

## New and Everlasting Covenant

From the midst of confusion can harmony flow?  
 Or can peace from distraction come forth?  
 From out of corruption, integrity grow?  
 Or can vice unto virtue give birth?

—ELIZA R. SNOW (SMITH) (YOUNG), 1842

WHILE Brigham Young oversaw the rapid expansion of the British church, Mary Ann struggled with poverty, sickness, and loneliness. In his absence, she had moved with their children across the Mississippi River to Commerce, Illinois. “I found my family,” he later wrote, “living in a small unfinished log cabin, situated on a low wet lot, so swampy that when the first attempt was made to plow it the oxen mired.” With his customary energy, Young drained and fenced the lot, finished the house (several blocks away from Joseph Smith’s riverside residence), and built an above-ground cellar. One week after Young’s return, Smith directed a revelation to him, promising that “it is no more required at your hand to leave your family as in times past . . . take special care of your family from this time henceforth and forever.” When Young had reached Missouri in 1838, Smith had given him a similar revelatory promise. Knowing the cost of the British mission on Mary Ann and his children, Young perhaps beseeched Smith for this second revelation. For the most part, Young relished the constant movement of missionary service, but he wanted to finally restore some balance between his ecclesiastical responsibilities and private life. He undertook only several shorter missions in the eastern United States over the next three years. “This evening I am with my wife a lone by my fire side for the first time for years,” Young wrote in his journal in January 1842. “We injoin it and feele to prase the Lord.” Young’s domestic tranquility, as usual, proved fleeting.<sup>1</sup>

faith and good works by themselves—cemented an individual’s grip on “glory, and honor, and immortality, and eternal life.” For Mormons, the creation of a godly community of Saints bound together by priesthood ordinances became as important as the individual’s relationship to the divine. Smith envisioned the exaltation of all would-be Saints across time, stretching back to Adam, who would present this unbroken chain of baptized and sealed humanity to Christ. God, along with those human beings exalted in glory, would continue to people worlds without end. Proxy baptism secured the salvation of the Saints’ ancestors, and patriarchal blessings reinforced ties between children and their parents (or other church members if their parents had not joined the church). Smith, though, taught that more rituals were required to ensure that families spent the hereafter with each other. The Mormons needed to seal themselves to each other, beginning with “welding link[s]” between husbands and wives.<sup>15</sup>

The husbands and wives Smith welded together for eternity, however, were often not legally married, at least not to each other. The early history of Mormon polygamy remains shrouded by unreliable, retrospective testimony, usually either from bitter enemies of the church or from staunch defenders of plural marriage’s divine origins. As was logical for a prophet committed to the “restitution of all things,” from the earliest days of his church Smith considered the marriage practices of the Hebrew patriarchs. In Kirtland, Smith engaged in his first well-documented nonmonogamous relationship, with a servant girl named Fanny Alger. Smith’s defenders, and some of his detractors, later described the relationship with Alger as the prophet’s first plural marriage. The relationship angered Smith’s wife Emma; it also produced allegations of adultery from high-ranking associate Oliver Cowdery, who termed it a “dirty, nasty, filthy affair.” By 1836, Alger had exited the relationship; she soon married a non-Mormon. Around the time that Brigham Young and his fellow apostles returned from England in the spring of 1841, Smith was “sealed” to Louisa Beaman, daughter of an old family friend. Joseph Bates Noble, Beaman’s brother-in-law and the officiator at the ceremony, recalled that Beaman disguised herself in a man’s coat and hat to avoid attracting attention.<sup>16</sup>

Whether Smith was motivated by religious obedience or pursued sexual dalliances clothed with divine sanction cannot be fully resolved through historical analysis. In Nauvoo, he gradually and carefully revealed an elaborate theological edifice surrounding plural marriage. In keeping with church teachings on baptism, Smith insisted that only marriages eternally sealed through the church would bind couples in heaven. In a public March 1844 address, Smith did not specifically mention marriage, but he

Mormons' emphasis on restoring "all things," and rumors about Smith's own sexual practices, Young had surely considered whether God sanctioned something other than monogamy.<sup>24</sup>

Within a few months, Young signaled his acceptance of the new doctrine. In early January 1842, Young officiated at Smith's sealing to the latter's widowed sister-in-law Agnes Coolbrith, a wedding that took place in the upper room of a red brick store owned by Smith. Young cryptically recorded the event in his diary using a Masonic cipher: "J. Smith w[edded] a[nd] s[ealed] Agness." The next month, Young officiated at a second marriage ceremony, the prophet's sealing to Mary Elizabeth Rollins, who was already married to non-Mormon Adam Lightner. Many decades later, Mary Rollins related that Smith informed her that God commanded him back in 1834 "to take me for a wife." Since that seemed impossible, "he got afraid, the angel came to him three times the last time with a drawn sword and threatened his life." Not willing to trust the prophet's word, she needed divine confirmation for herself. "The angel told him," she recounted, "I should have a witness, and an Angel came to me, it went through me like lightning." When Young sealed her to Smith "for time & all eternity," it had little visible impact on her life, for she continued to live with Adam Lightner. By performing two of Smith's marriages, Young had made it clear that he accepted the principle of plural marriage. Polygamy, however, was not meant to be only for the prophet, and Young would soon have to take further steps of obedience.<sup>25</sup>

At some point in early 1842, Smith told him to "go & get another wife." Young recalled that the instruction came in the form of a "command," not a choice. Still, he hesitated. "I felt as if the grave was better for me," he later explained. After discussing the matter with Smith, though, the apostle quickly moved from apprehension to exhilaration. "I was filled with the Holy Ghost," he recalled, "that my wife and Brother Kimball's wife would upbraid me for lightness in those days. I could jump up and hollow [holler], my blood clear as India Rum." Young was "ready to go ahead." Like many others, he followed where his prophet led. No one would marry more women in Nauvoo than Brigham Young. The exact dates of several early polygamous sealings are uncertain, but Young was one of the first men besides Smith to attempt to live out the principle of plural marriage.<sup>26</sup>

Young first proposed to seventeen-year-old Martha Brotherton, a winsome young woman from England who had recently arrived in Illinois with her parents and siblings. Young knew Brotherton from his time in Manchester, where he spent the night at her family's home on two occasions. Young baptized Martha's sister Elizabeth in September 1840, and

the church. She remained in the United States with her parents, suffered an unfortunate marriage to an alcoholic with the surname Purnell, and died in 1864 in Quincy, Illinois, just sixty miles from Nauvoo. Her sister Elizabeth remained faithful to the church and became Parley Pratt's first plural wife in an 1843 ceremony at Young's house.<sup>32</sup>

Undeterred by Brotherton's rejection and the unfolding scandal, on June 14 Young married twenty-year-old Lucy Ann Decker. Smith officiated at the ceremony. At the time she became Young's first plural wife, Lucy Ann Decker was already the wife of William Seeley, whom she had married at around the age of fourteen. Young family lore identifies Seeley as an alcoholic who had abandoned his family, but he was at least still in Nauvoo. Young's account book reveals several transactions with William Seeley in July 1842, during which he paid him a total of \$19. Several decades later, Lucy recalled that Joseph Smith had performed the ceremony, with Willard Richards present as the only witness. Presumably her father, Isaac Decker, was aware of the ceremony. Smith married into families with which he had close friendships, and the Young family had known Isaac Decker for many years. Brigham's marriage to Lucy thus strengthened a preexisting bond between the two families. William Seeley probably did not know of or agree to the marriage, unless Young's payments to him represent an attempt to mollify a disgruntled husband. Lucy did not cohabit with Young after the sealing; it is unclear whether she lived with Seeley or with her parents.<sup>33</sup>

It is also uncertain when Mary Ann Young learned of her husband's entrance into plural marriage. Early plural marriages—such as many of Joseph Smith's as well as Heber Kimball's first polygamous sealing—often took place without the consent of first wives. While probably not fully aware of the implications of Smith's emerging theology, when she learned about celestial marriage Mary Ann likely reacted with a combination of displeasure and stoic acceptance. "To say she did not suffer," wrote Charlotte Cobb Godbe in a eulogy of Mary Ann, "when the tenderest chords of her woman's heart were touched, is to say that she was not sensitive, and that no one could say who knew her." Regardless of her initial reaction, Mary Ann quickly signaled her acceptance of the doctrine. Since Smith typically only sealed couples if both parties accepted plural marriage, his May 1843 sealing of Mary Ann to Brigham provides evidence of her acceptance or at least toleration of the practice. On the same date, she served as proxy for Brigham's eternal sealing to his deceased first wife Miriam Works. Mary Ann then further indicated her support in the autumn of 1843 by attending two of Brigham's subsequent sealings.<sup>34</sup>

Young frequently discussed his embrace of polygamy as the simple ac-

tions, the Mormons still believed in an imminent tribulation preceding Christ's millennium. In that light, church members needed to gather to Zion posthaste. "We must build a house," Young exhorted, encapsulating his church's teachings, "& get an endowment & preach the gospel, warn the people, gather the Saints, build up Zion & finish our work & be prepared for the coming of Christ." Young warned that those who ignored the call to gather might taste a "Bitter Cup," and he entreated the Saints to give "all your gold silver & precious things." Heber Kimball allowed that Young "has put the flail on rather heavy." Young, however, explained that his harsh words flowed out of his own devotion to the church. "This work is all," he insisted. "It is my all. If this work does not live God knows I dont want to live." Young's commitment remained steadfast.<sup>47</sup>

That resolute devotion prompted Young to marry additional wives. When Young departed Boston in late September 1843, forty-year-old Augusta Adams Cobb joined his party. Married to the prosperous Henry Cobb, Augusta and Henry's sister Elizabeth had both joined the church in 1832, baptized by the prophet's brother Samuel. Henry rejected the missionaries' message and never joined the church. When Augusta departed Boston with Brigham Young eleven years later, she left behind Henry and most of her children, taking with her only her daughter Charlotte and an infant son. In early October, Young recorded that Augusta's "Babe Died of the consumpsion" in Cincinnati. Augusta "had hir babe put in a tin coffin tooke it with us." A few weeks later, the Nauvoo sexton made an official record of the consumptive death of five-month-old "Brigham Y. Cobb." The choice of names suggests that Young had made a strong impression on Augusta during his northeastern missionary trips.<sup>48</sup>

In all likelihood, that summer Young had taught Augusta the doctrine of plural marriage, prompting her to travel to Nauvoo with the intention of marrying her son's namesake. The principle of celestial marriage gave Augusta a strong theological motivation to exchange a union destined to cease with the grave for one that would secure her future glory and persist for eternity. Brigham and Augusta's marriage, moreover, was born of mutual faith and attraction. She wrote of a "love" that had sprung up rapidly. "Sister Cobb," Young asserted in 1847, "was given me by Revelation but I never did anything till long after she was given until I got the ceremonies performed and all made right." Young's comment makes clear that the relationship included sexual relations after their sealing.<sup>49</sup>

Mary Ann gave her visible assent to Brigham's marriage to Augusta. Perhaps because she agreed to do so, she gained a place in the Anointed Quorum. On November 1, recorded Brigham in his diary, Mary Ann was "admitted into the hiest orderer Preasthood." Freemasons formed lodges