


The Emma Smith Lore Reconsidered

Linda King Newell

everal years ago an unsigned *Church News* editorial on "Two Great Women" praised Emma Hale and her mother-in-law, Lucy Mack Smith, for their loyalty to Joseph Smith: "They never hesitated to valiantly defend him, never recanted, never denied their testimonies of his work." While somewhat overstating the case (Emma was "*always* by his side, *always* loving, and *forever* brave"), the editorial concluded with the accurate assessment that Emma "made an invaluable contribution to the coming forth of the Church in these last days."¹

Excepting only a few paragraphs in a 1933 *Relief Society Magazine*,² this short (500-word) *Church News* essay marked the first time in nearly a century since Emma's death that any article had appeared on her in an official Church periodical.

Yet even this generalized praise drew the ire of readers steeped in conventional lore on "the elect lady." One reader went so far as to send in nineteen notecards of quotations dating from 1863 to 1955 which "documented" Emma as a selfish shrew, guilty of burning the revelation on plural marriage, attempting to poison Joseph (with supporting citations from Brigham Young), conspiring in Joseph's death, usurping Church property, attempting to gain the leadership of the Church for herself, and, finally, failing to measure up to the valiant Mary Fielding.³

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¹ "Two Great Women," *Church News*, 16 Sept. 1978, p. 16.

² "Emma Smith, The Prophet's Wife," *Relief Society Magazine* 20 (April 1933): 237-41.

³ Dennis "C" Davis to the First Presidency, 19 Sept. 1978, copy in possession of author used with permission of Davis. The historical quotations below are found in Orson Pratt, *The Deseret News Weekly*, 18 (20 Oct. 1869): 439; Brigham Young Address, 9 Aug. 1874,

These charges, of course, were not new. They have been quoted often, enhanced, elaborated upon, even intentionally fictionalized and then repeated as fact. Seldom if ever have readers traced these stories to their origins or asked the obvious questions that would place them in context. What were Emma's circumstances? In what setting and context was the statement made? Certainly it is relevant that the earliest cited sources date from a series of public and private outcries against Emma following the arrival in Utah of the first RLDS missionaries in September 1863. Is there other information that might add to our understanding? This essay will examine the popular myths describing Emma during that crucial decade of her life in Nauvoo, from 1840 to 1850 as a heritage of the early Utah period.

OPPOSITION TO PLURAL MARRIAGE

Emma's opposition to plural marriage is well known, as is a temporary embracing of it when she gave Joseph permission to marry at least four women of her own choosing.⁴ However, few know the circumstances in which Emma learned of plural marriage. Unlike Joseph's careful, usually private and intensive instructions to selected members of the Twelve and the women he took as wives, available evidence suggests that Emma first learned of Joseph's departure from monogamy in Kirtland when he took his first known plural wife, a young hired girl named Fanny Alger. William McLellin, then a member of the Twelve, reported that Emma missed Fanny Alger and Joseph one day and went to the barn where, peering through a crack in the door, she witnessed the "sealing."⁵ Apparently, she treated it as a one-time incident, but later in Nauvoo rumor and innuendo about such unconventional marriages began surfacing. In the spring of 1842, Emma was unaware that Joseph was taking plural wives. She first thought the stories came as a result of John C. Bennett's spiritual wifery practices, and went before the Relief Society to warn

The Deseret News Weekly 2 (2 Sept. 1875): 488; Joseph F. Smith to William F. McLellin, M.D., 6 Jan. 1880, Personal Letterbooks (Book 2), Historical Department Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; hereafter LDS Church Archives; Brigham Young Conference Addresses, 7 Oct. 1863, 7 Oct. 1866, both Brigham Young Collection and LDS Church Archives; Charles Smith, Diary, 7 Oct. 1866, p. 155, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University; Charles L. Walker, Diary, 17 Dec. 1876, p. 31 and 12 Nov. 1897, p. 31, LDS Church Archives; *Juvenile Instructor* 23 (15 March 1888): 86, 5 (5 Feb. 1870): 21, 22; Benjamin F. Johnson, *My Life's Review* (Independence, Mo.: Zion's Printing and Publishing Co., 1947), pp. 102, 107; Joseph F. Smith, "Comments of the Day," *The Contributor* 7: (March 1886): 238-39; Melvin J. Ballard, Address, *Conference Report*, 1 June 1919, pp. 69-70. For Brigham Young's attitude, see Valeen Tippetts Avery and Linda King Newell, "The Lion and the Lady: Brigham Young and Emma Smith," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 48 (Winter 1980).

⁴ Lucy Walker Kimball, in Joseph F. Smith, "40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage," LDS Church Archives; Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of Polygamy* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1914), p. 137. See also Emily Dow Partridge Young, "Incidents in the Early Life of Emily Partridge," typescript, University of Utah Marriott Library, Special Collections.

⁵ See William McLellin to Joseph Smith III, 10 Jan. 1861, and n.d. July 1872, RLDS Library Archives, Independence, Mo. See also Oliver Cowdery to Warren Cowdery, 21 Jan. 1838, Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.

of "a great evil creeping into the church," admonishing the women to "use every honorable means to combat it and protect the sanctity of their homes."⁶ Only when someone told her that Joseph had married other women did she realize that she had been preaching against her own husband.⁷ That Emma was hurt and angry when she learned the truth is not surprising; that she was later condemned for those feelings is.

Given this context, even the impulsive act of pushing her friend and unexpected sister-wife, Eliza R. Snow, down a flight of stairs, might seem more understandable, especially when one remembers that Eliza had lived with Emma in Kirtland, taught her children, been her Relief Society secretary, accompanied her to see the governor of Illinois to plead for Joseph's safety from the Missourians, acted as her personal scribe, and finally, when Eliza had no place else to go, had been invited by Emma to live in her home.⁸ Emma apparently discovered by chance that her husband and trusted friend had perpetrated what most women would regard as the ultimate deception. In that flash of sudden awareness, Emma would also have realized that the marriage had most likely been consummated. Emma, who was known by her friends and family as even-tempered and fair, would be characterized by future writers as being a shrew, primarily because of her predictable, human responses to unusually stressful circumstances.

Lucy Mack Smith, who lived either with or near Emma through most of the seventeen years of Emma and Joseph's marriage, left a much different view. In the privacy of Emma's home, Lucy had seen her daughter-in-law respond to a variety of situations and had admired her: "I have never seen a woman in my life, who would endure every species of fatigue and hardship, from month to month, and from year to year, with that unflinching courage, zeal, and patience, which she has ever done; for I know that which she has had to endure — she has been tossed upon the ocean of uncertainty — she has breasted the storms of persecution, and buffeted the rage of men and devils, which would have born down almost any other woman."⁹

BURNING THE REVELATION

The summer of 1843 was an unsettling time for both Emma and Joseph. In July, he dictated the revelation on plural marriage, and Hyrum, confident he could win Emma's acceptance of it, received only a tongue-lashing.¹⁰ Then, according to William Clayton, "two or three days after the revelation was

⁶ Minutes of the Nauvoo Female Relief Society, [date of quote?], Microfilm, Joseph Smith Collection, LDS Church Archives.

⁷ Joseph Smith III, *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration*, ed., Mary Audentia Smith Anderson (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1979), pp. 263–64.

⁸ See Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Linda King Newell, and Valeen Tippetts Avery, "Emma, Eliza, and the Stairs," *BYU Studies* 20 (Winter 1980): 51–62.

⁹ Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith The Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), p. 169.

¹⁰ William Clayton statement, (*italics added*), *Historical Record*, 9 vols. (Salt Lake City: 1887), 6:226.

written Joseph related . . . that Emma had so teased and urgently entreated him for the privilege of destroying it, that he became so weary of her teasing, and to get rid of her annoyance, *he told her she might destroy it* and she had done so, but he had consented to her wish in this matter to pacify her, realizing that he knew the revelation perfectly and could rewrite it at any time if necessary.”¹¹ Isaac Skeen, editor of the *Saints Herald*, also wrote in 1860 that Joseph “caused the revelation on that subject to be burned.”¹² Other accounts involve Joseph even more directly in the destruction of this document. William McLellin visited Emma in 1847 and questioned her about the incident. In 1872, he wrote on the basis of that conversation that after Emma and Joseph discussed the document they retired for the night. Joseph “wished her to get up and burn the revelation. She refused to touch it even with tongues [tongs]. He rose from his bed and pulled open the fire with his fingers, and put the revealment in and burned it up.”¹³ Emma herself in an 1856 interview, said, “The statement that I burned the original of the copy Brigham Young claimed to have, is false, and made out of whole cloth, and not true in any particular.”¹⁴ But Emma’s oldest son pursued the question long after his mother’s death. His diary entry for 20 April 1885, reads: “Visited James Whitehead had chat with him. He says he saw the Rev. — about 1 page of foolscap paper. Clayton copied it and it was this copy that Mother burned.”¹⁵ Apparently the incident was later discussed in the larger Smith family, for Samuel Smith’s daughter wrote to Don Carlos Smith’s daughter: “I suppose you have heard that Aunt Emma burnt the revelation — which I suppose was so — I have heard my Aunt Lucy [Joseph’s sister] say that Emma would not touch it with her fingers but took the tongs to put it in the fire.”¹⁶

These accounts raise several questions. Did Joseph burn the plural marriage revelation or did Emma? Did Emma deny that she burned a piece of paper with the revelation on it or was she denying that the paper she burned did not contain an authentic revelation? One conclusion seems safe: If Emma destroyed the document, she did so with Joseph’s permission.

William Clayton’s Nauvoo diary entries in particular seem to portray Emma as an unreasonable, difficult woman, but between the lines we can also see the human struggle on all sides of complex issues. For example, when Emma returned from a business trip to St. Louis in early August, she discovered that Joseph had solicited support of the Nauvoo High Council for the revelation on plural marriage. William Clayton reported her reaction in his journal:

This A.M. Joseph told me that sin[c]e Emma came back from St. Louis, she had resisted the P[rinciple of plural marriage] in toto, and he had to tell her he would

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Isaac Sheen, “The Early Revelations” *True Latter Day Saints’ Herald*, 1 (March 1860): 64.

¹³ William E. McLellin to Joseph III, July 1872, RLDS Library Archives.

¹⁴ Edmund C. Briggs, “A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856,” *Journal of History* 9 (October 1916): 445–62.

¹⁵ Joseph III, Diary, 20 April 1885, RLDS Library Archives.

¹⁶ Mary Bailey Smith Norman to Ina Coolbrith, 27 March 1908, RLDS Library Archives.

relinquish all for her sake. She [had] said she would give him E[liza] and E[mily] P[artridge] but he knew if he took them she would pitch on him, & obtain a divorce & leave him. He however told me he should not relinquish anything.¹⁷

A few days after hearing that Joseph would "relinquish all," Emma found two letters in his pocket from Eliza R. Snow, then living at the Morley Settlement. Emma, seeming "vexed and angry," asked William if he had delivered the letters to Joseph. Clayton denied it.¹⁸ His report of the incident may have been colored by his own apprehensions.

Two days later, William Clayton again reported Emma in another situation, where she appears unreasonable and petty. The 23 August entry reads:

Prest J. told me that he had difficulty with E. yesterday. She rode up to Woodworths with him & caled while he came to the Temple. When he returned she was demanding the gold watch of F. he reproved her for her evil treatment. On their return home she abused him much & also when he got home. he had to use harsh measures to put a stop to her abuse but finally succeeded.¹⁹

William Clayton did not include the full details. Still smarting from her discovery of Eliza's letters, Emma went for a short carriage ride with Joseph. He attended to some business at the temple while she called on the Lucian Woodworth family. Emma was unaware that the Woodworth's sixteen-year-old daughter, Flora, had been Joseph's plural wife since spring.²⁰ What probably began as a casual social visit exploded when Emma discovered that Joseph had given Flora a gold watch. The implications of such a gift were obvious since he had also given one to Eliza.²¹ Joseph returned as Emma "was demanding the gold watch" from Flora and reprimanded her. Once in the carriage, however, Emma undoubtedly vented her own anger at discovering yet another unsettling situation, continuing what William Clayton called "her abuse" until Joseph must have lost his temper and employed "harsh measures" to stop Emma.

THE POISONING

Joseph won a respite with Emma over plural marriage when she received the Church's highest ordinance, the second anointing, on or shortly before 28 September 1843. She had received her endowment and been sealed to Joseph for eternity the previous spring.²² But by November marauders on the outskirts of the city had begun looting, burning, and whipping. Emma and

¹⁷ William Clayton, *Diary*, excerpts in possession of author, 16 Aug. 1843. Used with permission of Andrew F. Ehat.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21 Aug. 1843.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23 Aug. 1843.

²⁰ *Historical Record*, 6:225.

²¹ The watch Joseph gave Eliza is in possession of the LDS Church. For more information on Eliza's watch, see Mary Belnap Lowe, statement, Ogden, Utah, 12 May 1841, LDS Church Archives.

²² See Andrew F. Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the 1844 Mormon Succession Question," M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1982, pp. 61-63, 94, 95.

Joseph's relationship again showed signs of intense stress and they both suffered from ill health. In an 1866 conference address, Brigham Young told this story:

[Joseph] called his wife Emma into a secret council, and there he told her . . . of the time she undertook to poison him, and he told her that she was a child of hell, and literally the most wicked woman on this earth, that there was not one more wicked than she. He told her where she got the poison, and how she put it in a cup of coffee. . . . When it entered his stomach he went to the door and threw it off.²³

The story seems bizarre. How could Joseph think such a thing? But if he said it, the reasoning goes, it must be true. How could Emma have done such a thing? The evidence strongly suggests that Joseph indeed made the accusation but that he was wrong in concluding that Emma tried to poison him. The episode needs a larger context. Joseph's diary entry of 5 November 1843, describes becoming suddenly ill while eating dinner and vomiting so violently that he dislocated his jaw and "raised fresh blood." He believed he had been poisoned, but recovered enough to attend a "prayer meeting in the hall over the store" that evening.²⁴ This was a meeting of the "quorum of the anointed" — those who had received their endowments — and most likely the "secret council" in which, according to Brigham, Joseph accused Emma of trying to poison him. Joseph's diary records that he and Emma did not dress for the prayer circle that night. Significantly, members did not customarily participate in the prayer circle if they had hard feelings against anyone else in the group.

Joseph would subsequently experience periodic bouts of sudden nausea and vomiting. Many ailments could cause such symptoms, including acute indigestion, food poisoning, ulcers, gallstones, but only poisoning, bleeding ulcers, or (rarely) food poisoning would have led to such an acute episode. Moreover, the 1844 poisons strong enough to cause hemorrhaging in the stomach as rapidly after ingestion as Joseph's diary indicates, would not leave the victim well enough to attend a meeting just a few hours later.²⁵

According to Joseph's diary, "domestic concerns" kept him busy the next morning.²⁶ Perhaps Emma was able to convince her husband that she had not attempted to poison him. The previous evening, according to Brigham, Emma had cried when Joseph lashed out at her. Tears rather than an open defense are in keeping with at least one other occasion when she endured a public rebuke from Joseph.²⁷ When Joseph was suffering from violent vomiting the next month, he reported that Emma "waited on me, assisted by my scribe,

²³ Young, conference address, 7 Oct. 1866.

²⁴ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 6:25.

²⁵ "Poisons and Poisoning Appendix," *Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary*, 12th ed., rev. and ed. by Clayton L. Thomas (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Co., 1973), pp. 108–28. Valen Tippetts Avery also interviewed George Yard, M.D., and Corwin DeMarse, M.D., of Flagstaff, Arizona, concerning Joseph's symptoms during this time. Although both physicians said they could not give an absolute diagnosis 140 years after the patient's death, ulcers were the most likely diagnosis considering Joseph's stress during this period.

²⁶ *History of the Church*, 6:66.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:304.

Willard Richards, and his brother Levi, who administered some herbs and mild drinks. I was never prostrated so low, in so short a time, before; by evening was considerably better.”²⁸

If Emma had convinced Joseph of her innocence in the earlier incident, Joseph apparently did not tell the others at the meeting and Emma remained forever guilty in their minds. Aroet Hale, who heard the accusations later in Utah, wrote in her defense:

a grate meny of the Saints in these Days think that the Prophet wife Emma Hale Smith was a bad Woman that she tried to Poison the Prophet. Their never was a more Dutiful woman than Emma Smith to her husband till after the Prophet had made publick the revelation on Seelestial marriage. He begun to take to himselve Other Wives. This proved a grate trial to her. How meny women is there in Our Day after 30 or 40 years . . . that it Dose not try to the Hartsbare. The prophet Joseph Said that She was a good woman. . . . Emma wood & did go before Judges Rulers and Govenors to Plead for her Husband. She would have Lade her life down for him.²⁹

COMPLICITY IN JOSEPH'S DEATH

Accusations that Emma was responsible for Joseph's return from safety in Iowa and hence for his death at Carthage are also better evaluated in the context of June 1844 rather than of the Utah period. When Joseph crossed the Mississippi River to seek safety the night of Saturday, 22 June — five days before his death — he told Stephen Markham to send his and Hyrum's horses across the river at eight o'clock the next (Sunday) morning.³⁰ He later told Porter Rockwell, who had rowed him across the river, to take the horses across Sunday *evening*. Rockwell returned to Nauvoo early Sunday morning and reached Emma's first. He delivered a letter to her from Joseph and presumably told her about Joseph's instructions to obtain the horses that evening.³¹

When Markham appeared at the Mansion at nine A.M. (an hour late) he found the barn door locked. Emma, who was unaware of Joseph's contradictory instructions concerning the horses, had good reason for safeguarding them: the night before, just after Joseph left, a posse had ridden into Nauvoo looking for him, promising to return the next day.³² When she would not give Markham the key, he threatened to chop down the door with an ax. Emma told him to carry out the rest of Joseph's orders and “rest contented that they [would] get the horses.”³³

Stephen Markham recalled leaving Emma at the Mansion and walking toward the center of town where he found Alpheus Cutler, Reynolds Cahoon, Hiram Kimball, and several others who told Markham they believed Joseph should return to stand trial. Fearful that the mobs would “break up the place

²⁸ Ibid., 6:16 and Joseph Smith Journal, 15 Dec. 1843. Joseph Smith Collection, LDS Church Archives.

²⁹ Aroet Lucius Hale, Journal, p. 3, LDS Church Archives.

³⁰ Stephen Markham to Wilford Woodruff, 20 June 1856, LDS Church Archives.

³¹ *History of the Church*, 6:548.

³² *History of the Church*, 6:548–49.

³³ Stephen Markham to Wilford Woodruff, 20 June 1856.

and lessen the value of property [and] also ruin a number of men" if Joseph left, they tried to persuade Markham to be part of a committee to invite Joseph to come back. Markham refused and departed.³⁴

The group then broke up and two of the more determined, Reynolds Cahoon and Hiram Kimball, headed toward the Mansion House, en route meeting Wandle Mace and his brother. Kimball and Cahoon were "very much excited, and thought it was absolutely necessary that Joseph should return," Mace related in his journal. The Mace brothers watched them stop outside Emma's gate, then lean on the fence, absorbed in deep conversation. "We . . . both felt the impression that they were going to persuade Sister Emma, Joseph's wife, to write to him and prevail on him to return, this feeling came upon us so forcibly, we were very uneasy."³⁵

James W. Woods, Joseph's trusted attorney, had arrived earlier with a pledge from Governor Ford for Joseph's safety and assurance of a fair trial.³⁶ Emma knew Joseph was in danger, but he had always surmounted threatening obstacles before. In this climate of mixed concern, she heard Cahoon and Kimball out, then penned a letter to Joseph. She asked her nephew, Lorenzo Wasson, to go with the two men to find Porter Rockwell, who would take them across the river immediately.

That afternoon, Joseph read the letter, then handed it to his brother Hyrum. "I know my own business," he said firmly.

Reynolds Cahoon snapped back in anger, "You always said if the church would stick to you, you would stick to the church, now trouble comes and you are the first to run." Hiram Kimball chimed in and the two men called Joseph a coward, reminding him that if mobs destroyed their property, they would all be homeless.³⁷

Joseph turned first to Rockwell, then to his brother Hyrum, "What shall we do?"

³⁴ Ibid., Henry G. Sherwood, who was with Alpheus Cutler on that morning, said Emma wanted him and Cutler to bring Joseph back to Nauvoo, but he refused. Henry G. Sherwood statement, Joseph Smith Collection, LDS Church Archives. Markham, on the other hand, said the group of men, Cutler included, solicited *his* help in getting Joseph to come back to Nauvoo. Two of the group, Kimball and Cahoon, would later answer to Brigham Young for their part in Joseph's surrender at Carthage, and apparently said Emma made them do it. Sherwood may have taken a similar position and signed his own statement against Emma to vindicate himself. The direct quotations are taken from Markham's statement.

Cutler and Cahoon's overriding interest in property is corroborated by a statement attributed to Joseph in the *History of the Church* 6:42: "Alpheus Cutler and Reynolds Cahoon are so anxious to get property, they will all flat out as soon as the Temple is completed and the faith of the Saints ceases from them &c." *History of the Church* 6:238 relates a conflict between Joseph and Hiram over ownership of the wharfs where the riverboats docked.

³⁵ Journal of Wandle Mace, LDS Church Archives; typescript BYU.

³⁶ William Holmes Walker, *The Life Incidents and Travels of Elder William Holmes Walker*, published by Elizabeth Jane Walker Peipgrass, (n.p.) 1943.

³⁷ The *History of the Church*, 6:549 says Wasson joined in the name-calling with Cahoon and Kimball. Joseph's reliance on him in the following days and other evidence suggests that Wasson was implicated falsely in this incident, perhaps because he was Emma's trusted relative. He had no property in jeopardy for he owned only a small lot — 6×22 rods — that he had purchased from Brigham Young earlier that year.

"Let's go back and give ourselves up, and see the thing out." Hyrum may have had an added incentive — his daughter was to be married that night, and he wanted to perform the ceremony.

Joseph replied, "If you go back I will go with you, but we shall be butchered."³⁸

Most historians have assumed Emma's letter caused Joseph to return to Nauvoo, yet no one but Joseph and Hyrum seemed to have read the letter. No account quotes it, even in part. William Clayton's diary says only: "Emma sent messengers over the river to Joseph & informed him what they intended to do and urged him to give himself up inasmuch as the Gov. had offered him protection."³⁹ In crises, Emma typically informed Joseph of circumstances, sent him the opinions of others, and added her own assessment of the situation. She probably did so now. But whatever she told him, it was not her letter alone that changed his course. Hyrum Smith's desire to be at home coupled with Cahoon and Kimball's name-calling were also influential, and it must not be overlooked that Joseph himself made the final decision. Brigham Young's opinion was that Joseph had lost the spirit of the Lord and therefore returned to his death.⁴⁰

Obviously, Emma had not expected him to return for she later told a friend, "When he came back I felt the worst I ever did in my life, and from that time I looked for him to be killed."⁴¹

Although Joseph's return deepened Emma's anxiety, others in the city interpreted it differently. Vilate Kimball wrote to Heber, "Joseph went over the river out of the United States, and composed his mind, and got the will of the Lord concerning him, and that was, that he should return and give himself up for trial. . . . My heart said Lord bless those Dear men, and preserve them from those that thirst for their blood."⁴²

THE STRUGGLE FOR LEADERSHIP

After Joseph's murder, Sidney Rigdon claimed authority to act as "guardian" of the Church while Joseph III was still young. Some writers have

³⁸ *History of the Church*, 6:549–50.

³⁹ James B. Allen notes on the diary of William Clayton, 23 June 1844, used by permission.

⁴⁰ Brigham Young addressed a special meeting in the Salt Lake Tabernacle on 21 March 1858, saying: "If Joseph Smith, jun., the Prophet, had followed the Spirit of revelation in him he never would have gone to Carthage . . . and never for one moment did he say that he had one particle of light in him after he started back from Montrose to give himself up in Nauvoo. This he did through the persuasion of others," (Salt Lake City, 1858), pp. 3–4, pamphlet in Frederick Kesler Collection, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, as quoted in D. Michael Quinn, "Joseph Smith III's 1844 Blessing and the Mormons of Utah," *DIALOGUE: A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT* 15 (Summer 1982): 77. See also A. Karl Larson and Katharine Miles Larson, *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, 2 vols. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1980), 1:25.

⁴¹ Edmund C. Briggs, "Visit to Nauvoo in 1856," *Journal of History* 9 (Oct. 1916): 453–54, RLDS Library Archives.

⁴² Vilate Kimball to Heber Kimball. The entire letter was written over a period of three days: 9, 16, and 24 June 1844, LDS Church Archives.

assumed that Emma encouraged this plan. There is little evidence to support that assumption. In the spring of 1845 she told James Monroe, a young man employed by her to run a school for children, that she did not believe that Sidney Rigdon was the one to lead the Church.⁴³ Nor is there evidence that Emma raised her sons to become leaders of any church. That view, created by the RLDS Church, is one which LDS members have helped perpetuate. As Edmund C. Briggs recalls, Emma said in 1856, "I have always avoided talking to my children about having anything to do in the church, for I have suffered so much I have dreaded to have them take any part in it. . . . But I have always believed that if God wanted them to do anything in the church, the One who called their father would make it known to them, and it was not necessary for me to talk to them about it."⁴⁴

EMMA AND MARY FIELDING

The two years following Joseph's death were emotionally taxing and difficult for Emma. The same can be said, of course, of Hyrum's wife, Mary Fielding Smith.

Some writers have suggested that Emma suffered a mental breakdown at the time of Joseph's death and was a changed person thereafter or that she became a "hollow shell."⁴⁵ No one has suggested that Mary went into "deep depression" or had a mental breakdown, yet the two women actually reacted similarly. Dr. B. W. Richmond, a paying guest at the Mansion House at the time of Joseph and Hyrum's death, left a moving account of the grief-stricken women viewing the bodies of their dead husbands which shows them both in almost uncontrolled anguish.⁴⁶ Emma fainted and Mary did not, but Emma was pregnant. In the months that followed, the widows greeted friends and other mourners in much the same way. Sometimes they gave close friends a lock of hair or a cane made from the oak coffins used to carry the brothers' bodies from Carthage to Nauvoo.

Mary's courage and faith are well chronicled in Mormon history, and rightly so, but two crucial differences set Emma apart from Mary as a widow, which make comparisons of the two women inappropriate. First, Emma's public position was inescapable. Her personal and financial affairs were intertwined with those of the Church in ways that Mary's were not. Second, Emma stood unalterably opposed to plural marriage. Mary had not only approved when Hyrum married her widowed sister, Mercy Fielding Thompson, and other wives, but she, herself, would soon become a plural wife of Heber C.

⁴³ James Monroe, Diary, Yale University, microfilm copy, Utah State Historical Society, (24 April 1845).

⁴⁴ "A Visit to Nauvoo," p. 453.

⁴⁵ Erwin E. Wirkus, *Judge Me Dear Reader* (Idaho Falls: Erwin E. Wirkus, 1978), p. 32-33; Keith Terry and Ann Terry, *Emma: The Dramatic Biography of Emma Smith* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Butterfly Publishing Inc., 1979), p. 121.

⁴⁶ B. W. Richmond, in "The Prophet's Death!" *Deseret News*, 27 Nov. 1875, reprinted from the *Chicago Times*.

Kimball. These factors determined the separate paths the two women would follow.

THE STRUGGLE OVER CHURCH PROPERTY

Joseph left no will. When the Saints had first arrived in Illinois the First Presidency, Joseph, Hyrum, and Sidney Rigdon, used their personal credit to buy land on which Church members would dwell. Joseph also involved himself in other partnerships and business opportunities such as stores and steamboats. In the winter of 1840–41, he sought to separate his personal property and the Church's and was consequently elected sole trustee-in-trust for the Church. At that time the Twelve approved of Joseph's attempts to provide an inheritance for his family as well as "his father's household," and so he deeded some land to Emma, the children, and others.⁴⁷

In spite of Joseph's desire to provide security for his family, as Emma knew, Nauvoo lands had been purchased on long-term credit and the debts were still outstanding when her husband was killed. In 1866 Brigham Young, reflecting back on this time, responded to Emma's son's accusations against him and the Twelve:

Alexander [Smith] stated when here, that the Twelve robbed his mother of 'the last second shirt to her back.' Now, I want to tell this congregation what we did for his mother. . . . Instead of the Twelve robbing her she goes and takes these [rings and possibly a portrait of Hyrum] from her sisters. She was not satisfied yet. . . . She complained about her poor, little fatherless children, and she kept up this whine until she got the farms she wanted, and besides these farms she owned city property worth fifty thousand dollars. . . . We gave her all she asked for.⁴⁸

The family's cash reserves had been so low before his death that Joseph had borrowed \$300 and given Emma and Mary Fielding each \$50.⁴⁹ Five days after his death, Emma gathered together \$300 to pay the debt, probably leaving her with very little operating money.⁵⁰ On the Fourth of July, William Clayton and Joseph's lawyer, James W. Woods, whom Emma had retained after her husband's death, met at Emma's home and examined Joseph's finances. Afterwards Clayton acknowledged that Emma's situation was indeed bleak. Most of the assets were in Joseph's name as trustee-in-trust; the liabilities, however, were in his name as private citizen.⁵¹ By Joseph's own account, he still owed approximately \$70,000 when he and Hyrum were murdered. In 1984 dollars the debt would be well over \$500,000. Because the

⁴⁷ Dallin H. Oaks and Joseph I. Bentley, "Joseph Smith and Legal Process: In the Wake of the Steamship *Nauvoo*," *BYU Law Review*, 1976, No. 3, pp. 750–66, reprinted in *BYU Studies* 19 (Winter 1979): 167–99.

⁴⁸ Young, conference address, 7 Oct. 1866.

⁴⁹ Statement of John A. Wolf, 22 June 1844, 2 July 1844, Wilford Wood Collection, Microfilm Reel 7, LDS Church Archives.

⁵⁰ Emma clearly did not want further debts adding to her financial burden. Willard Richards had recovered \$25 of the \$100 Joseph took to Carthage, and he paid Emma about half of that. Mary returned the \$50 Joseph had given to her, which helped Emma pay John A. Wolf, the man from whom Joseph had borrowed the \$300.

⁵¹ William Clayton, *Diary*, excerpts, 4 July 1844.

courts granted Hyrum bankruptcy a year and a half earlier, Mary was relatively unencumbered; but Emma's legacy was a debt that would plague her for years.⁵²

Three weeks after Joseph's death, the court appointed Joseph W. Coolidge to administer the estate. His settlement on behalf of Emma and her children was less than generous. She got her "household goods, two horses, two cows, her spinning wheels and one hundred and twenty-four dollars a year" for the support of her family.⁵³

Emma used a letter Joseph had written to her from the Iowa side of the river on 23 June as a guide in pursuing her claims with the Twelve, who had possession of Joseph's papers — both business and private. In that letter Joseph told Emma, "You may sell the Quincy Property—or any property that belongs to me . . . for your support and children & mother."⁵⁴ Emma pushed for the deed to the Quincy property, which was also known as the Cleveland farm. Brigham later said she offered to trade the Bible containing Joseph's "new translation" for the farm. "She got the deed," he said, but when Willard Richards asked her for the Bible, she told him "she was not ready to give [it] up yet."⁵⁵ Brigham did not mention — nor did anyone else — his refusal to let Emma's lawyer examine the paper concerning Joseph's estate three days *before* Richards asked for the new translation.⁵⁶ Her failure to make the trade must be understood in this context. She also felt a special "guardianship" over the Bible, for "it had been placed in her charge."⁵⁷

In addition to the farms the Twelve deeded to Emma, Brigham claimed she "owned city property worth fifty thousand dollars." This apparently refers to the Hugh White purchase which Joseph had deeded to her before his death; but a review of land sales records of Nauvoo before the martyrdom indicate that most of that land had already been sold before Joseph's death and Brigham's estimation of the remainder of Emma's property was inflated far beyond its real value even at 1844–45 prices.⁵⁸ Of course, Brigham's judgments about Emma's wealth were made from the perspective of securing equity the Church so desperately needed in the move West. In fact, by the time Emma paid her taxes in 1847, her land was worth only slightly over eight thousand dollars. Additionally, she owned \$650 worth of personal property and five wells valued together at \$200.⁵⁹ Joseph's estate, however, was not settled in the courts until 1850–52.

⁵² For a list of the debts and a full discussion of the bankruptcy case, see Oaks and Bentley, "Joseph Smith and the Legal Process," pp. 750–67.

⁵³ Joseph Smith III, *Joseph Smith III*, pp. 86–87.

⁵⁴ Joseph Smith, Jr. to Emma Smith, 23 June 1844, original in RLDS Library Archives.

⁵⁵ Brigham Young Address, 1 April 1867, Liverpool, England. See also his conference address, 7 Oct. 1866.

⁵⁶ William Clayton, Diary, excerpts, 15 Aug. 1844.

⁵⁷ Joseph Smith III, *Joseph Smith III*, p. 86; Emma Smith to Joseph Smith III, 2 Feb. 1866 [1867], RLDS Library Archives.

⁵⁸ See Nauvoo Land Records, Nauvoo Restoration Papers, LDS Church Archives.

⁵⁹ Ibid. See also 1847 and 1849 tax receipts, Lewis Bidamon Collection, RLDS Library Archives.

On 9 August 1850, the new United States Attorney in Illinois filed a complaint to recover a debt Joseph Smith owed from the 1840 purchase of the steamship *Nauvoo*. The judge upheld the Illinois law that no church could legally hold more than ten acres of property, but he also ruled that all the property which exceeded the allotted ten acres that Joseph held either personally or as trustee-in-trust after 1842 must be sold to pay the creditors. This included all the other property Joseph had conveyed to Emma or the children after that time.⁶⁰

As surviving spouse, Emma was entitled to a one-third dower interest in what her husband owned, and this took precedence over other claims. But because of Emma's age, the court valued her widow's rights at only one-sixth of Joseph's estate. The court, however, did exempt from the sales the Mansion House, the Homestead, and the Nauvoo House.

The sale proceeds totaled \$11,148.35. The United States Government received \$7,870.23, which was full payment for the steamship debt plus court costs and interest. An additional \$1,468.71 apparently went to pay legal fees. The widow's share of Joseph's estate, therefore, was a mere \$1,809.41. The rest of the creditors, with one exception, got nothing. Phineas Kimball, land speculator and brother to Hiram Kimball filed another state-court judgment against the estate in March 1852 for \$500. On 5 June he received \$3,000 from a judicial sale of the same property the court had earlier exempted.⁶¹ Thus, Emma had to use the dower money plus over \$1,000 more to buy back the Mansion House, the Homestead, the Nauvoo House, and the farm. Acting in her behalf at the federal sale, her lawyer, George Edmunds, Jr., had purchased another piece of land for \$255. Kimball got the state court to agree to resell that property, and Edmunds purchased it a second time for Emma, paying seven hundred dollars.⁶²

Brigham Young probably never fully realized Emma's financial plight, the final outcome of Joseph's estate, or its effect on her. Instead he discoursed publicly on Emma's wealth, giving the impression that she had usurped most of it from the Church. But while the Church did not gain anything from the final settlement of Joseph's estate, even the property Brigham thought he and the trustees had given Emma had to be repurchased with the money she received from the court. Both Emma and the Church trustees had sold lands between 1844 and 1848 with most of those sales taking place during, and shortly after, the Mormon exodus from Nauvoo. In 1847, Emma sold approximately \$2,600

⁶⁰ By the end of 1849, thirty-one creditors had filed claims totaling \$25,023.45 against the estate. The administrators of the estate had earlier paid approximately \$1,000 for additional small claims and funeral costs. Four claimants asked for \$21,500 or 82 percent of the total. They were Phineas Kimball, who had notes from Joseph amounting to about \$2,800; Halstead Haines and Co. for a debt left over from the Kirtland days totaling \$7,349; Almon Babbitt acting in behalf of the Lawrence sisters' estate, \$4,033.87; and the United States Government which asked for \$5,184.31 for the boat debt. See Oaks and Bentley, "Joseph Smith and Legal Process," p. 769.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 768-69, 778-80, and notes. See also Record of the United States Circuit Court for the District of Illinois, No. 1603, 18 June 1841 through 17 July 1852, Federal Records Center, Chicago, Ill., copy in the BYU Archives, Mss/SC 174.

⁶² Record of United States Circuit Court.

worth of property. The trustees for the Church sold considerably more.⁶³ When much of this same property fell under the jurisdiction of the court sales, no Church trustees remained in Nauvoo to witness the frustration of the people who had bought the land in good faith and found they no longer had title to it. But Emma was there, and it was a difficult time for her when innocent people lost their property. Many of the new citizens had become her friends.

Emma spent her remaining years far removed from the associates who had helped shape the events of that first decade of the Nauvoo period. Like those around her, she did not always react rationally nor did she always make decisions in those trying years that others would have wished her to make. She alienated some of her friends and they similarly alienated her. Emily Partridge no doubt expressed the sentiments of many who knew Emma when she wrote, "I hope the Lord will be merciful to her, and I believe he will. It is an awful thought to contimplate the misery of a human being. If the Lord will, my heart says let Emma come up and stand in her place. Perhaps she has done no worse than any of us would have done in her place. Let the Lord be the judge."⁶⁴

⁶³ Oaks and Bentley, "Joseph Smith and Legal Process," pp. 780–81; see also Nauvoo land records, Nauvoo Restoration Papers.

⁶⁴ Emily Dow Partridge Young, "Incidents in the Early Life of Emily Partridge," typescript, University of Utah Marriott Library, Special Collections.