

# Mormon Polyandry in Nauvoo

*Richard S. Van Wagoner*



Joseph Smith emerged from the ferment of Jacksonian America during a time when religion was regaining its hold over American life, when abolitionist groups, temperance movements, and benevolent societies were thriving. Utopian experiments testified to the exuberance of a nation advancing from infancy to childhood. Innocent vitality, limitless resources, a booming economy, and westward expansion nurtured a profound belief in America as the land of destiny, a light to the world.

God could not have chosen a better place, a better time, or a better people than the people of early nineteenth-century America for the "restitution of all things." After a decade of religious revivalism, the booming economy of the 1830s had ripened millennial expectations. Word of angelic visitations was greeted with enthusiasm. The heavens were being rolled back. Old men were dreaming dreams, young men saw visions. Women spoke in tongues, and children conversed with angels. New faiths mushroomed.

Western New York, where the Prophet grew up, was so frequently swept by the fires of religious enthusiasm that it came to be known as the "burned-over district." It was in this milieu, on 6 April 1830, that Joseph Smith organized the Church of Christ, later renamed the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Like other dynamic movements of the day, the fledgling church was influenced not only by restoration Protestant sectarianism but by flourishing contemporary social experiments. Joseph Smith's unique ability to blend current ideas with his own visionary experiences is evident in the growth of his communal vision. The Prophet's earliest exposure to utopian thought and practices may have stemmed from a religious sect called the United Society of True Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. Popularly known as the Shakers, the

---

*RICHARD S. VAN WAGONER, a clinical audiologist, has published in DIALOGUE, Sunstone, Utah Historical Quarterly, Utah Holiday, and BYU Studies. Coauthor of A Book of Mormons with Steven C. Walker, he has also written Mormon Polygamy: A History (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985). A version of this article was presented at the 1983 Sunstone Symposium.*

group established a community a few miles from Smith's birthplace in Vermont (Arrington, Fox, and May 1976, 20). Mother Ann Lee's celibate society was the first communitarian organization of its kind in the United States.

Joseph was probably also familiar with the Harmonists, who claimed that George Rapp, a Lutheran minister and social reformer in Germany, was responding to a vision from Gabriel when he brought his followers from Germany in 1814 to Harmony, Pennsylvania, where Joseph Smith intermittently lived from 1825 to 1827. The Harmonists, who migrated to Indiana to found New Harmony in 1824, experimented like the Shakers with shared property and celibacy.

Robert Owen, wealthy Scottish reformer and industrialist, may also have directly shaped Joseph Smith's utopian ideas through one of his most influential American followers. Arriving in the United States in the mid-1820s, Owen promised a "new Eden in the far west" and began establishing communities based on communal ownership and equality of work and profit. After purchasing the New Harmony community from the Harmonists in 1825, he established two other communitarian societies in Ohio, at Kendal and Yellow Springs.<sup>1</sup> Sidney Rigdon, a prominent Protestant minister in the Western Reserve area of Ohio and a follower of Alexander Campbell's Disciples of Christ, attended a debate between Owen and Campbell in 1829. Taken with Owen's system of "family commonwealths," he tried to implement such a communal order within the Disciples of Christ (Erickson 1922, 17). Campbell's objections caused Rigdon to split from the group, along with other dissenters who went on to set up "common-stock" societies at Mentor and Kirtland, Ohio. By the fall of 1830, Rigdon and more than 100 members of "the family," as they were known, had converted to Mormonism, products of the missionary zeal that brought within a few months nearly 1000 new members into the Mormon fold.

After arriving in Ohio from New York in early February 1831, Joseph Smith convinced Rigdon's communal group to abandon the common-stock principle in favor of the "more perfect law of the Lord." A week later, on 9 February 1831, Smith announced God's revealed "Law of Consecration and Stewardship." Members were advised that "all things belong to the Lord" and were directed to deed all personal property to the bishop of the Church. The bishop then returned a "stewardship" to each head of a household, who was expected to turn over any accrued surplus to the Church. Known as the "Order of Enoch," "The Lord's Law," and the "United Order," the Mormon Order of Stewardship was intended as a pattern of social and economic reorganization for all mankind. The dream was to unify "a people fragmented by their individualistic search for economic well-being." The Saints as a group, divested of personal selfishness and greed, were to be prepared by this communal discipline to usher in the millennial reign of Christ (Arrington, Fox, and May 1976, 2-3).

---

<sup>1</sup> The Harmonists returned to Pennsylvania, founding the village of Economy some twenty miles from Harmony.

Despite the relatively peaceful but brief period in Kirtland, Smith's futuristic plans never fully materialized. As the Church began to expand in Ohio and Jackson County, Missouri, converts imported a diversity of life styles to the Mormon strongholds. Not only had a majority of Rigdon's communal "family" become Mormons, but individuals from a variety of utopian communities had also been converted. Ugly accusations that the Mormons were practicing free love, polygamy, and "spiritual wifery" soon rose against the utopian practices of the young society.

Many outsiders were suspicious of their close-knit adhesion, so foreign to mainstream America. Nor is it difficult to see how Mormon communitarianism with its shared property could have been suspected of a "community of wives" as well. One prominent observer of Robert Owen's "family commonwealths" expressed the popular assumption: "Family life is eternally at war with social life. When you have a private household, you must have personal property to feed it; hence a community of goods — the first idea of a social state — has been found in every case to imply a community of children and to promote a community of wives" (Dixon 2:209).

Mormons may have easily become confused in the public mind with Owen-like contemporary movements. In the early 1830s, another group of "saints" also emerged from the New York social chaos. Disciples of revivalist preachers Erasmus Stone, Hiram Sheldon, and Jarvis Rider claimed they were perfect and could no longer sin. They became known as "Perfectionists." As part of their doctrine, they advocated "spiritual wifery," a concept nearly identical to Mormon eternal marriage. John B. Ellis's 1870 description of perfectionist theology assured that "all arrangements for a life in heaven may be made on earth; that spiritual friendships may be formed, and spiritual bonds contracted, valid for eternity." Mormon missionary Orson Hyde, a former member of Rigdon's "family," visited a similar group he referred to as "Cochranites" in 1832 and worried about their "wonderful lustful spirit, because they believe in a 'plurality of wives' which they call spiritual wives, knowing them not after the flesh but after the spirit, but by the *appearance they know one another after the flesh*" (Hyde, 11 Oct. 1832; emphasis in original).

The frontier teemed with other practitioners of that "wonderful lustful spirit," such as the notorious Robert Matthews, alias "Matthias the Prophet." This self-styled "Prophet of the God of the Jews" announced that "all marriages not made by himself, and according to his doctrine, were of the devil, and that he had come to establish a community of property, and of wives" ("Memoirs" in Ivins 7:15). Matthews practiced what he preached, contracting an unusual marriage with the wife of one of his followers in 1833. Convincing the couple that, as sinners, they were not properly united in wedlock, he claimed power to dissolve the marriage and prophesied that the woman was to "become the mother of a spiritual generation" while he Matthews, would father her first spiritual child. Charges of swindling and murder were brought against him in 1835 by a group of his followers. Though legally acquitted of murder, he served a brief sentence on a minor charge. Three months after his release from prison, he turned up on Joseph Smith's doorstep in Kirtland using

the alias "Joshua the Jewish Minister." After two days of mutually discussing their religious beliefs, they disagreed on the "transmigration of souls," and Joseph told him his "doctrine was of the Devil . . . and I could not keep him any longer, and he must depart" (Jessee 1984, 74–79).

Linked as the Prophet was with such contemporary religionists as Matthias, Shaking Quakers, Harmonists, Perfectionists, Rapphites, and Cochranites, it is little wonder that many outsiders viewed him with a jaded perspective. Ironically, however, the real problems for Smith in Kirtland were caused by insiders. He had given a revelation 9 February 1831 which reaffirmed New Testament monogamy. "Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shall cleave unto her and none else," he said (D&C 42:22). In March 1831 he added, "It is lawful that [a man] should have one wife, and they twain shall be one flesh" (D&C 49:16). Within the Prophet's own congregation, rumors floated that he was violating these directives.

Benjamin Winchester, once a close friend of Smith's and leader of Philadelphia Mormons in the early 1840s, recalled in 1889 the situation in Kirtland during the mid-1830s: "There was a good deal of scandal prevalent among a number of the Saints concerning Joseph's licentious conduct, this more especially among the women. Joseph's name was connected with scandalous relations with two or three families" (*Salt Lake Tribune*, 22 Sept. 1889). Benjamin F. Johnson, another of Smith's confidants, added late in life that this was "one of the Causes of Apostacy & disruption at Kirtland altho at the time there was little Said publicly upon the subject" (Zimmerman 1976, 39).

These and other rumors circulating in Kirtland during the summer of 1835 may have been the catalyst for the canonization of the Church's position on marriage. At a 17 August 1835 general assembly, Church members voted to accept the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants as "our belief, and . . . the faith and principle of this society as a body" (D&C, 1835 ed.). Addressing the charges of fornication and polygamy leveled at the Church, a "Chapter of Rules for Marriage among the Saints," as the Kirtland High Council Minutes called it, was read to the group by W. W. Phelps, the Prophet's scribe. This declaration said in part: "Inasmuch as this church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy; we declare that we believe, that one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband, except in the case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again." The assembled Saints voted to canonize the section by appending it to the Doctrine and Covenants.

Historically, Mormons have not given that marriage statement the attention deserved by its pivotal significance. The neglect is understandable: the section is no longer in Church scriptures. When the Church officially announced in 1852 that it had been practicing plural marriage for nearly a decade, the 1835 statement in the Doctrine and Covenants seemed obsolete. It was removed in 1876 and replaced with Section 132, a revelation on "celestial marriage" received 12 July 1843 and introduced to the Saints in August 1852.

An additional reason the 1835 marriage statement gets little notice despite its status as the present law of the Church is that Joseph Smith was not present

during the 17 August général assembly which voted on the measure. Years later, the rumor circulated that Oliver Cowdery had authored the marriage statement against the Prophet's wishes. If Cowdery, as an Assistant President of the Church, did write the statement, most likely it was to protect the Prophet from the rumors that were spreading against him. For whatever reason, Smith planned a brief missionary venture to Michigan to coincide with the 17 August meeting.<sup>2</sup> Statements he and other Church leaders later made, however, as well as the fact that he performed marriages using the ceremony canonized in that 1835 declaration, argue that he approved of the marriage declaration.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Smith could have made changes prior to the 1835 printing. A "Notes to the Reader" addendum, page xxv in the 1835 edition, details a change in the article of marriage *after* it had been canonized.

The 1835 marriage statement was important in several respects. Not only did it deny the practice of Church-sanctioned polygamy, but it also outlined a marriage ceremony which ended by pronouncing the couple "'husband and wife' in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by virtue of the laws of the country and authority vested in him [the person performing the ceremony]: 'may God add his blessings and keep you to fulfill your covenants from henceforth and forever!'"

This statement, the first referring to eternal marriage, together with the Prophet's two 1831 revelatory statements, suggests that Church leaders no longer viewed marriage as a strictly civil contract. But the Church did not officially accept responsibility for solemnizing the marriages of its members until *after* the 1835 "rules for marriage" had been canonized.

Civil authorities in Ohio did not recognize the license of Church leaders. Sidney Rigdon was arrested in 1835 for marrying a couple, then released when he produced his Campbellite license. This refusal to recognize Mormon priesthood authority was a source of irritation to Joseph Smith; and in a bold display of civil disobedience on 24 November 1835, he performed his first marriage. It was initially intended that Seymour Brunson, who held a valid minister's license, would marry Newel Knight and Lydia Goldthwait Bailey. But

<sup>2</sup> Smith was in Kirtland as late as 10 August and had returned by 23 August (HC 2:242-43, 253). Cowdery remained in Kirtland not only to conduct the conference, but to be with his wife Elizabeth, who gave birth to their daughter Maria on 21 August.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Smith quoted the 1835 marriage statement in its entirety and then declared it the only "rule of marriage . . . practiced in this Church" (*Times and Seasons* 3 [1 Oct. 1842]: 939). President Wilford Woodruff added in court testimony in 1893 that before the revelation on plural marriage was given in 1843, "there could not have been any rule of marriage or any order of marriage in existence at that time except that prescribed by the Book of Doctrine and Covenants." President Woodruff further testified that this was "all the law on the question" of marriage that was given "to the body of the people." Lorenzo Snow, president of the Quorum of the Twelve, added that the section on marriage was the "doctrine and law of the church upon marriage at that time [early Nauvoo]" (Temple Lot 1:304, 309, 312).

Joseph Smith used the ceremony outlined in the marriage statement in performing marriages — even plural marriages. Mercy Fielding testified in 1893 that on 4 June 1837 Joseph Smith married her to Robert Blashel Thompson using the "ceremony prescribed by the Church and set forth in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants." She added that the same ceremony was used when she became the plural wife of Hyrum Smith in 1843 (Temple Lot 1:344-45).

as Hyrum Smith began the introductory comments, Joseph stepped forth and declared his intent to officiate. The bride, later noting that "the prevailing law of Ohio did not recognize the Mormon Elders as ministers," added that Smith said at the time of the wedding:

Our elders have been wronged and prosecuted for marrying without a license. The Lord God of Israel has given me authority to unite the people in the holy bonds of matrimony. And from this time forth I shall use that privilege and marry whomsoever I see fit. And the enemies of the Church shall never have power to use the law against me.<sup>4</sup>

Another interesting aspect of the 1835 marriage statement was a clause which held that "all legal contracts of marriage made before a person is baptized into this church, should be held sacred and fulfilled." Despite that explicit directive, Lydia Goldthwait Bailey, though abandoned by her legal husband, was not divorced when the Prophet married her to Newel Knight, a fact well known to all involved.

The polyandrous Knight marriage was one of Joseph Smith's earliest efforts to apply heavenly guidelines on earth despite legal technicalities. Emphasizing the sacramental nature of marriage, he commented at the conclusion of the Knight ceremony "that marriage was an institution of heaven, instituted in the garden; that it was necessary it should be solemnized by the authority of the everlasting Priesthood" (HC 2:320). Viewing temporal and spiritual standards as inextricably intertwined, Joseph Smith began in the fall of 1835 to teach the eternal marriage alluded to in the canonized marriage statement. W. W. Phelps, Smith's scribe in Kirtland, has provided a commentary on the Prophet's marriage teachings of that period. Writing to his wife in Missouri 9 September 1835, Phelps explained: "I have it in my heart to give you a little instruction, so that you may know your place, and stand in it, believed, admired, and rewarded, in time and in eternity." Two weeks later he again wrote:

Br. Joseph has preached some of the greatest sermons on the duty of wives to their husbands and the role of all Women, I ever heard. I would not have you ignorant, Sally, of the mystery of Men and Women, but I cannot write all you must wait till you see me. This much, however, I will say, that you closed your 4th letter to me in a singular manner: really it was done after the manner of the Gentiles: says Sally "*I remain yours till death.*" But since you have seen my blessing I think you will conclude, "*if your life and years are as precious in the sight of God as Mine,*" thus you will be mine, in this world and in the world to come; And so long as you can "*remain on earth as you desire.*" I think you may as well use the word "*forever,*" as "*till death.*" . . . This is the reason why I have called you at the commencement of this letter, *My Only One*, because I have no right to any other woman in this world nor in the world to come according to the law of the celestial Kingdom. (emphasis in original)

Phelps's understanding of eternal marriage in the "celestial Kingdom" obviously came from Smith, who preached numerous sermons on marriage dur-

<sup>4</sup> Homespun 1893, 31. Newel Knight, the bridegroom, added that the Prophet said at the conclusion of the wedding: "I have done it by the authority of the holy Priesthood and the gentile law has no power to make a law that would abridge the rights of my religion. I have done as I was commanded, and I know the Kingdom of God will prevail, and that the Saints will triumph over all their adversaries" (Sketch, 6).



ing the fall of 1835 while Phelps was living in his home and working with him daily. Despite the implication of eternal marriage in both the 1835 canonized ceremony and Phelps's statements, the first Mormon eternal marriage did not take place until 6 April 1841, when Smith was sealed to plural wife Louisa Beaman by Joseph B. Noble.<sup>5</sup> The Prophet had apparently come to view all marriages prior to this time, including his own to Emma Hale, as valid for "time" only. As late as 1840 he was occasionally signing his letters to Emma with the benediction "your husband till death" (Jessee 1984, 454).<sup>6</sup> It was not until a 28 May 1843 meeting of the Endowment Council<sup>7</sup> in Nauvoo that Joseph and Emma were sealed for time and eternity through the "new and everlasting covenant of marriage" (Ehat 1982, 2).

The idea of eternal marriage was not unique to Joseph Smith. Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), an eminent Swedish scientist who turned to theology in middle age, wrote a number of books setting forth "heavenly doctrines" which he claimed were based on biblical teachings interpreted to him through direct communication with the spiritual world. "Two souls which grew up together before life are bound to find each other again on earth," he wrote, and "in heaven as on earth there are males and females. Man was made for woman and woman for man. Love must unite them eternally, and there are marriages in heaven" (in Cairncross 1974, 174–75).

William Hepworth Dixon discussed the "Americanization of spiritual wifery" as developed by Joseph Smith's New York contemporaries, the Perfectionists:

The theory is, that a man who may be either unmarried before the law or wedded to a woman whom he cannot love as a wife should be loved, shall have the right, in virtue of a higher morality, and a more sacred duty than the churches teach him, to go out among the crowd of his female friends, and seek a partner in whom he shall find some special fitness for a union with himself; and when he has found such a bride of the soul, that he shall have the further right of courting her, even though she may have taken the vows as another man's wife, and of entering into closer and sweeter relations with her than those which belong to the common earth; all vows on his part and on her part being to this end thrust aside as so much worldly waste. (Dixon 1:88–89)

New England proponents of spiritual wifery in the 1830s were asking such questions as "Does a true marriage on earth imply a true marriage in heaven? Can there be a true marriage of the body without a binding covenant for the soul? Is not the real marriage always that of the soul? Are not all unions which

<sup>5</sup> Louisa Beaman (also spelled Beman or Beeman), daughter of Alva and Betsy Beaman, was born in Livonia, New York, 7 February 1815. She was sealed to Joseph Smith for eternity and Brigham Young for time on 14 January 1846, and died in Salt Lake City 15 May 1850.

<sup>6</sup> See also Joseph to Emma Smith, 9 Nov. 1839, in Smith 2:376–77. Jessee (1984, 448–49) cites it, explaining that the closing benediction and Smith's signature have been cut away. Interestingly, in a 16 August 1842 letter to Emma, Smith signs the letter "your affectionate husband until death through all eternity for evermore" (Jessee 1984, 527). This letter precedes by more than nine months the Smiths's eternal sealing on 28 May 1843.

<sup>7</sup> This secret organization was also called the Endowment Quorum, the Quorum of the Anointed, Joseph Smith's Prayer Circle, or simply the Quorum.

are of the body only, false unions?" Dixon notes that leaders of this movement answered boldly that "all true marriages are good for time and for eternity . . . all other combinations of the two sexes, even though they have been sanctioned by the law and blessed by the Church, are null and void" (Dixon 1:94).

Swedenborgian and Perfectionist thinking have striking similarities in Joseph Smith's early Nauvoo teachings. But Smith went a step further by advocating what he termed "celestial marriage," a blending of eternal marriage and polygamy to which polyandry became an integral though short-lived appendage.

With the introduction of polygamy to Nauvoo, the standards of "gentile law" were simply viewed as invalid, despite the clause to the contrary in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. As God's earthly agent, the Prophet claimed powers transcending civil law. Responsibility for binding and unbinding marriages on earth and in heaven was solely his or his designates'.

Augusta Adams Cobb is a case in point. Baptized in 1832, she was a stalwart Church member in the Boston area. Her husband, however, was not converted. Returning to Boston in the fall of 1844 after an extended visit to Nauvoo, Mrs. Cobb told her husband that she loved Brigham Young and "live or die, she was going to live with him at all hazards" (*Boston Post*, 22 Dec. 1847, cited in Ivins). She returned to Nauvoo and her husband successfully sued for divorce; but Church leaders had obviously not recognized her civil marriage to Mr. Cobb in the first place: she and Brigham Young had been married secretly 2 November 1843.

"Gentile law," with its civil marriage, was publicly denounced as early as 1847 by Orson Pratt in a sermon recorded by Wilford Woodruff:

as all the ordinances of the gospel administered by the world since the Apostacy of the church was illegal, in like manner was the marriage Cerimony illegal and all the world who had been begotton through the illegal marriage were Bastards not Sons & Hence they had to enter into the law of adoption & be adopted into the Priesthood in order to become sons & legal heirs to salvation. (Kenney 3:260)

Eleanor McLean, the twelfth wife of Apostle Parley P. Pratt, amplified this theology in an 1869 newspaper interview. In an 1857 Arkansas dispute, Mrs. McLean's legal husband, Hector, had murdered her extralegal husband, Parley. Trying to clear up the confusion of the polyandrous relationship for a reporter in 1869, she dismissed her legal marriage: "The sectarian priests have no power from God to marry: and a so-called marriage ceremony performed by them is no marriage at all" (Pratt 1975, 233).

Mrs. McLean was on safe Mormon ground theologically. Her source could have been the published writings on the subject by her brother-in-law, Orson Pratt. In his Church-sponsored *The Seer*, Pratt had explained in 1853: "Marriages, then among all nations, though legal according to the laws of men, have been illegal according to the laws, authority, and institutions of Heaven. All the children born during that long period, though legitimate according to the customs and laws of nations, are illegitimate according to the order and authority of Heaven."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Pratt 1853, 47. Orson further added on 11 August 1871: "I said their [non-Mormon] baptisms are illegal. Now let me go a little further, and say that the ordinance of marriage is



Even Mormon marriages prior to the fall of 1835, when priesthood authority began to be evoked in marriage ceremonies, were adjudged invalid, with Joseph Smith's own marriage to Emma Hale 18 January 1827 by Squire Tarbill being considered "illegal according to the laws . . . of heaven." John D. Lee, a member of the secret Council of Fifty and an adopted son of Brigham Young, explained:

About the same time the doctrine of "sealing" for an eternal state was introduced . . . the Saints were given to understand that their marriage relations with each other were not valid. That those who had solemnized the rites of matrimony had no authority of God to do so. That the true priesthood was taken from the earth with the death of the apostles and inspired men of God. That they were married to each other only by their own covenants, and that if their marriage relations had not been productive of blessings and peace, and they felt it oppressive to remain together, they were at liberty to make their own choice, as much as if they had not been married. (Lee 1891, 146-47)

This developing position of Church leaders in Nauvoo on what constituted a wife makes much of the confusion surrounding Joseph Smith's personal behavior easier to understand. When he was sealed to Louisa Beaman 5 April 1841, few people were aware of the incident. Emma Smith did not know, neither did Hyrum. Most of the Twelve were on missions in England. But shortly after the first boatload of apostle-missionaries docked at the Nauvoo wharf, Joseph took them aside and began to teach them about polygamy—"spiritual marriage," as it would be known to a select few Nauvoo Saints.<sup>9</sup>

illegal among all people, nations and tongues, unless administered by a man appointed by new revelation from God to join the male and female as husband and wife" (JD 16:175).

<sup>9</sup> The terms "spiritual marriage," "spiritual wifery," and polygamy have become confused in Mormon history. Though "spiritual wifery" in Mormon usage later became equated with John C. Bennett's advocacy of promiscuous intercourse or "free love," this was not the contemporary Nauvoo meaning. Polygamy, spiritual wifery, and/or spiritual marriage were used in Mormon and non-Mormon contexts as though interchangeable. Emily Dow Partridge, a plural wife to Joseph Smith and later Brigham Young, for example, uses "spiritual wife" as a reference to herself and others: "Spiritual wives, as we were then termed, were not very numerous in those days and a spiritual baby was a rarity indeed" (1877, 72). Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, another of Joseph's plural wives, added that in Nauvoo, "spiritual wife was the title by which every woman who entered into this order [plural marriage] was called" (Whitney 1882, 15). Bathsheba Smith, wife of Apostle George A. Smith, testified in court that during the John C. Bennett fracas in Nauvoo, the church "preached against him from the stand, and against plural marriage, the secret wife system, secret marriages. The spiritual wife system was the system by which a man had two wives at the same time" (Temple Lot 1:362). And Ebenezer Robinson, who was introduced to plural marriage by Hyrum Smith in November or December 1843, when asked in an interview, "Did you understand from Hyrum Smith in 1843 that polygamy & spiritual wifery was identical?" responded "I did" (Robinson to Jason W. Briggs, 28 Jan. 1880). Justin Morse, a Nauvoo resident in the early 1840s, testified 23 March 1887 that in 1842, "Elder Amasa Lyman, taught me the doctrine of *sealing*, or marrying for eternity, called *spiritual wifery*, and that within one year from that date my own wife and another woman were sealed to me for eternity. . . . This woman was the wife of another man, but was to be mine in eternity" (in Shook 1914, 169-70). Furthermore, the 1 January 1845 *Nauvoo Neighbor*, responding to Illinois Governor Thomas Ford's charges of polygamy, editorialized:

To relieve the governor's mind, on this subject, we will just say that the meaning of spiritual wives is to be married for eternity, instead of natural lifetime; and should a man die after they have been married, they have a legal right to get married again; and should they do it for eternity, especially a man, he must have spiritual wives.

Perhaps one of the first married Nauvoo women to be introduced to Joseph Smith's polyandrous teachings was the wife of Apostle Orson Pratt. If one believes the report of Smith's turncoat counselor John C. Bennett, Joseph approached Sarah Pratt sometime in early 1841 while Orson was still on his mission in Europe. "Sister Pratt, the Lord has given you to me as one of my spiritual wives," Bennett later quoted Smith. "I have the blessings of Jacob granted me, as he granted holy men of old, and I have long looked upon you with favor, and hope you will not deny me." "I care not for the blessings of Jacob," the feisty Sarah reportedly replied. "I have one good husband, and that is enough for me" (Bennett 1842, 229). The incident caused sufficient difficulty between Smith and Pratt that both Orson and Sarah left the Church for a short time.<sup>10</sup>

Some have assumed that, when Joseph Smith approached married women with polyandrous proposals, he was merely testing their faith, loyalty, or virtue. In Sarah Pratt's case, for example, the 14 September 1877 *New York Herald* reported: "It is said that the Prophet admitted to [Pratt] the attempt he made on his wife's virtue, but that it was only done to see whether she was true to her absent husband." In at least two other cases the Prophet "tested" an apostle by asking him for the hand of his wife. Church President Wilford Woodruff recounted the "test" of Apostle John Taylor: "The Prophet went to the home of President Taylor, and said to him, 'Brother John, I WANT LEONORA.'" Taylor was stunned, but after walking the floor all night, the obedient elder said to Smith, "If GOD wants Leonora He can have her." Woodruff concluded: "That was all the prophet was after, to see where President Taylor stood in the matter, and said to him, Brother Taylor, I dont want your wife, I just wanted to know just where you stood" (Whitaker 1 Nov. 1890; emphasis in original).

A similar test was required of Apostle Heber C. Kimball: "Joseph demanded for himself what to Heber was the unthinkable, his Vilate. Totally crushed spiritually and emotionally, Heber touched neither food nor water for three days and three nights and continually sought confirmation and comfort from God." Finally, after "some kind of assurance," Heber took Vilate to the upper room of Joseph's store on Water Street. The Prophet wept at this act of faith, devotion, and obedience. Joseph had never intended to take Vilate. It was all a test" (Kimball 1981, 93).

Jedediah M. Grant, second counselor to Brigham Young and father of President Heber J. Grant, commented on such tests in a Utah sermon delivered on 19 February 1854. "When the family organization was revealed from heaven — the patriarchal order of God, and Joseph began, on the right and on the left, to add to his family, what a quaking there was in Israel." But asked Grant, "Did the Prophet Joseph want every man's wife he asked for? He did not, but in that thing was the grand thread of the Priesthood developed. The grand object in view was to try the people of God, to see what was in them" (JD 2:13–14).

---

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the difficulties between the Pratts and Joseph Smith, see my forthcoming essay on Sarah M. Pratt.

In some instances, however, the Prophet's intent went beyond "trying the people." He sought to marry wives of several living men, refusing to recognize the legality of their civil marriages. Mary Elizabeth Rollins, married to non-Mormon Adam Lightner since 11 August 1835, was one of the first women to accept the polyandrous teachings of the Prophet. "He was commanded to take me for a wife," she wrote in a 21 November 1880 letter to Emmeline B. Wells. "I was his, before I came here," she added in an 8 February 1902 statement. Brigham Young secretly sealed the two in February 1842 when Mary was eight months pregnant with her son George Algernon Lightner. She lived with Adam Lightner until his death in Utah many years later. In her 1880 letter to Emmeline B. Wells, Mary explained: "I could tell you why I stayed with Mr. Lightner. Things the leaders of the Church does not know anything about. I did just as Joseph told me to do, as he knew what troubles I would have to contend with." She added on 23 January 1892 in a letter to John R. Young: "I could explain some things in regard to my living with Mr. L. after becoming the *Wife of Another*, which would throw light, on what *now* seems mysterious — and you would be perfectly satisfied with me. I write this; because I have heard that it had been commented on to my injury" (George A. Smith papers).<sup>11</sup>

Sarah M. Kimball, a prominent Nauvoo and Salt Lake City Relief Society leader was also approached by the Prophet in early 1842 despite her solid 1840 marriage to non-Mormon Hiram Kimball. Sarah later recalled that

Joseph Smith taught me the principle of marriage for eternity, and the doctrine of plural marriage. He said that in teaching this he realized that he jeopardized his life; but God had revealed it to him many years before as a privilege with blessings, now God had revealed it again and instructed him to teach with commandment, as the Church could travel [progress] no further without the introduction of this principle. (Jenson 1887, 6:232)

Sarah Kimball, like Sarah Pratt, was committed to her husband, and refused the Prophet's invitation, asking that he "teach it to someone else." Although she kept the matter quiet, her husband and Smith evidently had difficulties over the incident. On 19 May 1842, at a Nauvoo City Council meeting, Smith jotted down and then "threw across the room" a revelation to Kimball which declared that "Hiram Kimball has been insinuating evil, and formulating evil opinions" against the Prophet, which if he does not desist from, he "shall be accursed" (HC 5:12–13). Sarah remained a lifetime member of the Church and a lifelong wife to Hiram Kimball, who eventually joined the Church but was killed in a steamship explosion while enroute to a mission in Hawaii.

---

<sup>11</sup> After her sealing to Smith, Mary Lightner had seven more children by Adam Lightner. It was the rule rather than the exception for Smith to encourage a polyandrous wife to remain with her legal husband. Joseph Kingsbury even wrote that he served as a surrogate husband for the Prophet: "I according to Pres. Joseph Smith & council & others, I agreed to stand by Sarah Ann Whitney [sealed to Smith 27 July 1843] as though I was supposed to be her husband and a pretended marriage for the purpose of shielding them from the enemy and for the purpose of bringing out the purposes of God" (Kingsbury, 5).

Marinda Nancy Johnson, sister of Apostles Luke and Lyman Johnson, married Orson Hyde in 1834. A year before Hyde returned from Jerusalem in 1843, Marinda was sealed to Joseph Smith, though she lived with Orson until their divorce in 1870 (Quinn 1978, 98). Josephine Lyon Fisher, born to Windsor P. Lyon and Sylvia P. Sessions on 8 February 1844, less than five months before the Prophet's martyrdom, related in a 24 February 1915 statement that prior to her mother's death in 1882 "she called me to her bedside and told me that her days on earth were about numbered and before she passed away from mortality she desired to tell me something which she had kept as an entire secret from me and all others but which she now desired to communicate to me." Josephine's mother told her she was "the daughter of the Prophet Joseph Smith, she having been sealed to the Prophet at the time that her husband Mr. Lyon was out of fellowship with the Church."<sup>12</sup>

Two sisters, Zina D. and Prescindia Huntington, both respected Nauvoo women, were also polyandrous wives of Joseph Smith. Prescindia had married Norman Buell in 1827 and had two sons by him before joining Mormonism in 1836. She was sealed to Joseph Smith by her brother Dimick on 11 December 1841, though she continued to live with Buell until 1846, when she left him to marry Heber C. Kimball. In a "letter to my eldest grand-daughter living in 1880," she explained that Norman Buell had left the Church in 1839, but that "the Lord gave me strength to Stand alone & keep the faith amid heavy persecution."

Prescindia's twenty-year-old sister Zina was living in the Joseph Smith home when Henry B. Jacobs married her in March 1841. According to family records, when the Jacobs asked the Prophet why he had not honored them by performing their marriage, he replied that "the Lord had made it known to him that [Zina] was to be his Celestial wife" (Emma R. Jacobs in O. Cannon, 5). Believing that "whatever the Prophet did was right, without making the wisdom of God's authorities bend to the reasoning of any man," the devout Jacobs consented for six-months-pregnant Zina to be sealed to Joseph Smith 27 October 1841 (O. Cannon, 5). Some have suggested that the Jacobs's marriage was "unhappy" and that the couple had separated before her sealing to Joseph Smith.<sup>13</sup> But, though sealed to the Prophet for eternity, Zina con-

<sup>12</sup> On 12 October 1905, Angus M. Cannon discussed this incident with Joseph Smith, III, and his son Frederick. In response to the elder Smith's inquiry, "Where is the issue in evidence of my father's having married plural wives," Cannon replied:

I will now refer you to one case where it was said by the girl's grandmother that your father has a daughter born of a plural wife. The girl's grandmother was Mother Sessions, who lived in Nauvoo and died here in the valley. She was the grand-daughter of Mother Sessions. . . . Aunt Patty Sessions, asserts that the girl was born within the time after your father was said to have taken the mother. And I want you to understand that I know your father lived and died a Prophet of the Living god, and I will be the last one to seek evidence of anything that the world might be pleased to criticize in his life, knowing that he alone was accountable to God for his conduct. (A. Cannon, 1905)

<sup>13</sup> Jensen, 1:697, and Arrington 1985, 171. Henry Jacobs's letters indicate a blissful relationship from his point of view with no hint of discord. Interestingly, he still viewed Zina as his wife though she had been "sealed for time" to Brigham Young. Six months after that sealing had taken place, Jacobs wrote "Mrs. Zina Jacobs" from Brooklyn, New York, on 19 August 1846, enroute to his mission in Liverpool to tell her, "I have not forgotten you my

tinued her connubial relationship with Jacobs. On 2 February 1846, pregnant with Henry's second son, Zina was resealed by proxy to the murdered Joseph Smith and in that same session was "sealed for time" to Brigham Young. Faithful Henry B. Jacobs stood by as an official witness to both ceremonies (O. Cannon, 7).

This polyandrous triangle became even more complex. Zina and Henry lived together as husband and wife until the westward-bound Saints reached Mt. Pisgah, Iowa. At this temporary stop on the pioneer trail, Brigham Young announced that "it was time for men who were walking in other men's shoes to step out of them. Brother Jacobs, the woman you claim for a wife does not belong to you. She is the spiritual wife of brother Joseph, sealed up to him. I am his proxy, and she, in this behalf, with her children, are my property. You can go where you please, and get another, but be sure to get one of your own kindred spirit" (Hall 1853, 43-44).

President Young then called Jacobs on a mission to England. Witnesses to his departure commented that he was so ill they had to "put him on a blanket and carry him to the boat to get him on his way" ("Short Sketch" in O. Cannon Collection).<sup>14</sup> Though his health returned, his spirits remained low. On 27 August 1847, his missionary companion and brother-in-law, Oliver Huntington, received a letter from his wife informing the two missionaries that "Zina had gone to Salt Lake City to live with President Young's family" (Firmage). Oliver dashed off a letter to Zina, complaining that "Henry is here and herd the letter. He says all is right, he don't care. He stands alone as yet. I have had almost as much trial about you as he has. I have had to hear, feel and suffer everything he has — If you only knew my troubles you'd pity me" (Firmage in O. Cannon Collection).

Henry returned from his mission and settled in California. But he was still in love with Zina, now a plural wife of Brigham Young. His letters to her were heartrending. On 2 September 1852 he wrote: "O how happy I should be if I only could see you and the little children, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh." "I am unhappy," Henry lamented, "there is no peace for poor me, my pleasure is you, my comfort has vanished. . . . O Zina, can I ever, will I ever get you again, answer the question please" (O. Cannon Collection). In an undated Valentine he added:

Zina my mind never will change from Worlds without Ends, no never, the same affection is there and never can be moved I do not murmur nor complain of the handlings of God no verily, no but I feel alone and no one to speak to, to call my own. I feel like a lamb without a mother, I do not blame any person or persons, no — May the Lord our Father bless Brother Brigham and all purtains unto him forever. Tell

---

Love is as ever the same and much more abundantly And hope that it will contue to grow stronger an stronger to all Eternity worlds without End when familys are joined together" (In O. Cannon Collection).

<sup>14</sup> Henry in his 19 August 1846 letter to Zina mentioned that "My health is measurably good at present excepting my Lung Bleede at times which causes much debilation of body; when I Met you before in nauvoo I was very feeble indeed and continued So untill I came to Cambey NY then my helth began to improve."

him for me I have no feelings against him nor never had, all is right according to the Law of the Celestial Kingdom of our god Joseph (O. Cannon Collection).

One might understandably wonder why a man so obviously in love with his wife would give her up to another. Oliver Huntington, writing of this incident in his autobiography, explained: "Zina's husband took to himself another woman before he had returned from England to the bluffs . . . and [Zina] chose a guardian, who could supply her with whatever she wanted, which she could not get, this supply came from the Church. She became the wife of Brigham Young."<sup>15</sup> Another descendant clarified the incident further: "President Young told Zina D. if she would marry him she would be in a higher glory" (Briant S. Jacobs quoted in Firmage, 15, in O. Cannon Collection). Brigham Young himself provided the clearest insight into this situation in an 8 October 1861 General Conference statement on divorce: "There was another way — in which a woman could leave a man — if the woman preferred — another man higher in authority & he is willing to take her. & her husband gives her up — there is no bill of divorce required in the case it is right in the sight of God."<sup>16</sup>

The "patriarchal order of marriage," as polygamy was often termed in the nineteenth century, was specific in pointing out that salvation for women depended on their being sealed to a "Lord," or worthy man. Orson Pratt, who eventually became recognized as the "Apostle of Polygamy" for his spirited defenses of the principle, published the first theological discussion on the necessity of a woman's being sealed to a worthy man in order to receive heavenly exaltation:

You will clearly perceive from the revelation which God has given that you can never obtain a fulness of glory without being married to a righteous man for time and for all eternity. If you marry a man who receives not the gospel, you lay a foundation for sorrow in this world, besides losing the privilege of enjoying the society of a husband in eternity. You forfeit your right to an endless increase of immortal lives. And even the children which you may be favored with in this life will not be entrusted to

---

<sup>15</sup> Cannon Collection. After receiving word of Zina's relationship with Brigham Young, Jacobs married Sarah Taylor. He was excommunicated on 6 December 1847 for his part in sealing W. W. Phelps to three women. See Van Wagoner and Walker 1982, 207–8. After reinstatement Jacobs was again excommunicated on 26 January 1851 for reasons that even he did not know, according to his 1 Sept. 1852 letter to Zina.

<sup>16</sup> President Young's theology may have come directly from Joseph Smith. Wilford Woodruff wrote in his journal, 2 June 1857:

Brigham Young Said Joseph taught that when a womans affections was entirely weaned from her husband that was Adultery in spirit. Her Affections were Adulterated from his. He also said that there was no law in Heaven or on Earth that would Compel a woman to stay with a man either in time or Eternity. This I think is true (but I do not know), that if a man that is a High priest takes a woman & she leaves him & goes to one of a lesser office say the Lesser priesthood or member I think in the resurrection that the High Priest Can Claim her. Joseph [Young]: What if she should not want to go with him? I should not want a woman under those Circumstances.

Brigham. I will tell you what you will find that all those evil traditions & affections or passions that Haunt the mind in this life will all be done away in the resurrection. You will find then that any man who gets a glory & exaltation will be so beautiful that any woman will be willing to have him if it was right & whatever it is right for the woman to go there she will be willing to go for all those evils will vanish to which we are subject in this life. (Kenney 5:55–56)



your charge in eternity; but you will be left in that world without a husband, without a family, without a kingdom — without any means of enlarging yourselves, being subject to the principalities and powers who are counted worthy of families, and kingdoms, and thrones, and the increase of dominions forever. To them you will be servants and angels . . . [Regardless of the] morality of such persons . . . how kind they may be to you, they are not numbered with the people of god; they are not in the way of salvation; they cannot save themselves nor their families; and after what God has revealed upon this subject you cannot be justified, for one moment, in keeping their company. It would be infinitely better for you to suffer poverty and tribulation with the people of God, than to place yourselves under the power of those who will not embrace the great truths of Heaven (Pratt 1853, 140).

Steeped in such philosophy, married women such as Mary Elizabeth Lightner, Sylvia Sessions, Prescendia Buell, Zina D. H. Jacobs, Augusta Cobb, and Eleanor McLean were persuaded that their non-Mormon or Mormon layman husbands could not take them to the highest degree of the coveted celestial kingdom. A Mormon male of hierarchical rank, with feet firmly planted in the priesthood, seemed a sure ticket to heaven.

In the labyrinth of early LDS matrimonial theology, the definitions of "wife" and "husband" are complex indeed. *Polygyny* — the practice of having two or more wives at the same time — correctly describes the Mormon practice of plural marriage. But so, in Nauvoo, does *polyandry* — the practice of having two or more husbands at the same time. There is considerable evidence, during the early years of plural marriage, that more than a few Mormon women had two husbands simultaneously. These bigamous or polyandrous relationships were complicated by the fact that the legal husband did not usually know about the extralegal husband. In addition, the Church recognized the nonlegal husband as the valid mate, whereas the law recognized the legal mate. *Polygamy* — the state of having two or more wives or husbands at the same time — is often said to be used incorrectly in describing Mormon plural marriage. But the history of Mormon marriage systems makes it correct to call many early Mormon marriages not only polygynous, but also polygamous.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Unless otherwise noted, all items cited are in the Historical Department Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. The Utah State Historical Society is also in Salt Lake City.

Arrington, Leonard. *Brigham Young: American Moses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.

Arrington, Leonard J., Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May. *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation Among the Mormons*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976.

Beck, James. Notebooks, 1859–65. Holograph.

Bennett, John C. *The History of the Saints: Or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*. Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842.

Cannon, Angus M. "Statement of an Interview with Joseph Smith, President of the 'Reorganites,' 12 Oct. 1905." Holograph.

Cannon, Ora J. History of Henry Bailey Jacobs. Typescript. N.d. This biography contains the statement of Joseph Smith about his future marriage to Zina as reported by descendant Emma R. Jacobs; and Mary Brown Firmage, "Recollections of Zina D. Young." N.d.

- . Collection. The "Short Sketch of the Life of Henry B. Jacobs, Prepared for 1977 Reunion," is included.
- Cairncross, John. *After Polygamy was Made a Sin: The Social History of Christian Polygamy*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974. He cites Dailland de la Touche's edition of Swedenborg's work.
- Dixon, William Hepworth. *Spiritual Wives*. 2 vols. London: Hurst and Blackett, 1868.
- Ehat, Andrew F. "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the Mormon Succession Question." M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1982.
- Ellis, John B. *Free Love and Its Votaries*. 1870. In Ivins.
- Ericksen, Ephraim Edward. *The Psychological and Ethical Aspects of Mormon Group Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922.
- Fisher, Josephine F. Statement to Andrew Jensen, 24 Feb. 1915.
- Hall, William. *The Abominations of Mormonism Exposed*. Cincinnati: I. Hart & Co., 1853.
- HC. Joseph Smith, Jr. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. B. H. Roberts, ed. 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1974.
- Homespun (pen name). "Lydia Knight's History." *The First Book of Noble Women's Series*. Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1893.
- Huntington, Oliver B. History of the Life of Oliver B. Huntington Also His Travels and Troubles. N.d. Typescript. Utah State Historical Society.
- Huntington, Prescindia (Smith Kimball). To her "eldest granddaughter living in 1880." Holograph.
- Hyde, Orson. Journal. Typescript. Utah State Historical Society.
- Ivins, Stanley S. Notebooks. Stanley S. Ivins Collection. Utah State Historical Society Library.
- Jenson, Andrew. *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia*. 4 vols. Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson Historical Co., 1901-36.
- , comp. *The Historical Record: A Monthly Periodical Devoted Exclusively to Historical, Biographical, Chronological and Statistical Matters*. 9 vols. Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson, 1887.
- JD. *Journal of Discourses*. 26 vols. Liverpool and London: LDS Booksellers' Depot, 1854-86.
- Jessee, Dean C. *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984.
- Kenney, Scott G., ed. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*. Typescript. 9 vols. Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983-85.
- Kimball, Stanley B. *Heber C. Kimball, Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981.
- Kingsbury, Joseph. History of Joseph Kingsbury Written by His Own Hand. Utah State Historical Society.
- Knight, Newel. Sketch. Holograph. N.d.
- Lee, John D. *Mormonism Unveiled*. St. Louis: M. E. Mason, 1891.
- Lightner, Mary E. Statement. 8 Feb. 1902; Lightner to Emmeline B. Wells, 21 Nov. 1880; Lightner to John R. Young, 25 Jan. 1892. George A. Smith Papers. Special Collections. University of Utah. Salt Lake City.
- Lyman, Albert R. *Amasa Mason Lyman: Trailblazer and Pioneer from the Atlantic to the Pacific*. Delta, Utah: Melvin A. Lyman, 1957.
- Partridge, Emily Dow (Smith Young). Autobiographical Sketch. Typescript.
- Phelps, W. W. Letter Collection.
- Pratt, Orson. *The Seer*. London: Franklin D. Richards. 1853.

- Pratt, Steven. "Eleanor Mclean and the Murder of Parley P. Pratt." *BYU Studies* 15 (Winter 1975): 225-56.
- Quinn, D. Michael. "Latter-day Prayer Circles." *BYU Studies* 19 (Fall 1978): 82-96.
- Shook, Charles A. *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy*. Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Co., 1914.
- Smith, Joseph. Journal. Microfilm.
- Smith, Joseph, III, and Herman C. Smith. *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*. 4 vols. Lamoni, Iowa: Herald House, 1896-1903.
- Temple Lot. *Complainants Abstract Pleading and Evidence in the Circuit Court of the United States, Western District of Missouri, Western Division, at Kansas City*, 2 vols. Lamoni, Iowa: Herald Publishing House and Bindery, 1893.
- Van Wagoner, Richard S., and Steven C. Walker. *A Book of Mormons*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1982.
- Whitaker, John Mills. Journal. N.d. Typescript.
- Whitney, Helen Mar Kimball. *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet, a Reply to Joseph Smith, the Editor of the Lamoni (Iowa) Herald*. Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882.
- Winchester, Benjamin F. "Primitive Mormonism — Personal Narrative of It." *Salt Lake Tribune*, 22 Sept. 1889.
- Zimmerman, Dean R. *I Knew the Prophets — An Analysis of the Letter of Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, Reporting Doctrinal Views of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young*. Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 1976.