

# William Smith, 1811-93: Problematic Patriarch

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WILLIAM SMITH, YOUNGER BROTHER of the prophet Joseph Smith, has been easy to dismiss but difficult to deal with. More often than not, he has been described with adjectives like *violent*, *wicked*, *unstable*, and *licentious*. Yet intriguing references suggest that a more balanced view of this complex man might be appropriate. The Prophet described his brother in a blessing 18 December 1833 this way: "Brother William is as the fierce lion which divideth not the spoil because of his strength."<sup>1</sup> Then on 9 December 1842, William defended the Nauvoo Charter with uncommon eloquence as representative for Hancock County in the Illinois legislature.<sup>2</sup> In August 1845, W. W. Phelps designated William "the Patriarchal Jacob's Staff."<sup>3</sup> And B. H. Roberts, impressed with the seventy-year-old William in 1881, said he had "so vindicated the claims and the character of his brother that ever afterward whenever the question of Joseph Smith came up, people would say 'He had just as good a right to be a prophet as any man mentioned in the Bible.'"<sup>4</sup>

William Smith was born at Royalton, Vermont, 13 March 1811, the fifth son of Joseph, Sr., and Lucy Mack Smith. He was baptized by David Whitmer 9 June 1830 and was ordained an apostle 15 February 1835, before he was twenty-four years old. He married Caroline Amanda Grant, the sister of

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978), 1:467.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:201.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:435.

<sup>4</sup> As cited in Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), p. 122.

Jedediah M. Grant, in 1833, they had two children, she died 22 May 1845 at the age of thirty-four, and on 22 June 1845 William married Mary Jane Rollins who left him two months later.<sup>5</sup> On 18 May 1847, he married Roxie Ann Grant, Caroline's younger sister, by whom he had two more children before they separated. He married Eliza Elise Sanborn some time before 1858 and they had three children. Eliza died in 1889 and two years later William married Rosanna Surprise, a Frenchwoman. During the year 1845, while in Nauvoo, William Smith had also been sealed to several plural wives, including Mary Ann Sheffield, Mary Jones, Priscilla Mogridge, and Sarah and Hannah Libbey.<sup>6</sup> He died at Osterdock, Iowa, 13 November 1893, at the age of eighty-two, a member of the Reorganized Church which he had joined in 1878.

Because William Smith never went west, we cannot know what he might have contributed to the church in Utah. He was ordained and set apart as Patriarch to the Church 24 May 1845, but five months later was rejected as apostle and patriarch at the 6 October 1845 general conference. Official church history records the objection to William: "He aspires to uproot and undermine the legal presidency of the Church," and "his doctrine and conduct have not had a savory influence but have produced death and destruction wherever he went."<sup>7</sup> Even though Orson Pratt is cited in the *History of the Church* as the one who objected, he was in the East at the time; his own journal names his brother Parley as the one who protested.<sup>8</sup> So does the journal of Willard Richards.<sup>9</sup> A vote was taken, William was not sustained, and he was excommunicated two weeks later.<sup>10</sup>

William Smith's reputation has subsequently suffered one of two fates. Either he has been ignored, omitted from the list of patriarchs and treated as someone of little consequence, or he has been trotted out as a bad example — a modern Laman or Lemuel, "the profligate brother" of the Prophet.<sup>11</sup> Because William Smith was not sustained as patriarch by the general membership of the church, historians such as Joseph Fielding Smith have said William never legally acted in the office and therefore "should not be classed among the

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<sup>5</sup> Willard Richards, Journal, 31 Aug. 1845, Historical Department Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives. See also *Warsaw Signal*, 3 Sept. 1845.

<sup>6</sup> Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Seventies Mission Bookstore, 1981), p. 277.

<sup>7</sup> *History of the Church*, 7:458–59.

<sup>8</sup> Orson Pratt, *Journal of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Elden J. Watson, 1975), p. 293.

<sup>9</sup> Willard Richards, Journal, 6 Oct. 1845, LDS Church Archives.

<sup>10</sup> Dates of William Smith's excommunication vary. Manuscript History, Journal History, and *History of the Church*, 7:483, give the date as 19 Oct. 1845. *Times and Seasons* 6 (1 Nov. 1845): 1019, and Andrew Jenson, *Latter Day Saints Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Co., 1901–1936), 1:87, give the date as 12 Oct. 1845.

<sup>11</sup> Jedediah M. Grant, Sunday Tabernacle Discourse, Salt Lake City, 23 March 1856, LDS Church Archives.

patriarchs holding that exalted position.”<sup>12</sup> This ruling raises some questions, however, in light of the common practice noted by Michael Quinn that “important ordinations of General Authorities had not only occurred without a prior vote of the Church but had also continued in force for weeks, months, and years before being officially presented for a public vote of common consent.”<sup>13</sup> Additionally, William gave more than 290 blessings prior to his excommunication and was at all times regarded by the Twelve as fully functioning in the office; his exclusion from the list of patriarchs cannot be convincingly justified.

A more balanced appraisal of William Smith requires first, seeing the historical context for his early behavior prior to excommunication, and second, looking at William Smith’s own perceptions during the succession crisis of 1844, for that crisis has served, consciously or unconsciously, as the lens through which his character has been viewed. The first understanding is important because we have tended to ignore the mores of nineteenth-century America within which the embryonic Mormon culture emerged. The second understanding — William’s perceptions — is not only crucial to any explanation of his reactions during the succession and later, but also to understanding the crisis in the patriarchal office itself that occurred at the same time.

To begin, it is difficult to find any literal examples of the “death and destruction” which allegedly followed in William’s wake. In fact Brigham Young wrote to Willard Richards from Salem, Massachusetts, as late as 8 July 1844, before he knew of the murders of Joseph and Hyrum: “The Twelve have been faithful in all things. William Smith is a great man in his calling in this country.”<sup>14</sup> But official church history and other publications have made much of William’s “violence” towards Joseph Smith, his brother. For example, two incidents appear in print with predictable regularity, even in short biographical sketches. One is a 29 October 1835 high council trial which took place at William’s instigation. A Brother and Sister Elliot had been accused of beating their fifteen-year-old daughter, and charges against Brother Elliot had been dismissed. Later, Mother Smith testified against Sister Elliot, but Joseph denied her evidence on the grounds that the court had ruled previously on it. William became angry with Joseph, accusing him of doubting his mother’s testimony. Joseph ordered William to sit down but he refused, saying Joseph would have to knock him down first.<sup>15</sup> On 6 December 1835 a further altercation took place. William was conducting a debating school in his home and Joseph questioned if good could come of the school and whether it should continue. William became enraged at Joseph’s interference. He laid violent hands on the

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:167–68.

<sup>13</sup> D. Michael Quinn, “The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844,” *BYU Studies* 16 (Winter 1976): 193.

<sup>14</sup> Brigham Young to Willard Richards, 8 July 1844, Journal History, LDS Church Archives.

<sup>15</sup> *History of the Church*, 2:294–95.

Prophet, the unspecified consequences of which, it is said, Joseph "occasionally felt until his death."<sup>16</sup> The brothers were reconciled 1 January 1836, each asking forgiveness of the other.<sup>17</sup>

These incidents are recounted with scarcely veiled disgust at such conduct. Yet during the nineteenth-century, this easy resort to anger and fisticuffs was far from unusual both in the Church and in American society in general. More significant, however, was the general attitude towards such activity. Historian Robert Flanders, for example, observes, "For people to take the law into their own hands was to be both democratic and faithful to the tradition of the American revolution . . . It was a regular and ordinary part of the lifestyle."<sup>18</sup> Benjamin Franklin believed that the liberty of the press should not be tempered by the courts but "by the liberty of the cudgel."<sup>19</sup> For example, in 1831, diarist Philip Hone of New York witnessed a violent encounter between William L. Stone, editor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, and poet William Cullen Bryant, then editor of the *New York Evening Post*. They met on the sidewalk and Bryant produced a whip and lashed Stone about the head with it.<sup>20</sup> Yet Bryant is described as "retiring and contemplative," a self-restrained man who "stood for principles rather than measures."<sup>21</sup>

Mormon church communities during the 1830s and 1840s, though perhaps more cohesive and to some extent more disciplined, still reflected many of the cultural norms of their day. Even the Prophet Joseph Smith was a product of his time and place and there is ample evidence of his spontaneous physical reactions in socially tense situations. In David Patton's journal, partly penned by Wilford Woodruff, is this account:

He [David] arrived in Kirtland during the summer of 1837 . . . Their was a great aposticy in the church about those days. David . . . was not altogether satisfied with all things and in one instance while conversing with Joseph, David, while this spirit was upon him, insulted Joseph and he slaped David in the face and kicked him out of the yard and it had a good effect and brought David to his senses.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jensen, *Biographical Encyclopedia*, 1:87.

<sup>17</sup> *History of the Church*, 2:353. William had offered to resign his apostleship, "then I would not be in a situation to bring so much disgrace upon the cause," but requested that he might remain a member of the Church. *History of the Church*, 2:339.

<sup>18</sup> Robert B. Flanders, "Dream and Nightmare: Nauvoo Revisited," in *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History*, eds., F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, and Paul M. Edwards (Lawrence, Kan.: Coronado Press, 1972), p. 149. See also Gordon S. Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 61 (Oct. 1980): 370, and J. C. Furnas, *The Americans: A Social History of the United States 1587-1914* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), pp. 528-29.

<sup>19</sup> Furnas, *Americans*, p. 529.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 528.

<sup>21</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1953, s.v., William Cullen Bryant.

<sup>22</sup> David Patton, Journal 1832-34, LDS Church Archives. The last part of the journal, undated, is written by Wilford Woodruff, probably after David Patton's death, 25 Oct. 1938.

Of Benjamin F. Johnson it was said in 1906, "he was possibly better acquainted with the Prophet Joseph Smith than any man now living."<sup>23</sup> A great admirer of Joseph, he paid tribute to the Prophet as a kind, generous, and mirth-loving man, then adds in his memoirs:

And yet, although so social and even convivial at times, he would allow no arrogance or undue liberties, and criticisms, even by his associates, were rarely acceptable and contradictions would rouse in him the lion at once, for by no one of his fellows would he be superseded. In the early days at Kirtland and elsewhere one or another of his associates were more than once, for their impudence, helped from the congregation by his foot and at one time at a meeting at Kirtland for insolence to him he soundly thrashed his brother William who [had] boasted himself as invincible.<sup>24</sup> (Brackets in original)

The atmosphere in Kirtland at the time might well have led to such demonstrations within the Church, for a journal history entry of 1 January 1836 states that there was "a division among the Twelve also among the Seventy and bickering and jealousies among the Elders and the official members of the church."<sup>25</sup> Warren Parrish about this time tried to drag Joseph, Sr., from the stand during a church meeting because of some remark the Prophet's father had made, and William Smith alone of those present went to his father's aid.<sup>26</sup>

But later in Nauvoo there were similar instances. Hosea Stout, for one, well nigh choked a man who was baiting him.<sup>27</sup> And most are familiar with anecdotes of Joseph Smith's sturdy resistance to abuse. Once, for example, when Ira Spaulding was riding in a carriage with the Prophet, a man who came to collect a note insulted Joseph. The Prophet simply handed the reins to Spaulding, "just stepped outside the carriage and knocked him down as flat as a beef, not speaking a word" and travelled on.<sup>28</sup> And there are other accounts. The Danites, of course, were an extralegal reaction to the violence meted out to the Saints themselves, and the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* can only be understood in the context of this same time period. Violence and crudity of speech were likewise prevalent.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin F. Johnson, *My Life's Review* (Independence, Mo.: Zion's Printing and Publishing Co., 1947), p. 387.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin F. Johnson to George S. Gibbs, 1903, p. 4, typescript, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

<sup>25</sup> Journal History, 1 Jan. 1836, Church Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Lucy [Mack] Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool, England: S. W. Richards for Orson Pratt, 1853), p. 211.

<sup>27</sup> Juanita Brooks, ed., *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), 1:306.

<sup>28</sup> David Osborn, Autobiography, cited in Stanley S. Ivins Notebook No. 5, p. 111, photocopy New York Public Library. This autobiography, in a private collection, is not the autobiography in the Church Archives. Osborn relates another hearsay incident concerning Joseph Smith. A man named John Eagle attacked the Prophet when Joseph, as mayor, served a writ on him. Joseph not only knocked the man down but he sent men later to tip over Eagle's small house and pour out his stock of liquor.

The accusation of "licentiousness" seems to have surfaced mainly during the succession crisis of 1844, a year after polygamy had been introduced in Nauvoo. Even then the judgments passed on William's behavior were contradictory. During the trial of John Hardy, formerly president of the Boston area, Hardy accused William, along with George J. Adams and Samuel Brannan, "and at least five others of the Twelve," of teaching the "plurality wife" doctrine in secret, "in its worst features." William Smith, he alleged, had also behaved in an "obscene" manner towards certain females.<sup>29</sup> Wilford Woodruff, visiting Boston on his way to England, evidently accepted the allegations as true. Writing to Brigham Young from Boston 9 October 1844, he said:

I soon discovered from various sources that the conduct of Wm. Smith, Adams, Brannan, Ball and others had been such in crowding their spiritual wife claims . . . until some of the strongest pillars were shaking, and if any opposed them in their deeds, they would trample them down until presiding Elders were loosing their posts and some ready to come out in battle array openly against the Church.<sup>30</sup>

Yet Parley P. Pratt, only three months later, wrote in *The Prophet* 18 January 1845 in New York:

I have just returned from a short visit to Boston and vicinity . . . I must now hasten to close by saying that I highly approve of the course pursued by Elder Wm. Smith and the presiding officers in general in this region . . . and by a strict and just administration of the laws and discipline of the church they have been enabled to cut off from the tree those branches which were most bitter and to excommunicate those members which were seeking the destruction of the society in which they were. Thus they have preserved the church in union by the aid of the Spirit of God.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, George J. Adams and Samuel Brannan were cut off from the Church for adultery three months later, 10 April 1845, Brannan being restored to fellowship six weeks later.<sup>32</sup> No action was taken against William Smith and he was ordained as Patriarch to the Church 24 May 1845. Less than five months later, one of the grounds for Parley P. Pratt's objection to William as an apostle was his conduct in the East; thus one can only conjecture about the basis for the change in Pratt's publicly stated view of William's activities there.

There is a reference to possible sexual misconduct on William's part prior to Joseph Smith's death which appears as a second-hand account recorded in Abraham H. Cannon's diary 9 April 1890. According to Cannon, President Snow — illustrating the fact that all must be tested — told of one instance, unspecified in time, when Brigham Young had been "tried to the very utmost by the Prophet." Joseph had instructed Brigham to prefer charges against Wil-

<sup>29</sup> John Hardy, *History of the Trials of Elder John Hardy* (Boston: Conway and Company, 1844), pp. 8–9.

<sup>30</sup> Wilford Woodruff to Brigham Young, 9 Oct. 1844, Manuscript History, LDS Church Archives.

<sup>31</sup> Parley P. Pratt to the Editor, 11 Jan. 1845, in *The Prophet*, 18 Jan. 1845, New York City Library Newspaper Collection. William was no longer editor at this time, having resigned November 1844.

<sup>32</sup> Willard Richards, Diary, 24 May 1845, LDS Church Archives.

liam for adultery and “many other sins.” Cannon, quoting President Snow, continues:

Before the time set for the trial, however, Emma Smith talked to Joseph and said the charge preferred against William was with a view to injuring the Smith family. After the trial had begun Joseph entered the room and was given a seat. The testimony of witnesses concerning the culprit’s sins was then continued. [In] a short time Joseph arose filled with wrath and said, “Brother Brig[ham] I will not listen to this abuse of my family a minute longer. [I] will wade in blood up to my knees before I will do it.”<sup>33</sup>

Most of the labeling of William as licentious, however, seems to be retrospective. For example, in the January 1865 issue of the *Millennial Star*, a short history of William Smith says, “In all his missions the course of conduct he pursued towards the females subjected him to much criticism.”<sup>34</sup> Jedediah M. Grant, in a discourse in the Salt Lake Tabernacle 23 March 1856, compared Joseph Smith — a “great lover of women” who elevated them and made them virtuous and happy — with William, the “profligate brother,” whose brand of love would make women “wretched and miserable, would debauch and degrade them.”<sup>35</sup> Even Thomas L. Kane, ignorant of the reality of polygamy among the Saints, referred to William on 11 July 1851 as a “ribald scamp” who, because the authorities had been forced to excommunicate him for his own licentiousness, had concocted “that unmixed outrage the spiritual wife story.”<sup>36</sup> Kane’s observation was published, without correction, in the *Millennial Star*, November 1851, by editor Franklin D. Richards.<sup>37</sup>

There seems to be at least some question about whether William had, in fact, misbehaved since no specific evidence of such wrongdoing seems to have survived. However, even granting truth to the allegations, we must still see the charge of “licentiousness” in the context of nineteenth-century American society. Under frontier conditions couples lived together for months or years without legalizing their relationship, or they resorted to what were called “left-handed marriages” performed by persons of dubious authority, sometimes the bride’s father. Divorce was just as informal; couples simply separated without legal formality.<sup>38</sup> Lawrence Foster, characterizing the New York area in the

<sup>33</sup> Abraham H. Cannon, Diary, 8 April 1890, LDS Church Archives. The incident related by Cannon might be associated with the 25 May 1842 Nauvoo High Council investigation of John C. Bennett. In an M.A. thesis by Robert D. Hutchins, “Joseph Smith III: Moderate Mormon” (Brigham Young University, 1977), p. 33, n. 104 the author refers to the testimony of Catherine Fuller Warren which names William Smith as being “involved with John C. Bennett in his numerous seductions which included the Widow Fuller.” Hutchins cites “Nauvoo Miscellaneous Papers,” LDS Church Archives.

<sup>34</sup> *Millennial Star* 26 (Jan. 1865): 8.

<sup>35</sup> Jedediah M. Grant, Sunday Tabernacle Discourse, 23 March 1856, Journal History.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas L. Kane to President Millard Fillmore, 11 July 1851, Journal History, Church Archives.

<sup>37</sup> *Millennial Star*, 13 (Nov. 1851): 344.

<sup>38</sup> Russel Blaine Nye, *The Cultural Life of the New Nation: 1776–1830* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 139.

1820s with a well-chosen phrase, "a hot-bed of marital experimentation," asserts: "Nearly all the new religious groups in the area were involved in some manner with unorthodox marriage ideals and practices." He refers to the concept of "spiritual wifery" as "a catch-all suggesting rationalized infidelity."<sup>39</sup> Orson Hyde in 1832 recorded preaching to groups of Cochranites in the coastal area of Maine, who also believed in plurality of wives.<sup>40</sup>

The Church, too, officially acknowledged the existence of such practices. As early as May 1837 the *Messenger and Advocate* contained a warning from the presidents of seventies meeting held 28 April 1837 that "we will have no fellowship whatever with any Elder belonging to the quorum of the Seventies who is guilty of polygamy or any offense of the kind."<sup>41</sup> Danel Bachman in his study of plural marriage refers to even earlier gossip about "unusual marital conduct" among the members of the Church in Kirtland.<sup>42</sup>

Because of the secrecy involved in the early practice of polygamy before the Saints came west, church laws governing it were, to some extent, unformed, unknown, and unenforced, so there were abuses of the principle as well as the approved practice of it.

And it was difficult to separate the two. In a letter to the Twelve, 16 September 1844, John Hall and Richard Hewitt of China Creek, Illinois, expressed concern because some elders were teaching the "spiritual wife" doctrine, causing contention, slander, and backbiting thereby. They wrote, "If such mysteries are generally as have been taught here . . . you will soon be sent to your graves as was the case of our lamented Prophet and Patriarch."<sup>43</sup> The problem had been of at least six months' duration because Hyrum Smith, in an article in the *Times and Seasons*, 15 March 1844, reported that Hewitt had been to see him about elders in China Creek teaching that men could have any number of wives. Hyrum answered that no such doctrine was taught or practiced and anyone found teaching it "will stand a chance to be brought before the High Council and lose his licence and membership also."<sup>44</sup>

Yet in 1843, George J. Adams had brought back a wife and child from his mission in England, even though he had a family already in Nauvoo. According to gentile Charlotte Haven, the first wife "is reconciled to this certainly at first unwelcome guest to her home for her husband and some others have rea-

<sup>39</sup> Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 131. See also Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1950), p. 87.

<sup>40</sup> Orson Hyde, Journal, 11 Oct. 1832, LDS Church Archives.

<sup>41</sup> *Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate* 3 (May 1837): 510. Also cited in Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, p. 138.

<sup>42</sup> Danel W. Bachman, "A Story of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith" (M.A. thesis, Purdue University, 1975), p. 86.

<sup>43</sup> John Hall and Richard Hewitt to the presidents and brethren of the Twelve, 16 Sept. 1844, in *Journal History*.

<sup>44</sup> *Times and Seasons* 5 (15 March 1844): 473-74.



soned with her that plurality of wives is taught in the Bible.”<sup>45</sup> Adams had been charged with adultery 12 February 1843, but he was restored to full fellowship only three months later, 27 May 1843, and a *Times and Seasons* announcement said he had been “honorably acquitted of all charges.”<sup>46</sup>

Amid the uncertainties of hide-and-seek played by those living the principle, the speed with which excommunicants were reinstated must have convinced many that the church trials were simply a public-relations ploy, and the words *licentious* and *adulterous* must have lost some of their meaning. It is important to note that no action was taken against William. Although contemporaries later called him licentious they took no action that would constitute evidence of licentious behavior. He gave a “spiritual wifery” speech at Nauvoo 17 August 1845 which could have been a rather rash attempt to clear his own name at the expense of others, but was, no doubt, seen by church leaders as dangerous provocation. According to contemporary sources he “avowed that the spiritual wife system was taught in Nauvoo secretly — that he taught and practised it and he was not in favor of making any secret of the matter. He said it was a common thing among the leaders and he for one was not ashamed of it.”<sup>47</sup> But the speech only served to alienate those living the principle and it disgusted those who were not aware of it, or who knew of it and were opposed to it.

There were other conditions, too, at the time which tended to blur the issue of morality. The Church had for some time been taking care of the marriages and divorces of church members, the latter somewhat loosely.<sup>48</sup> William Smith’s own first known plural wife, Mary Ann Sheffield, had been sealed to William by Brigham Young in 1845 (exact date unknown), even though she had not been divorced from her husband in England. And in 1893 she would testify “William B. Smith divorced himself from me. I consider he did that when he went away East.”<sup>49</sup> Mary Jane Rollins, whom he married 22 June 1845 after his first wife died, left him because of his relationship with Mary Ann Sheffield who was living with them at the time. Either she did not know of William’s plural marriage or else she disapproved of it.<sup>50</sup> In short, it is difficult to trace actual evidence of adultery or of unauthorized wives on William’s part because legal practices lacked the clarity of our own conventions and because of the secrecy involved in the practice of polygamy.

<sup>45</sup> Charlotte Haven, “A Girl’s Letters from Nauvoo,” *The Overland Monthly* 16 (Dec. 1890): 653, cited in Ivins Notebook No. 3, p. 255.

<sup>46</sup> Wilford Woodruff, Journal, 27 May 1843; also *Times and Seasons* 4 (15 Aug. 1843): 303.

<sup>47</sup> *Warsaw Signal*, 3 Sept. 1845. See also Deposition of Cyrus H. Wheelock, Temple Lot Suit (Abstract), Lamoni, 1893, cited in Ivins Notebook No. 2, p. 111.

<sup>48</sup> Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, p. 135.

<sup>49</sup> Mary Ann Sheffield Smith West, Testimony in Temple Lot Suit (Abstract), Lamoni, 1893, RLDS Library, Independence, Mo. Mary Ann was uncertain about the date of her sealing to William Smith, and she could not remember how long the marriage had lasted. Lyndon W. Cook, *Revelations*, p. 277, gives the year of the sealing as 1845.

<sup>50</sup> *Warsaw Signal*, 3 Sept. 1845.

In the context of his own day, William Smith's behavior does not stand out in sharp relief, and even the general description of "unstable" loses some of its edge with a closer look at the careers of the other apostles. William, it is true did resign his apostleship because of his difficulties with Joseph in October 1835, and his faith was doubted more than once. But he was not alone. The Prophet pointed out that William's sins were no more grievous than those of David Patton, Orson Hyde, or William McLellin.<sup>51</sup> Most of the quorum were tried for disobedience, not once but several times. Even Brigham Young rebelled. Once he refused to obey Joseph when the Prophet requested that the brethren be put under bonds because "when some of the brethren in Nauvoo were sent out to collect funds for the building of the temple part of their collections stuck to their fingers."<sup>52</sup> Although there are references to William's earlier stubbornness, much of the emphasis on William's contentiousness and rebellion comes from the period of the succession crisis when expectations clashed resoundingly.<sup>53</sup>

William Smith returned from a mission to Nauvoo, 4 May 1845, almost a year after the assassination of his brothers. With Brigham Young installed as virtual president of the Church, William could no longer bask in the security of being the Prophet's brother nor could the Church be recognized as the province of the Smith family. Jan Shipps suggests that "the Mormonism described in Mother Lucy Mack Smith's *History* explains . . . William Smith's 1845 claim that the Saints were all dependent upon his family for the priesthood."<sup>54</sup> Joseph, Sr., and Hyrum had served as assistant president and associate president respectively while they were Patriarchs to the Church; William not unnaturally expected to hold similar responsibilities. The *Times and Seasons* had made announcements on several occasions signed by both Joseph and Hyrum as "Presidents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints."<sup>55</sup> And an article in the *New York Herald*, 19 February 1842, reproduced in the *Millennial Star*, referred to "the first presidency of the Mormon hierarchy which consists of four dignitaries — to wit a principal prophet, a patriarch and two councillors."<sup>56</sup> In a letter to Brigham Young from the mission field,

<sup>51</sup> *History of the Church*, 2:301.

<sup>52</sup> Abraham H. Cannon, Diary, 8 April 1890, LDS Church Archives. On another occasion, during the trial of Benjamin Winchester, Brigham Young refused to heed the direction of the Prophet, saying his mind was made up and that "the remarks of Brother Hyrum or of Brother Joseph had not altered it." He refused to sit upon the case another day. *History of the Church*, 5:411.

<sup>53</sup> It has been suggested that Joseph protected his brother William from the consequences of his behavior and this may well be true. But the sibling relationship might also provide an explanation for William's physical encounters with the Prophet — a prophet who also happened to be his brother. The patriarchal succession crisis of 1845 is treated more fully in the essay which follows by E. Gary Smith.

<sup>54</sup> Jan Shipps, "The Prophet, His Mother, and Early Mormonism: Mother Smith's History as a Passageway to Understanding," paper presented at the Mormon History Association Annual Meeting, Logan, Utah, May 1979, p. 17.

<sup>55</sup> *Times and Seasons* 4 (14 Oct. 1843): 329, 347–48.

<sup>56</sup> *Millennial Star* 3 (May 1842): 8.

24 August 1844, William said he wanted simply to stand in the same position as Hyrum who, as patriarch, had been "spiritual father" to the Church.<sup>57</sup>

The martyrdom had caused a fundamental shift, reinforcing William Smith's fears that the Smith family was being ousted. James Monroe tells in his diary of a sermon preached by William just one week after his arrival in Nauvoo, 11 May 1845. Monroe reports: "He [William] seemed determined to live up to his privilege and stand in his place," and furthermore "did not seem to approve of the harsh measures now going on to get rid of our enemies but advised the saints to leave judgment in the hand of God." Monroe says Brigham Young was present at the stand and "spoke in a commendatory manner of William, but I thought rather coolly." <sup>58</sup>

A 15 May 1845 article, "Patriarchal," written by William for the *Times and Seasons* reveals much of what he felt at the time. In it he emphasizes the role and sufferings of the Smith family as founders of the Church; he, as the last of that family, asks the support of the community.<sup>59</sup> In the same issue, an editorial by W. W. Phelps referred to William as "Patriarch over the whole Church," <sup>60</sup> a description countered by editor John Taylor two weeks later.

By this time the Twelve were holding at least some council and prayer meetings without William, even though he was still a member of the quorum. At a May 23 meeting "the improper course of William was the subject of conversation," and it was agreed that William constituted "the greatest danger." <sup>61</sup> Despite this, the next day, 24 May 1845, William Smith was ordained and set apart by the Twelve as patriarch, and Willard Richards refers to the "warm interchange of feelings" between William and the Twelve.<sup>62</sup>

But apparently William was still speaking out. Five days later, 29 May 1845, Brigham Young met with members of the Quorum and "prayed that the Lord would overrule the movements of William Smith who is endeavoring to ride the Twelve down." <sup>63</sup> On June 1 an official "clarification" appeared in the *Times and Seasons* defining William's position as Patriarch *to* the Church, not *over* the Church, an obvious restriction. William saw this as yet another attempt to undermine his position and, while continuing to give patriarchal

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<sup>57</sup> William Smith to Brigham Young, 24 Aug. 1844, Church Archives. Calvin Rudd "William Smith, Brother of the Prophet Joseph Smith" (M.A. thesis, BYU, 1973), Appendix A, p. 183, gives the date of this letter as 21 Aug. 1844.

<sup>58</sup> James Monroe, Diary, 11 May 1845. Photocopy, Huntington Library, holograph in Coe Collection, Yale University Library, New Haven, Conn. James Monroe, in an entry dated 12 May 1845, agreed with William Smith. He said "The course pursued in this city of late by the Mormons seems to have invited persecution."

<sup>59</sup> *Times and Seasons* 6 (15 May 1845): 904-05. Many of the issues of this Church newspaper were published later than the date given on the masthead, sometimes two weeks later. Notes to that effect appear in some but not all of the late issues.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 905-6.

<sup>61</sup> *History of the Church*, 7:417, also William Clayton, Journal, 23 May 1845, LDS Church Archives.

<sup>62</sup> Willard Richards, Diary, 24 May 1845, Church Archives.

<sup>63</sup> *History of the Church*, 7:420.

blessings as "Patriarch over the whole Church" and "by the highest authority in the church of God,"<sup>64</sup> wrote to Brigham Young 30 June 1845:

I said in a short note to you the other day that I would stand by you till death. But it might be asked upon what principle? I will answer, on the principle that I am dealt justly by in the church. The next morning after our meeting I notice an article that appears under the head of Patriarch. It is not so much the doctrine that I care about; it is the spirit of the article, a disposition that appears in the brethren to cut and shave me down to the last cent . . . I do not like it . . . I have often said I was willing . . . that you should stand as the President of the Church but I claim to be patriarch over the whole church, this gives me my place and proper standing, and what I inherit.<sup>65</sup>

Brigham Young replied the same day, reiterating that William as patriarch must be subject to the control of the Twelve.<sup>66</sup>

Then, on 1 July 1845, the *Times and Seasons* published an excerpt from the *History of Joseph Smith*. Dated 16 December 1833, it dealt with the Jackson County period and also included the 18 December 1833 blessings given by the Prophet to members of his family and to Oliver Cowdery. William's blessing referred to "the pride of his heart" and his "rebellious spirit."<sup>67</sup> He must have questioned the wording because in a reply to him Brigham Young affirmed that the words were indeed Joseph's.<sup>68</sup> William's blessing was published a second time, however, in the *Times and Seasons* just two weeks later, without comment, and the words "rebellious spirit" were omitted.<sup>69</sup>

On 20 August 1845, William wrote to a Brother Little complaining that "there seems to be a severe influence working against me and the Smith family in this place." He referred to "little Joseph" as "his father's successor, although some people would fain make us believe that the Twelve are to be perpetual heads of this church to the exclusion of the Smith family."<sup>70</sup> William continued to fight for recognition and for his rights according to precedent. After failing to be sustained as patriarch and apostle at the 6 October 1845 general conference, he published a pamphlet against the Twelve and was excommunicated from the Church, 19 October 1845, for apostasy and for opposition to the authority of the Twelve.

From the standpoint of Brigham Young and the Twelve, William Smith was a problem. But from William's point of view he, as representative of the founding Smith family, was being excluded, denied the rights of presidency held by the two preceding Smith patriarchs. These two perceptions, meeting

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<sup>64</sup> See for example, patriarchal blessings given to William A. Beebe, 21 June 1845; Jonathan Packer, June 1845; Nathan W. Packer, 19 June 1845; Anson Matthews, 16 July 1845; all at Nauvoo, and others. Historical Archives of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Independence, Mo.

<sup>65</sup> William Smith to Brigham Young, 30 June 1845, LDS Church Archives.

<sup>66</sup> Brigham Young to William Smith, 30 June 1845, LDS Church Archives.

<sup>67</sup> *Times and Seasons* 6 (1 July 1845): 947.

<sup>68</sup> Brigham Young to William Smith, 10 Aug. 1845, LDS Church Archives.

<sup>69</sup> *Times and Seasons* 6 (15 July 1845): 968.

<sup>70</sup> William Smith to Brother Little, 20 Aug. 1845, LDS Church Archives.

head-on in the face of a stated doctrine of lineal descent, had prompted the narrower definition of the office. But the confrontation had also illuminated the problems inherent in a doctrine of lineal descent, and it had created thereby a climate of unease between the patriarch and the rest of the hierarchy. William Smith departed, much embittered, but the legacy of the confrontation would remain.

