Character

Hiding the Deception

Hiding the Deception
The polygamy essay hides that Joseph hid his prior marriages from Emma.

Downplaying the Record

Downplaying the Record
The character essay dismisses 21 criminal charges as “prejudice” and highlights only one minor conviction.

Euphemistic Language

Euphemistic Language
Using phrases like “emotional turmoil” to describe alleged domestic violence and “weaknesses” to describe polygamy and fraud.

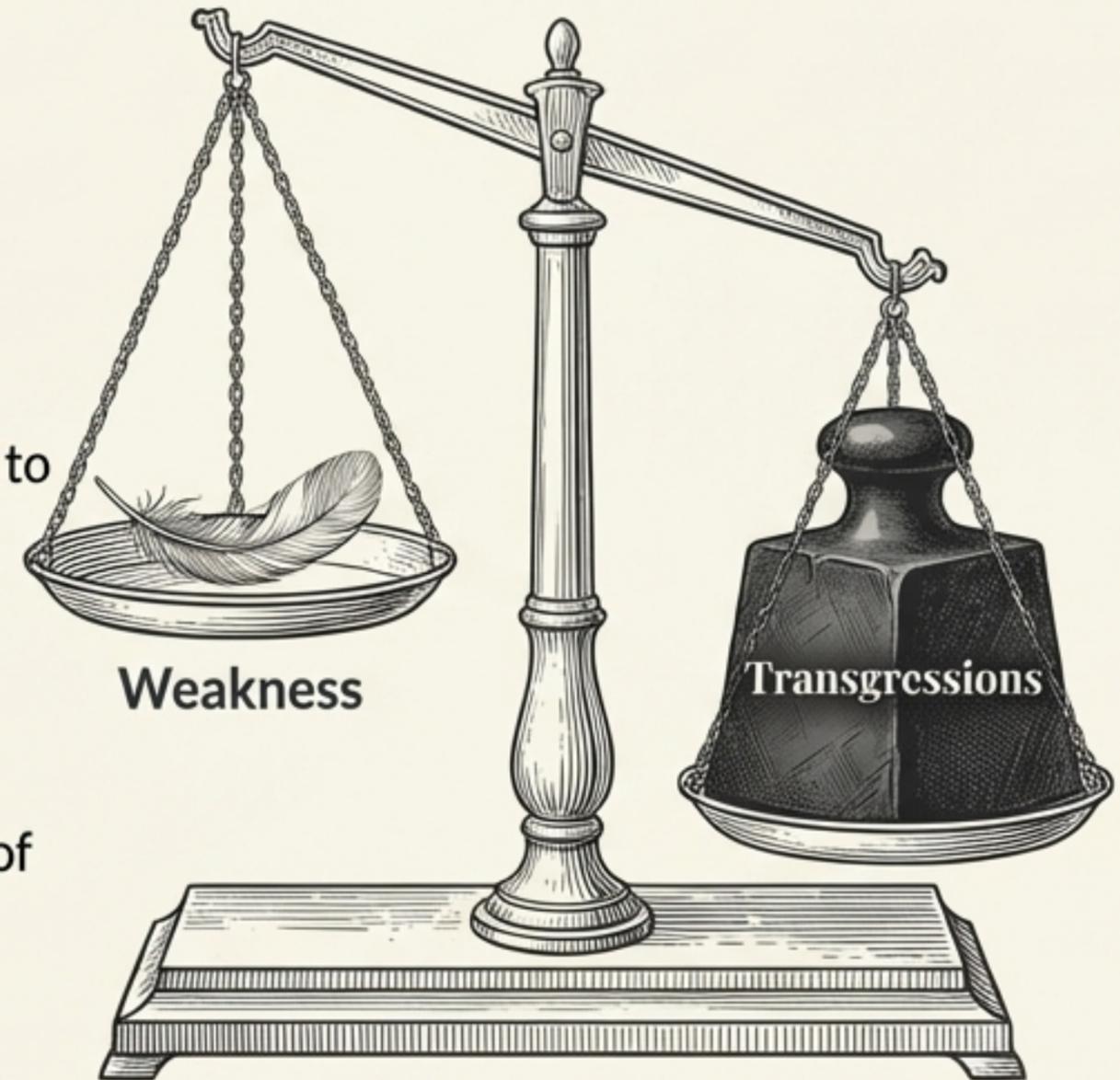
Weaknesses, Mistakes, or Leading the Church Astray?

The Apologetic

The Church essay compares Joseph's "weaknesses" to those of biblical prophets like Moses, arguing they don't disqualify him.

The Critique

1. **False Equivalence:** Is an aversion to public speaking (Moses) equivalent to bank fraud, polygamy with teenagers, and dozens of criminal charges? The term "weakness" is used to sanitize major moral and legal transgressions.
2. **A Double Standard:** If any regular Church member today emulated Joseph Smith's documented actions, they would face swift excommunication. The Church holds its members to a higher standard of conduct than its founder.



The Prophetic Contradiction

Modern Claim: President Russell M. Nelson taught: "If the president of the church should ever lead people astray God would take him away."

The Uncomfortable Question: Joseph Smith was killed at age 38. By President Nelson's own logic, does this imply God did take him away for leading the church astray?

The Unreliable Narrator

The Church's Advice (From the Essay)

- The most reliable sources were created by Joseph himself.
- Do “not rely on Joseph’s critics to shape our understanding.”

The Reality Check

- **A Proven Record of Dishonesty:** Joseph Smith repeatedly and publicly lied about his most consequential actions, including polygamy, the Fanny Alger affair, and his treasure-digging activities.
- **Who Are the “Critics”?** To dismiss critics is to dismiss key witnesses to Church history, including First Presidency member William Law and Book of Mormon witnesses Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, all of whom became critics.
- **The Church's Own Contradiction:** The Church now cites the “dissident” newspaper, the *Nauvoo Expositor*, as a “credible contemporary source” to prove Joseph practiced polygamy, directly contradicting its advice to ignore critics.



Balancing the Fruits of the Restoration

The Claim (From the Essay)

“The work the Lord established through the prophet Joseph Smith far outweighs Joseph's imperfections.”

A More Complete Ledger

While many find community and value in the Church today, the negative fruits of Joseph Smith's actions cannot be ignored.

- **The “Bad Fruit”:** Sandra Tanner argues the legacy includes “a trail of sorrow clear across the United States,” generations of women and families burdened by polygamy, and ancestors living under a harsh theocracy.
- **“Cults work until they don't”:** The Church has been a source of good for many, but it has caused immense damage to others: pioneers who died on a faith-based trek, polygamous wives, LGBTQ members, and all who feel betrayed by a history of false pretenses.
- **An Altered Product:** Much of the “good” in the modern Church is a direct result of it systematically abandoning or “sifting out” the most harmful and controversial doctrines Joseph Smith introduced.



What is a ‘Realistic Expectation’ for a Prophet?

A prominent Mormon apologist argues that those who leave the Church over its history have “unrealistic expectations” for what a prophet should be.

“Is it unrealistic for us to expect a prophet of God to be honest?

To be chaste?

To follow the laws of the land?

To be honest with his people?

To be honoring to his wife? To be honest with her?

Is this unrealistic for us to expect these things?”

— Sandra Tanner