

# Emma Smith Through Her Writings

*Valeen Tippetts Avery*



Emma Hale Smith's adult life spanned more than a half century from the 1820s to 1879. During this period the social and political institutions that would stamp the developing nation with a distinctively American character became either codified by law, accepted by custom, or imposed by the upheaval of events such as the Civil War, the settling of the American West, and the emerging of a diverse and complex national character. Many of these changes affected the social and legal status of women (the first Seneca Falls conference was in 1848 when Emma was forty-four), but notions of correct behavior for women were both formally and informally accepted by church members and described in manuals and pronouncements of the LDS and RLDS churches. These conventions provided a ready-made set of labels when it came to evaluating her. By focusing on the accepted role of Victorian women as repositories of all virtue and particularly as guardians of sexual morality, the Reorganized Church assigned her a role as the embodiment of female religious righteousness. But women were also expected to be true and constant followers of male leadership in the Mormon Church and Emma's refusal to follow Brigham Young to the West made her an example of perfidy.

Perhaps the time for judging her in these extreme contexts is past. The angry pronouncements of the 1860s and 1870s can be laid to rest; the defensive postures of the post-polygamy era from the turn of the century through the Second World War sound stilted; the reactionary conservatism of the 1950s belongs to a generation now fading. With much less rancor, we can listen to and learn from Emma Smith's own words as she addressed the issues that confronted her and thus reveal much about the dimensions of her personality.

In 1869, for example, ten years before her death, Emma wrote to her son, Joseph Smith III, apparently in the context of the granting and exercise of suffrage, the excitement surrounding the reform movement, and the public

---

*VALEEN TIPPETTS AVERY is assistant professor of history at Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, Arizona.*

speaking of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Anna Howard Shaw: "I am not one of those strong-minded [women]. I have always found enough to do to fill up all my time in doing just what was very plainly and positively my duty without clamoring for some unenjoyed privilege which if granted would be decidedly a damage to me and mine."<sup>1</sup> The connotation of "strong-minded" to Emma was negative; but her self-assessment reflects her cultural view of women's place. Emma was strong and her strength came from two main sources, both documented in her own words: her ability to love, and her faith in God. In the course of illustrating these character traits, other delightful aspects of her attitude and personality come to the fore in her letters.

Emma was in love with Joseph Smith and she developed many roles in her relationship with him. In addition to being his wife, she was also his confidante and partner in business, his bill collector, his legal advisor, his intercessor in troubles with the law, his doctor, his nurse, and his conscience. But first and foremost she loved him. On 25 April 1837, she wrote from Kirtland, Ohio, to Joseph who was hiding from his enemies. "Dear Husband, Your letter was welcomed both by friends and foes, we were glad enough to hear that you was well. . . . I cannot tell you my feelings when I found I could not see you before you left, yet I expect you can realize them, the children feel very anxious about you because they don't know where you have gone. . . . I pray that God will keep you in purity and safety till we all meet again."<sup>2</sup>

A week later Emma wrote again, "Ever affectionate husband, myself and the children are well," but she worried about the health of her little boys and feared they would catch the measles from a young man she was harboring in her house. "I wish it could be possible for you to be at home when they are sick, you must remember them all for they all remember you and I could hardly pacify Julia and Joseph when they found out you was not coming home soon. . . . adieu my Dear — Joseph."<sup>3</sup>

Joseph returned home safely, but the Mormons were soon forced from the area. In Missouri, Joseph suffered in Liberty Jail, while Emma and the children fled east over the icy winter roads to cross the Mississippi River on foot. From Quincy, Illinois, Emma wrote eloquently to Joseph:

Dear Husband

Having an opportunity to send by a friend I make an attempt to write, but I shall not attempt to write my feelings altogether, for the situation in which you are, the walls, bars, and bolts, rolling rivers, running streams, rising hills, sinking vallies and spreading prairies that separate us, and the cruel injustice that first cast you into prison and still holds you there, with many other considerations, places my feelings far beyond description. Was it not for conscious innocence, and the direct interposition of divine mercy, I am very sure I never should have been able to have endured the scenes of suffering that I have passed through. . . . but I still live and am yet willing to suffer more if it is the will of kind Heaven, that I should for your sake. . . . No one but God,

<sup>1</sup> Emma Smith Bidamon to Joseph Smith III, 1 Aug. 1869, RLDS Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri.

<sup>2</sup> Emma Smith to Joseph Smith, 25 April 1837, Historical Department Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah: hereafter LDS Archives.

<sup>3</sup> Emma Smith to Joseph Smith, 3 May 1837, LDS Archives.

knows the reflections of my mind and the feelings of my heart when I left our house and home, and almost all of everything that we possessed excepting our little children, and took my journey out of the State of Missouri, leaving you shut up in that lonesome prison. But the reflection is more than human nature ought to bear, and if God does not record our sufferings and avenge our wrongs on them that are guilty, I shall be sadly mistaken.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph survived the winter in jail, arrived in Illinois in the spring of 1839, and subsequently traveled to Washington where he negotiated fruitlessly with President Martin Van Buren for compensation. Emma regretfully concluded a lengthy letter: "I must reserve my better feeling untill I have a better opportunity to express them."<sup>5</sup>

Two years before Joseph's death Emma wrote in 1842, answering his request to leave Nauvoo and go north with him to escape the charges arising from the shooting of Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs.

Dear Husband: — I am ready to go with you if you are obliged to leave and Hyrum says he will go with me. I shall make the best arrangements I can and be as well prepared as possible. But still, I feel good confidence that you can be protected without leaving this country. . . . If it were pleasant weather I should contrive to see you this evening, but I dare not run too much of a risk, on account of so many going to see you. . . . Yours affectionately forever, Emma Smith.<sup>6</sup>

No later letters from Emma to Joseph survive but Joseph's letters, including one written on the day he was murdered, continued to reflect the couple's affection for each other.

While Emma's children were small they received excellent care and that same concern was extended to them as adults. Concerned over her youngest son, David, she wrote to her eldest son, Joseph:

As for David, I am as much at a loss what advice to give as you can possibly be, and I shall submit the matter to yourself and him. Your letter speaks of his being a teacher. I would ask of what, of music or painting or both? I would like to have him know something about legal lore, as you call it, if he could obtain it without too much sacrifice of other things. I believe a little knowledge of common law helps a man sometimes to keep out of the limbos [doubtful]. I know very well that if your Father had been a little acquainted with the laws of the country he might have avoided a great deal of trouble. and yet I have a horror of one of my children being entirely dependent upon being a lawyer for a living. But let you and him decide as best you can and then leave it to his steady and faithful perseverance and the kind blessing of our Heavenly father and I think it will be all right in the end.<sup>7</sup>

Emma, at sixty-three, commented:

If there is any thing in this world that I am or ever was proud of it is the honor and integrity of my children but I dare not allow myself to be proud, as I believe that pride is one of the sins so often reprov'd in the good book. So I am enjoying the better spirit, and that is to be truly and sincerely thankful and in humility give God

<sup>4</sup> Emma Smith to Joseph Smith, 9 March 1839, LDS Archives.

<sup>5</sup> Emma Smith to Joseph Smith, 6 Dec. 1839, LDS Archives.

<sup>6</sup> In Preston Nibley, *Joseph Smith, The Prophet* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Deseret News Press, 1944), p. 418.

<sup>7</sup> Emma Smith Bidamon to Joseph Smith III, 11 Oct. 1866, RLDS Library-Archives.

the glory, not trying to take in comparing my sons with others, and them too that has had fathers of their own to guard them. . . . God bless you all is the prayer of your mother.<sup>8</sup>

Repeatedly Emma's letters end with such phrases as "God bless my children," and "May heaven's blessing be with you." It was this ability to create a mutual affection and reciprocal concern that provided strength in Emma's life.

Another love also sustained Emma. In 1847 a newcomer to Nauvoo who supported the Mormon cause courted Emma. She married Lewis Bidamon on 23 December 1847 when she was forty-three. Many Mormons were shocked that Emma did not live out her life as a lonely sentinel to Joseph Smith, but Emma undoubtedly married Lewis Bidamon for the same reason she married Joseph: she loved him. Bidamon spent a brief period in the gold fields of California, and her letters from that period cannot be interpreted as other than tender:

My dear Lewis I have scarcely enjoyed any good things since you left home, in consequence of the constant terrifying apprehension that you might be suffering for the most common comforts of life. I never have been weary without thinking that you might be much more so. I never have felt the want of food without fear that you might be almost, or quite starving, and I have never been thirsty without feeling my heart sicken with the reflection that perhaps you were sinking, faint, and famished for want of that reviving draught that I could obtain so easy, and use so freely, and I very much feared that the heat of the sun on those burning plains might seriously affect you, but now those anxieties are over, and some may think that I might be content, but I am not, neither can I be until you are within my grasp, then, and not till then shall I be free from fears for your safety, and anxieties for your welfare. . . . but *when* O! *when* can I begin to think about your coming home. . . . No more at present only that I am ever yours wholly.<sup>9</sup>

Lewis returned in the early 1850s. Their marriage survived the birth of Lewis's illegitimate son in 1864 and lasted thirty-two years until Emma's death in 1879.

Emma was certainly not incapable of anger or bitterness, but in the sum of her extant writings she spoke harshly about only one person, Brigham Young. Then she was as angrily irrational about Brigham and his motives as he was about her. They had been friends until just before Joseph Smith's death in 1844. Joseph himself had injected tension by criticizing Emma in church councils and in private conversations for her opposition to plural marriage. The attempts to settle Joseph's tangled estate made Brigham and Emma adversaries as they each tried to preserve their own legitimate interests.<sup>10</sup> With memories of those encounters apparently still fresh in her mind and worried about her son Alexander's reception in Utah while he proselytized for the RLDS church, Emma warned Joseph III in 1866:

Now you must [not] let those L.D.S.'s trouble you too much. If they are determined to do evil, they will do it, and such as are anxiously willing to make you trouble are

<sup>8</sup> Emma Smith Bidamon to Joseph Smith III, 3 Feb. 1866 [1867], RLDS Library-Archives.

<sup>9</sup> Emma Smith Bidamon to Lewis Bidamon, Jan. 1850, RLDS Library-Archives.

<sup>10</sup> Brigham and Emma's friendship and its subsequent deterioration are discussed in Valeen Tippetts Avery and Linda King Newell, "The Lion and the Lady: Brigham Young and Emma Smith," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 48 (Winter 1980): 81-97.

not worth laboring very hard to save from the dogs. You may know that you are not the first one who has been misunderstood or misapplied, or misquoted and misrepresented in every way, and in every conceivable space, neither is it certain that you will be the last afflicted one. If you bear affliction well [the] Evil One will perhaps let up on you a little and go vex on someone else a while.<sup>11</sup>

A few months later she reverted to the same theme:

As for Alexander doing much with the Smiths at Salt Lake is a doubtful question with me. I think it might be right for him to go and discharge his duty to them and leave them without excuse. I look upon their case as a hard one. I believe that God is able to do all that is for his glory and the good of those that truly serve him, and may be that God will consider them in their ignorance and convict and convert them and cleanse them from their abominations and make them fit for more decent society. I hope he will, that is those who were taken there when too young to know any better. . . . It is time to get supper, so I must bid you good-bye and may Heaven's blessing be with you is the prayer of Your Mother Emma Bidamon.<sup>12</sup>

Three years later in 1869 Alexander and David Smith were both in Salt Lake City as RLDS missionaries, called by their brother Joseph. Emma wrote him:

I have received one letter from Alex and two from David since they got to Salt Lake City. I tried before they left here to give them an idea of what they might expect of Brigham and all of his ites, but I suppose the impression was hardly sufficient to guard their feelings from such unexpected falsehoods and impious profanity as Brigham is capable of. I hope they will be able to bear with patience all the abuse they will have to meet. I do not like to have my children's feelings abused, but I do like that Brigham shows to all, both Saint and sinner that there is not the least particle of friendship existing between him and myself. How long do you expect the boys to stay in Utah?<sup>13</sup>

Emma did not have or seek a public forum for her feelings about Brigham, but he did not similarly restrain himself. As a result, to members in the western church, the image of an uncommitted and faithless Emma became widespread. As revealed by her own writings, however, her religious feelings in general ran deep. The earliest letter extant from Emma to Joseph, written in 1837, states, "I verily feel that if I had not more confidence in God than some I could name, I should be in a sad case indeed, but I still believe that if we humble ourselves, and are as faithful as we can be we shall be delivered from every snare that may be laid for our feet, and our lives and property will be saved and we redeemed from all unrenderable encoumbrances."<sup>14</sup> A week later she wrote again, "I hope that we shall be so humble and pure before God that he will set us at liberty to be our own masters in a few things at least."<sup>15</sup>

At the age of sixty-two she wrote Joseph:

How often I have been made deeply sensible that my pilgrimage has been an arduous one and God only knows, how often my heart has almost sunk, when I have reflected

<sup>11</sup> Emma Smith Bidamon to Joseph Smith III, 19 Aug. 1866, RLDS Library-Archives.

<sup>12</sup> Emma Smith Bidamon to Joseph Smith III, 11 Oct. 1866, RLDS Library-Archives.

<sup>13</sup> Emma Smith Bidamon to Joseph Smith III, 1 Aug. 1869, RLDS Library-Archives.

<sup>14</sup> Emma Smith to Joseph Smith, 25 April 1837, LDS Archives.

<sup>15</sup> Emma Smith to Joseph Smith, 3 May 1837, LDS Archives.

how much more arduous and trying your work was to be. I have often thought that I know as well as any other person just how St. Paul felt, when he said, "If only in this life we have hope, we are of all men most miserable."<sup>16</sup>

A year later Emma confided again to her son:

I often find I have to yield my will to surrounding circumstances, so I am daily trying to learn St. Paul's lesson, but it is a hard one to keep in mind all the time, to be contented with our *condition*, to pray always, and in *all things* to give thanks. Well, I can try every day to be contented. I can pray let me be doing what else I may have on hand. I can pray and work in the kitchen or in the cellar or up stairs. My heart can not prevent prayers, but to be *thankful*. I have to confess I have not learned to put in practice yet, but I live in hopes that I shall be able to learn that in time, for I have a promise that my last days shall be my best days, and according to the years that is allotted to mankind. Those days are not very far distant, as I am now fast living out my sixty-fourth year. Well if kind Heaven lets my children, or some of them live either with me or near me I shall begin to see some of the good I am living for. . . . I do not want to be rich only when I think of your circumstances and Alex's and the church. Then I would like to straighten our all indebtedness and put the Bishop in possession of means to send out all on missions that are fit to go, then I feel I would willingly continue to keep tavern [inn or boarding house] a long time yet.<sup>17</sup>

In 1869 Emma reflected: "Joseph, I have seen many, yes very many trying scenes in my life in which I could not see any good in them, neither could I see any place where any good could grow out of them, but yet I feel a divine trust in God, that all things shall work for good, perhaps not to me, but it may be to some one else, and I am still hoping and praying, trusting that you will not be hindered in the great and good work you are doing."<sup>18</sup>

Although this essay samples only a few of the personal documents extant of Emma's, we would wish for many more. Not only would her perceptions of early church history be a valuable record from one uniquely placed to record it, she was herself a force to be reckoned with — not only from her relationship to Joseph but because of her own loving nature and strong faith.

---

<sup>16</sup> Emma Smith Bidamon to Joseph Smith III, 19 Aug. 1866, RLDS Library-Archives.

<sup>17</sup> Emma Smith Bidamon to Joseph Smith III, 27 Dec. 1867, RLDS Library-Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Emma Smith Bidamon to Joseph Smith III, 17 [no month] 1869, RLDS Library-Archives.