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Vox Joseph Vox Dei: **Regarding Some of the Moral and Ethical Aspects of Joseph Smith's Practice of Plural Marriage**

Gary James Bergera

I do not, nor never have, pretended to be any other than a man “subject to passion,” and liable, without the assisting grace of the Savior, to deviate from that perfect path in which all men are commanded to walk!

—Joseph Smith, 1834¹

That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be and often is, right under another.

—Joseph Smith, 1842²

IN HAZARDING A DISCUSSION of some of the moral and ethical aspects of Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage in Nauvoo, Illinois, I believe that a few preliminaries may be helpful.³ First, I hope to encourage a cautious, balanced discussion of the Mormon prophet's thought and behavior, especially of his character and personality. At the same time, I believe that shying away from difficult questions or from offering some tentative conclusions robs any discussion of the potential benefits of critical analysis. While the present stage for such a treatment is the subject of Smith's attempts to introduce and practice his controversial doctrine of plural marriage—or, as he preferred to

¹Quoted in *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 3 (December 1834): 40.

²Quoted in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 538–40.

³I have treated Joseph Smith and the beginnings of Mormon plural marriage in the following studies: “The Earliest Eternal Sealings for Civilly Married Couples Living and Dead,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 41–66; “Buckeye's Laments: Two Early Insider Exposés of Mormon Polygamy and Their Authorship,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 95, no. 4 (Winter 2002/2003): 350–90; “‘Illicit Intercourse,’ Plural Marriage, and the Nauvoo Stake High Council, 1840–44,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 23 (2003): 59–90; “Identifying the Earliest Mormon Polygamists, 1841–1844,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 1–74; and “John C. Bennett, Joseph Smith, and the Beginnings of Mormon Plural Marriage in Nauvoo,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 25 (2005): 52–92.

call it, celestial marriage—some of the observations that follow may relate to the larger drama of Smith’s multifaceted life. Such a consideration of how Smith navigated the moral and ethical aspects of the nontraditional marriage practice he inaugurated may tell us something about his handling of the weighty prophetic mantle he believed he was commanded to bear.

A second preliminary concerns the tricky matter of definitions—what is meant by “moral” and “ethical.” In tending to rely on definitions contained in the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed., 2006), I realize that some readers may accuse me of oversimplification, if not of sophomoric scholarship. While I freely admit that a more linguistically nuanced analysis would be better undertaken by someone more conversant with the finer points of rigorous philosophical analysis, still I would like to hope that, as a preliminary discussion, what follows may prove to be of some value in encouraging the continued discussion of the topic. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines “moral” as referring to “the judgment of the goodness or badness of human action and character” especially in “sexual conduct”; while “ethical” refers to “a set of principles of right conduct.” (Not surprisingly, the two terms are often used interchangeably.) All modern English dictionaries⁴ imply that the judging of thoughts and actions as good or bad reflects the values of a larger, presumably secular society. That a society’s values may result from the religious beliefs of its members, however, is stated explicitly in a dictionary closer to Smith’s own lifetime, Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*. Webster defines “moral” as having “reference to the law of God as the standard by which [the] character [of one’s actions] is to be determined.” For the purposes of the present discussion, I define—and, again, not to everyone’s satisfaction—“moral” as referring broadly to how and what one *believes* about right and wrong, about good and bad thought and behavior, and “ethical” as referring to how one actually *acts* based on those beliefs.

A third preliminary deals with the kinds of sources available to document Joseph Smith’s practice of plural marriage. Here we venture into very muddy terrain. For if we confine ourselves only to those contemporary sources attributed reliably to Smith, we are seemingly forced to conclude that he not only never taught or practiced plural marriage, but in fact unequivocally condemned it. I accept as fact that Smith was sealed to his first documented plural wife, Louisa Beaman, in Nauvoo on April 5, 1841, and that by the time of his death on June 27, 1844, he had been sealed, or married, to at least thirty-five additional wives (and, I suspect, probably more). Thus, in documenting Smith’s plural marriages, we must not only finesse, if not reject, Smith’s denials, but also look beyond Smith to statements from his associates, including his plural wives, as well as from the men and women who embraced—and in some instances

⁴Additional useful definitions may be found in the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) and in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (2002).

rejected—his teaching. This necessary reliance on statements of persons other than Smith both limits and colors what observations we may make about Smith and the beginnings of Mormon plural marriage.⁵

A fourth preliminary concerns the purpose of Smith's plural marriage doctrine. Smith was a man of intellect, passion, and appetite.⁶ Excitement powered his existence.⁷ Friendship and family formed the bedrock of his idealized celestial social order.⁸ Love and sex, or as he termed it, "reproduction," occupy an integral place in his plural marriage teaching. As early as 1830, Smith's Book of Mormon linked polygamy with sexuality: "For if I will ... raise up seed unto me," the Lord is quoted as saying, "I will command my people [to take more than one wife]."⁹ Thirteen years later, Smith's revelation on plural marriage stated explicitly that plural wives "are given unto him [i.e., the husband] to multiply and replenish the earth."¹⁰ In fact, according to the brother of one of his plural wives, Smith believed that one's "Dominion & powr in the great Future would be Comensurate with the no [number] of 'Wives Childin & Friends' that we inheret here."¹¹ To his male followers, at

⁵ Also complicating matters is the reluctance of the men and women participating in Smith's teaching to discuss the sexual dimension of plural marriage. In fact, most of what is known of Smith's sexual relations with his plural wives survives today only as compelled testimony elicited during the Temple Lot Case of the early 1890s. The most helpful studies of the beginnings of Smith's plural marriage doctrine are Todd Compton's 1997 book, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, and, especially, George D. Smith's more broadly oriented 2008 study, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "... But We Called It Celestial Marriage*," both of which are published by Signature Books (Salt Lake City).

⁶ Intellect: "The faculty of the human soul or mind, which receives or comprehends the ideas communicated to it by the sense or by perception, or by other means; the faculty of thinking"; passion: "The feeling of the mind, or the sensible effect of impression; ... as desire, fear, hope, joy, grief, love, hatred"; appetite: "The natural desire of pleasure or good; the desire of gratification, either of the body or of the mind" (all definitions from *Webster 1828*).

⁷ See Susan Staker, "Waiting for World's End: Wilford Woodruff and David Koresh," *Sunstone* 16, no. 7 (December 1993): 12–13. Source courtesy of Joe Geisner.

⁸ "Friendship," Smith stated on July 23, 1843, "is one of the grand fundamental principles of 'Mormonism,' to revolutionize and civilize the world.... [to] pour forth love. Friendship is like ... [the metals bonded in a] Blacksmith shop welding iron to iron; it unites the human family with its happy influence" (Joseph Smith, et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Period I. History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet by Himself* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980], 5:516–17). Hereafter cited as *History of the Church*. For more, see Steven Epperson, "The Grand, Fundamental Principle: Joseph Smith and the Virtue of Friendship," *Journal of Mormon History* 23, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 77–105; also Don Bradley, "The Grand Fundamental Principles of Mormonism: Joseph Smith's Unfinished Reformation," *Sunstone* no. 141 (April 2006): 32–41, esp. 36–38.

⁹ Book of Mormon (LDS, Jacob 2:30; Community of Christ, Jacob 2:39).

¹⁰ Doctrine and Covenants (LDS 132:63). This revelation is not included in the Doctrine and Covenants as published by the Community of Christ.

¹¹ In Dean R. Zimmerman, ed., *I Knew the Prophets: An Analysis of the Letter of Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, Reporting Doctrinal Views of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Horizon, 1976), 47.

least, Smith taught that plural marriage was “a privilege with blessings.”¹² Smith’s cousin, LDS church apostle George A. Smith, reported that in regards to plural marriage, Joseph Smith “felt as liberal to others as he did to himself,” and that in urging George A. to take a plural wife, said, “You should not be behind your privileges.”¹³ Finally, when one of Joseph Smith’s followers asked about marrying two elderly sisters who were more acceptable to this particular follower’s civil wife, Smith reportedly declared that such an “arrangement is of the devil[;] you go and get you a young wife[,] one you can take to your bosom and love and raise children by.”¹⁴ As I read the sources, Smith clearly intended that plural marriage provide sexual intimacy and facilitate the production of offspring. While there may be social and biological aspects as well to Smith’s teaching, the erotic element should be minimized. To do so, I believe, would misrepresent the overriding primary purpose of Smith’s celestial doctrine.

For those men and women who accepted Joseph Smith as God’s latter-day prophet, his word alone was enough to determine the morality or immorality of any given belief or practice. People “had no more right to dictate [to Smith] than they had to dictate [to] the angel Gabriel,” asserted one of his closest followers, and “had no more business to interfere with him, or call him to an account, than we have to call to an account the angel Gabriel.”¹⁵ “When brother Joseph Smith lived,” another of Smith’s friends insisted, “he was our dictator in the things of God, and it was for us to listen to him, and do just as he told us.”¹⁶ “I had the greatest faith in [Joseph Smith] and in everything that he taught,” testified Bathsheba W. Smith, George A. Smith’s civil wife, “and if he taught any thing I believed it was the truth or he would not teach it.”¹⁷ The sister of one of Smith’s plural wives similarly referred to Smith as “him who is too wise to err and too good to be unkind.”¹⁸ “It was not my prerogative to call [Smith] in question,” Brigham Young added, “with regard to any act of his life. He was God’s servant, and not mine. He did not belong to the people but to the Lord,

¹² Sarah M. Kimball, quoted in Augusta J. Crocheron, comp., *Representative Women of Deseret: A Book of Biographical Sketches, to Accompany the Picture Bearing the Same Title* (Salt Lake City: J. C. Graham & Co., 1884), 26.

¹³ George A. Smith to Joseph Smith III, October 9, 1869, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. Liberal: “generous; giving largely” (*Webster 1828*).

¹⁴ Quoted in Stan Larson, ed., *Prisoner for Polygamy: The Memoirs and Letters of Ruderger Clawson at the Utah Territorial Penitentiary, 1884–87* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 12.

¹⁵ Brigham Young in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, England: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1855–86) 3:318.

¹⁶ Heber C. Kimball in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:106.

¹⁷ Temple Lot Case, Respondent’s Testimony, p. 320 Q-621, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri.

¹⁸ Mercy Fielding Thompson Smith, untitled autobiographical sketch, December 20, 1880, LDS Church History Library.

and was doing the work of the Lord, and if He should suffer him to lead the people astray, it would be because they ought to be led astray.”¹⁹

Such devotion to the admittedly circular concept of *vox Joseph vox dei*,²⁰ which to some sensibilities also borders on “idolatry,”²¹ effectively renders moot any discussion of the moral and ethical aspects of Smith’s plural marriage doctrine—at least as far as those who share such a belief of Smith are concerned. Yet Smith in his practice of plural marriage also demonstrated an awareness of the transgressive nature to conventional morality and jurisprudence his teaching represented. He confessed to church members that he, like them, was subject to “unrighteousness,” stating a year before his death, “I do not want you to think I am very righteous, for I am not.”²² Two years earlier, even as he admitted to being “sinful,” he suggested that some sin may be situational: “if you do not accuse each other, God will not accuse you ... If you will not accuse me, I will not accuse you. If you will throw a cloak of charity over my sins, I will over yours—for charity covereth a multitude of sins.”²³

Smith believed that God’s revelation to him concerning polygamy was a result of Smith’s craving for knowledge and his intense curiosity, as only by actively studying and asking could one receive God’s truth.²⁴ Smith taught that the “spirit of revelation” is emotion based and speaks to one’s mind and heart, that God’s Holy Spirit reveals truth through a burning sensation in one’s bosom.²⁵ For Smith, God spoke to him through “pure intelligence”²⁶ which put “ideas and words into his mind.” Yet, he also “recognized that influences upon thought and feeling could have more than one source,” and thus relying solely on one’s feelings was not always “proof against error.” Mistakes, Smith learned, could sometimes be recognized only after the fact.²⁷ For some revelations are “of men,” he instructed, while others are “of devils.”²⁸ Smith’s understanding

¹⁹ *Journal of Discourses* 4:297–98.

²⁰ English translation: The voice of Joseph is the voice of God.

²¹ Leonard J. Arrington, “Personal Reflections on Mormon History,” *Sunstone* 8, no. 4 (July/August 1983): 43.

²² *History of the Church*, 5:401.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4:445. A year and a half later, Smith would repeat virtually identical sentiments: “I do not dwell upon your faults, and you shall not upon mine. Charity, which is love, covereth a multitude of sins, and I have often covered up all the faults among you” (*History of the Church*, 5:517).

²⁴ Richard P. Howard, at the time church historian of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now Community of Christ), has termed this “propositional revelation.” See his essay, “Latter Day Saint Scriptures and the Doctrine of Propositional Revelation,” in *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 1–18. See also the Book of Mormon (LDS and Community of Christ, Moroni 10:4).

²⁵ Doctrine and Covenants (LDS 8:2, 8; Community of Christ 8:1–3).

²⁶ *History of the Church*, 3:381.

²⁷ Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 344.

²⁸ Doctrine and Covenants (LDS 46:7; Community of Christ 46:3)

of revelation and personal admission of sin and error more than justify our approaching him from a perspective less deferential than that manifested by his earliest followers.

Smith seems never to have questioned his mission as God's prophet called to restore his gospel and to prepare the way for his imminent return. "If I had not actually got into this work," Smith said a year before his death, "and been called of God, I would back out. But I cannot back out: I have no doubt of the truth."²⁹ Smith "believed in himself," writes biographer Richard Lyman Bushman, "and the cause to the point of arrogance ... Indeed, the Church was built on his confidence."³⁰ Smith saw himself, somewhat grandiloquently, as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness," "a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain," "a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty," and "the towering rock in the midst of the ocean, which has withstood the mighty surges of the warring waves for centuries."³¹ With equal certainty, Smith insisted that "Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire."³² God's great salvific project for his children is most often impeded, according to Smith, by human prejudice. "I do many things to break down superstition," Smith explained, "and I will break it down."³³

Among the "superstitions"³⁴ Smith wanted to "break down" was monogamy, which he believed fundamentally undermined God's purposes and human happiness. "The thing that my servant Joseph Smith has made known unto you and your Family and which you have agreed upon," God, through Smith, promised the father of one of Smith's plural brides, "shall be rewarded upon your heads with honor and immortality and eternal life to all your house both old & young."³⁵ To one of his prospective wives, Smith offered what may be the most illuminating definition of his own moral and ethical world view, a view that depended on and reflected his role as God's prophet. "Happiness is the object and design of our existence," he dictated in April 1842, "That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be and often is, right under another ... This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom

²⁹ *History of the Church*, 5:336.

³⁰ Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 173.

³¹ *History of the Church*, 6:273, 5:401, 6:78. See also Gary James Bergera, "Joseph Smith and the Hazards of Charismatic Leadership," in *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith*, ed. Bryan Waterman (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 239–57, esp. 240–41.

³² Quoted in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 538.

³³ *History of the Church*, 4:445.

³⁴ Superstition: "abstaining from things not forbidden" (*Webster 1828*).

³⁵ Quoted in *The Essential Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 165.

are placed.... Every thing that God gives us is lawful and right, and 'tis proper that we should enjoy his gifts and blessings whenever and wherever he is disposed to bestow.... Our heavenly father is more liberal in his views, and boundless in his mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive."³⁶

However, as Smith also taught, adhering to God's commands must be ordered by his spirit and authority. "Behold, mine house is a house of order," God instructed Smith in 1843, "and not a house of confusion."³⁷ Thus, he continued, "All covenants, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, of him who is anointed ... are of no efficacy, virtue, or force in and after the resurrection from the dead.... Therefore, if a man marry him a wife in the world, and he marry her not by me nor by my word ... they are not bound by any law when they are out of the world."³⁸ "He that is called of God is not only a minister of the Law given by God," Smith stressed, "but is also anointed to make Law according to their Authority."³⁹ "The Prophet felt," LDS educator Danel W. Bachman has explained, "that only those who had his approval could properly exercise the religious ordinance [of marriage], and that he could void marriages that were not valid in eternity."⁴⁰ "Priesthood law transcended human convention," LDS scholar Rex Eugene Cooper concurs.⁴¹

Joseph Smith's belief in his plenary calling, in God's continuing revelation, and in *philia* and *eros* as the touchstones of God's celestial order undergird Smith's teaching and practice of plural marriage. That his closest followers shared such views helps to explain their willingness to accept his controversial

³⁶ Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 538–40. There is something almost Emersonian in such sentiments. Consider the following from Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Self-Reliance* (165–69), published in 1841: "Whoso would be a man, must be a non-conformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness ... I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make a valued adviser, who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within? my friend suggested, —'But these impulses may be from below, not from above.' I replied, 'They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil.' No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it." For a discussion of Emerson and Smith, see Benjamin E. Park, "Build, Therefore, Your Own World": Ralph Waldo Emerson, Joseph Smith, and American Antebellum Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 41–72.

³⁷ Doctrine and Covenants (LDS 132:8).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 132:7, 15.

³⁹ Quoted in Danel W. Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage before the Death of Joseph Smith" (master's thesis, Purdue University, 1975), 125–26.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴¹ Rex Eugene Cooper, *Promises Made to the Fathers: Mormon Covenant Organization* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 85. It should be noted that as he contracted and authorized plural marriages, and thus emphasized the inefficacy of secular authority and the supremacy of his own, Smith continued to approve and perform civil marriages.

teachings in both belief and practice. Even so, Smith's plural marriage doctrine represented as great a challenge to the prevailing moral and ethical sensibilities of his adherents as they were ever to experience, and in many cases with considerable personal cost. "We obeyed the best we knew how," recalled a Nauvoo polygamist, "and, no doubt, made many crooked paths in our ignorance."⁴² Because plural marriage was illegal, Smith publicly denied its existence, making certain to teach and practice it in secret; his attempts to secure compliance sometimes seemed to border on coercion; and, most transgressively, his plural marriages included marriages to already married women. It is in these areas especially that the contours of Smith's moral-ethical worldview come into sharpest relief and may pose the greatest challenge to contemporary moral-ethical beliefs.⁴³

In his 1975 study of Smith's plural marriages, Danel Bachman observed, "Early Mormonism was steeped in secrecy."⁴⁴ In fact, by the time Smith's civil wife, Emma Hale, learned of her husband's plural marriages, the Mormon prophet had already been married to some twenty women, including several of Emma's closest associates. According to Joseph Bates Noble, who at Smith's invitation performed Smith's first documented plural marriage (to Noble's sister-in-law), Smith made a point of stressing the lethal nature of his teaching and thus need for absolute secrecy: "In revealing this to you," he told Noble, "I have placed my life in your hands, therefore do not in an evil hour betray me to my enemies."⁴⁵ "Joseph revealed this unto some of the first Elders of the Church," remembered Erastus Snow (another brother-in-law of Smith's first plural wife), "taking care to enjoin them that they must preserve these things in their own hearts."⁴⁶ Smith's decision to dress his teaching in secrecy demonstrates an appreciation of its affront to conventional morality and its civil illegality. Smith not only feared a backlash from followers but, more importantly, criminal prosecution and imprisonment. He understood that, except in the eyes of his most faithful followers, his celestial marriage doctrine was immoral and illegal. "Would to God I could tell you what I know!" he lamented. "But you would call it blasphemy, and there are men ... who would want to take my life."⁴⁷ Though Smith seems never to have expressed it as

⁴² Amasa Lyman, in *Journal of Discourses* 11:207.

⁴³ In the remainder of this paper, I have decided not to address the sources of Smith's plural marriage doctrine or the status of wives as the "eternal possessions" or "privileges" of their husbands. These topics may be best left to their own separate treatments.

⁴⁴ Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage," 192.

⁴⁵ Noble, affidavit, June 26, 1869, LDS Church History Library. Two years later to the day, April 5, 1843, Smith personally performed Noble's own first plural marriage.

⁴⁶ *Journal of Discourses* 24:165.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 2nd ed. (1888; repr., Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallace, 1945), 333.

such, an argument could be made that his promulgation of the illegal practice amounted to a kind of religion-based civil disobedience.

Given the criminal element of Smith's practice, it should come as no surprise that when confronted publicly with charges that he endorsed the taking of plural wives, Smith repeatedly denied it. His denials most often took the form of deliberate obfuscation, if not outright lying. While he no doubt shared the nineteenth-century definition of lying as "a falsehood uttered for the purpose of deception,"⁴⁸ he felt fully justified in lying if he believed the circumstances required it. For example, in mid-1843 he backed out of a preaching engagement by "carry[ing] the idea that he had had a message from Springfield [Illinois] & had important business to attend to in that place."⁴⁹ Smith's excuse, as he knew, was false. Also in mid-1843, following an especially heated argument with his wife Emma over plural marriage, Smith decided to tell Emma that he would "relinquish" all of his plural wives, while privately resolving, as he confided to his personal secretary, that "he should not relinquish anything."⁵⁰ The next year, Smith commented: "What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one."⁵¹ The same month of his violent death, June 1844, he insisted publicly that his teachings on plural marriage merely showed "the order in ancient days, having nothing to do with the present times."⁵² By this time, Smith had taken an estimated thirty-five or more plural wives and had convinced at least thirty-two men to join him in the celestial marriage covenant by marrying a total of at least fifty-three plural wives.⁵³

In employing denials, Smith would come to espouse an eccentric definition of lying that turned more or less pragmatically not on deception, but on loyalty. On January 3, 1844, and in specific reference to plural marriage, he told members of the Nauvoo City Council: "The man who promises to keep a secret and does not keep it he is a liar, and not to be trusted."⁵⁴ In fact, Smith believed he was authorized to attack the credibility of any who violated his trust, especially if he believed they threatened his or his people's safety; it did not matter to him if his criticisms were factually true or not. "When a man becomes

⁴⁸ *Webster 1828*, s. v. "lie."

⁴⁹ Quoted in James B. Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear: The Story of William Clayton* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 400.

⁵⁰ Quoted in George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books/Smith Research Associates, 1995), 117.

⁵¹ *History of the Church* 6:411.

⁵² "City Council, Regular Session, June 8th [and 10th], 1844," *Nauvoo Neighbor*, June 19, 1844, 3; the last eight words do not appear in the version of these minutes published in *History of the Church* 6:441.

⁵³ See Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 311–12.

⁵⁴ Nauvoo City Council, minutes, under date, LDS Church History Library; this material was deleted from the *History of the Church*, 6:162–65.

a traitor to his friend or country who is innocent, [and becomes] treacherous to innocent blood[,] [I] do consider it right to cut off his influence so that he could not injure the innocent.”⁵⁵ Such reasoning speaks directly to Smith’s moral and ethical worldview as it developed in response to what he believed was a divine command to restore the lost practice of a plurality of wives.

As Smith expressed it to those he invited to participate in his celestial marriage doctrine, failure to comply could mean eternal damnation for the men, the women, and even their own families. “All those who have this law revealed unto them must obey the same,” Smith’s 1843 revelation on plural marriage announced. “For behold, I reveal unto you a new and an everlasting covenant; and if ye abide not that covenant, then are ye damned; for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory.”⁵⁶ While Smith may not have believed that those who rejected the doctrine would necessarily be punished in this life, he was certain that they would not be blessed as fully—or, in other words, would be “damned”—in the next. The brother of two of Smith’s already married plural wives recalled Smith telling him that “God had commanded it to be observed, and if he himself did not comply with it he should be damned.”⁵⁷ Likewise, Heber C. Kimball was reportedly told that “if he did not do this he would lose his Apostleship and be damned.”⁵⁸ Another of Smith’s followers understood that those who did not comply could have their own families taken from them and “given” to more obedient followers.⁵⁹ Given the secrecy and the urgency with which he promulgated his doctrine, Smith also hoped for, but did not always receive, a prompt response. “I have no flattering words to offer,” he told one prospective plural wife. “It is a command of God to you. I will give you until tomorrow to decide this matter. If you reject this message the gate will be closed forever against you.”⁶⁰ “The principle [of plural marriage],” historian Todd Compton notes in his study of Smith’s plural wives, “was ... the most important revelation in Joseph Smith’s life ... If they accepted him as an infallible prophet, and if they wanted full exaltation, they had no recourse but to marry many plural wives.”⁶¹

For his followers, compliance to Smith’s doctrine guaranteed exaltation not only for one’s self but also for one’s family. Smith told one of his brides: “If you will take this step, it will insure your eternal salvation & exaltation and

⁵⁵ Nauvoo City Council, minutes, January 3, 1844.

⁵⁶ Doctrine and Covenants (LDS 132:3–4).

⁵⁷ Dimick Huntington, in Salt Lake City School of the Prophets, minutes, February 10, 1873, LDS Church History Library.

⁵⁸ Whitney, *Heber C. Kimball*, 336n.

⁵⁹ Benjamin F. Johnson, *My Life’s Review: Autobiography of Benjamin F. Johnson* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1997), 84.

⁶⁰ “Statement of L[ucy]. W[alker]. [Smith] Kimball,” n.d., typescript, LDS Church History Library.

⁶¹ Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 456.

that of your father's household & all of your kindred."⁶² "This promise was so great," this young woman admitted, "that I willingly gave myself to purchase so glorious a reward."⁶³ To another bride, Smith promised: "She shall come forth in the first reserrection to recieve the same and verily it shall be so saith the Lord if she remain in the Everlasting covenant [of plural marriage] to the end as also all her Fathers house shall be saved in the same Eternal glory."⁶⁴ In fact, only those church members who accepted, at least in principle, Smith's doctrine of plurality were deemed sufficiently worthy to receive the church's highest blessing: the so-called second anointing, or confirmation, according to LDS historian Glen M. Leonard, "of promises that worthy men could become kings and priests and that women could become queens and priestesses in the eternal worlds."⁶⁵

Following his April 5, 1841, plural marriage to Louisa Beaman, Joseph Smith's next ten or eleven plural marriages, to about June 1842, were all to women who were already married (eight or nine) or were widowed (two), and ranged in age from twenty to fifty-three.⁶⁶ Convinced that his priesthood authority trumped all other claims, Smith believed that in bringing about God's latter-day purposes, it was his privilege to marry whom he would and his followers' privilege to obey. "If Joseph [Smith] had a right to dictate me in relation to salvation, in relation to a hereafter," one of his followers later commented, "he had a right to dictate me in relation to all my earthly affairs.... What would a man of God say, who felt aright, when Joseph ... came and said, 'I want your wife?' 'O yes,' he would say, 'here she is, there are plenty more.'"⁶⁷ Smith sometimes presented his proposal to the husband of the wife he desired as a test of loyalty. "Did the Prophet Joseph want every man's wife he asked for?" this same follower continued. "He did not ... The grand object in view was to try the people of God, to see what was in them."⁶⁸ Such tests, when passed, tended predictably to strengthen existing bonds of loyalty to Smith. At the same time, it is not known if in those instances of actual marriages to already married women, Smith always fully informed each husband of his intent.

⁶² Helen Mar Kimball, quoted in Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 293.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ "Blessing Given to Sarah Ann Whitney by Joseph Smith. Nauvoo City, March 23, 1843," typed copy, LDS Church History Library.

⁶⁵ Glen M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, A People of Promise* (Salt Lake City/Provo, UT: Deseret Book/Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 260–61.

⁶⁶ These were Zina Jacobs (married), Presendia Buell (married), Agnes Smith (widow), Lucinda Harris (married), Mary Elizabeth Lightener (married), Sylvia Lyon (married), Patty Sessions (married), Sarah Cleveland (married), Elizabeth Durfee (married), Marinda Hyde (married), and Delcena Sherman (widow). See Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 73–157.

⁶⁷ Jedediah M. Grant, quoted in *Journal of Discourses* 2:13–14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

Some researchers have asserted that Smith never planned to engage in sexual activity with any of his “polyandrous wives,” at least while they remained legally bound to their husbands.⁶⁹ Those holding such a view must convincingly explain, as historian George D. Smith has pointed out,⁷⁰ how the Mormon prophet hoped to accomplish the reproductive purpose of plural marriage without engaging in sexual activity with his polyandrous wives.⁷¹ From a strictly pragmatic point of view, such marriages to already married women would have functioned to deflect attention away from Joseph Smith in the event of a pregnancy. “Your father had mostly intercourse with married women,” a woman who rejected Smith’s plural marriage proposals told Smith’s eldest son, “and as to single ones, ... [a doctor] was always on hand, when anything happened.”⁷² “I could explain some things in regard to my living with [my civil husband] after becoming the *Wife of another*,” one of Smith’s married plural wives said, hinting, as I read her, at a means of shielding Smith from public condemnation, “which would throw light, on what *now* seems mysterious—and you would be perfectly satisfied with me.”⁷³ In fact, even after turning mostly away from “polyandrous” plural marriages in about mid-1842, Smith continued for a time to employ such a tactic with some of his previously unmarried wives. He even performed the civil ceremony for one of his plural wives nine months after his own marriage to her; her new “husband” referred explicitly to the ceremony as “a pretended marriage.”⁷⁴

Faced with the prevailing moral and legal objections to plural marriage, Joseph Smith found himself compelled to adopt a variety of strategies in

⁶⁹ See, for example, Brian C. Hales, “The Joseph Smith–Sylvia Sessions Plural Sealing: Polyandry or Polygyny?” *Mormon Historical Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 41–57; and Brian C. Hales, “Joseph Smith and the Puzzlement of ‘Polyandry,’” in *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 99–151.

⁷⁰ “Letters: George D. Smith Responds,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): vi.

⁷¹ An argument could be made, based on Mormon sealing theology, that following a marriage to Smith, any children born to these already married women and fathered by their civil husbands would belong to Smith in eternity. However, such an argument does not account for Smith’s teaching regarding the raising of righteous seed in mortality and for his counsel that other men should find plural wives with whom they can bear children in this life, thus assuring their greater joy in this life and their greater kingdom in the next.

⁷² Sarah B. Pratt, quoted in Dr. W. Wyl (Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal), *Mormon Portraits or the Truth about the Mormon Leaders from 1830 to 1886. Volume First. Joseph Smith the Prophet His Family and His Friends* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing, 1886), 61. Though Pratt rejected Smith’s teachings, and later left the LDS church, she was a knowledgeable insider during the church’s Nauvoo years, and her reminiscences carry some historical weight.

⁷³ Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, quoted in Bachman, “A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage,” 135; emphasis in original.

⁷⁴ See “History of Joseph (Corroden) Kingsbury, (As written by his own hand 1846, 1847, 1849, 1850 (and later),” Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah.

restoring what he seems to have genuinely believed was God's commandment. His unwavering belief in his roles as God's prophet and lawgiver gave rise to and fueled the kind of evolving moral and ethical worldview that permitted and, he believed, authorized him, and his followers, to attack, among other nineteenth-century *superstitions*, monogamous marriage. In its place, Smith envisioned a patriarchal society in which friendship and sexual love, fully sanctioned by revelation and God's priesthood authority, ordered all existence. The practical challenges of, and complex strategies for, restoring the celestial order of marriage were as much a function of Smith's developing moral and ethical worldview as they were a means to define and construct it. For those inclined to such an interpretation, it is not satisfying enough, in my opinion, to explain Smith as a moral relativist and an ethical pragmatist (however much he may have seemed to behave as such). Smith's seemingly transcendent encounter with what he believed was God's revelation left him grappling with the confining strictures of conventional morality, sometimes responding in ways that seem to be at cross-purposes with the "higher" moral sensibilities usually ascribed to God's holy prophets. Thus, we today are left to wonder to what extent those who adhere to a belief in Smith's calling would be as willing and, more interestingly, as able to transgress their own moral and ethical conventions for a glimpse of the celestial kingdom they believe Smith revealed.

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