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Linda King Newell

Emma Hale Smith and the Polygamy Question

Emma Hale Smith sat in the audience on April 6, 1860, and heard her son speak for the first time to a group of Latter Day Saints who had banded together in the tiny town of Amboy, Illinois, as part of a new reorganization. Before the day ended Joseph III was ordained president and prophet of that church. In this first speech the new leader faced the problem which had separated most of the members from the larger body of Mormons who had followed Brigham Young to the Rocky Mountains: the practice of plural marriage. "There is but one principle taught by the leaders of any faction of this people that I hold in utter abhorrence," he stated.

That is a principle taught by Brigham Young and those believing in him. I have been told that my father taught such doctrines. I have never believed it and never can believe it. If such things were done, then I believe they never were done by Divine Authority. I believe my father was a good man, and a good man never could have promulgated such doctrines.¹

Ten months later Joseph received a long and thoughtful letter from William McLellin, who had been a member of the Quorum of the Twelve in the Kirtland era, but who had long since become disaffected. He warned the young prophet that the stand he had taken was a dangerous one. Stating that polygamy was not of God was one thing, but believing that Joseph Smith, Jr., had not taught and practiced the doctrine was another. McLellin pleaded with young Joseph to take another course:

I do not wish to say things to You of your Father, but Joseph, if You will only go to your own dear mother, she can tell You that he believed in Polygamy and practiced it long before his violent death! That he delivered a revelation sanctioning, regulating, and establishing it—and that he finally burned the awful document before her eyes. Elder Marks can tell you that (before its conflagration) it was read in the High Council of Nauvoo, over which he presided. Your Mother told me these items when I was in Nauvoo. I am not dealing in fictions, nor in ill founded slanders—and would now feel glad if these things had never been enacted. But Sir, I have felt it a solemn duty to lay these items before You. And Sir, Your Mother (if she feels disposed) can give You a rather black catalogue reaching back as far as the date of your birth. Then, Sir, if you are honest before the Heavens yourself, never, no never proclaim again publicly or privately that "I believe my father was a good man," whilst the means to know his real character lies so near You—even in the bosom & memory of your Mother!²

Thus from the beginning of his ministry Joseph was urged to ask his mother the truth about his father's polygamous activities.

It would soon become clear to other leaders in the Reorganization that, while Joseph III had an abhorrence for polygamy, he had never discussed it in any depth with his mother and she had never divulged to her children their father's role in its development and practice. Emma told Edmund C. Briggs in 1956,

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*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 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.*³

Although Emma had struggled with the acceptance of the practice herself, her final position seems to have been that although her husband had been a prophet, the revelation on plural marriage had not come from God. While the evidence indicates that her conviction came from intimate knowledge of events in both Kirtland and Nauvoo, Joseph III's position stemmed from ignorance of those events. This paper will trace some of that history and Emma Smith's role in, and reaction to, it.⁴

Although the Utah church has maintained that the revelation on plural marriage came as early as 1831, some RLDS scholars have rejected that premise.⁵ William McLellin in 1875 told a newspaper reporter of Joseph's involvement with Fanny Alger. McLellin informed the reporter

*of the spot where the first well authenticated case of polygamy took place, in which Joseph Smith was "sealed" to the hired girl. The "sealing" took place in a barn on the hay mow, and was witnessed by Mrs. Smith through a crack in the door! . . . Long afterwards when he visited Mrs. Emma Smith . . . she then and there declared on her honor that it was a fact—"saw it with her own eyes."*⁶

In a second letter to Joseph III in 1872 McLellin detailed the story further. He prefaced his remarks with a reminder:

*You will probably remember that I visited your Mother and family in 1847, and held a lengthy conversation with her. . . . I did not ask her to tell, but I told her some stories I heard. And she told me whether I was properly informed. . . . I told her I heard one night she missed Joseph and Fanny Alger. She went to the barn and saw him and Fanny in the barn together alone. She looked through a crack and saw the transaction!!! She told me this story too was verily true.*⁷

While the term "sealed" was synonymous with marriage for eternity in Mormon circles, Oliver Cowdery chose to give the incident with Fanny Alger another name. In two holograph letters written from Missouri and now housed in the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, Oliver Cowdery discussed an argument between himself and Joseph. To Joseph he wrote:

*I learn from Kirtland, by the last letters, that you have publicly said, that when you were here I confessed to you that I had willfully lied about you—this compels me to ask you to correct that statement, and give me an explanation—until which you and myself are two [separated].*⁸

Cowdery penned a letter to his brother Warren that same day:

*When [Joseph] was here we had some conversation in which in every instance I did not fail to affirm that what I had said was strictly true. A dirty, nasty, filthy affair of his and Fanny Alger's was talked over in which I strictly declared that I had never deviated from the truth in the matter.*⁹

Two letters from Emma to Joseph during this same period may reflect her anxiety over these disturbing circumstances and the gossip which linked Joseph's name to other women in Kirtland. While Joseph was in hiding in the spring of 1837, she closed a letter to him with "I pray that God will keep you in *purity* and safety till we all meet again." In another she wrote, "I hope that we shall be so humble and *pure* before God that he will set us at liberty to be our own masters."¹⁰ (Emphasis added.)

If Joseph taught anyone the *full* theological backdrop for plural marriage before the Nauvoo period of the church, no record of it is extant. Although Joseph began again to take plural wives early in that period, it would be some time before Emma knew it, and even later before he would fully explain the doctrine to her, but then only after she had confirmed her own suspicions and confronted him. Emma's friends would learn from their husbands that Joseph had a revelation outlining a new order of marriage, but Emma would come to it piecemeal over a number of years through circumstances which hurt and shocked her.

In Nauvoo the marriage of Joseph Smith to twenty-six-year-old Louisa Beaman took place on the evening of April 5, 1841, under an elm tree on the banks of the Mississippi River. The bride was disguised in men's clothing; her sister's husband, Joseph Noble, performed the ceremony. Noble said Joseph had confided "the principle of celestial marriage" to him the previous fall. LDS accounts of this marriage usually refer to it as the first plural marriage performed in Nauvoo, but evidence links Joseph to at least three earlier brides in the city: Presindia Huntington Buell, Nancy Marinda Johnson Hyde, and Clarissa Hancock.¹¹

Rumors linking Joseph with other women were already circulating in Nauvoo by the time the Nauvoo Female Relief Society was organized on March 17, 1842. In the second meeting of the organization Emma reported that a young woman, Clarissa Marvel, "was accused of telling scandalous falsehoods on the character of Prest. Joseph Smith without the least provocation," and asked that "they would in wisdom, adopt some plan to bring her to repentance."¹² Agnes Coolbrith Smith, the widow of Joseph's brother Don Carlos Smith came to the accused woman's defense, apparently unaware that the gossip linked her own name to Joseph's. "Clarissa Marvel lived with me nearly a year and I saw nothing amiss of her," she reported.

The women agreed that someone should investigate the charges but no one was eager for the assignment. One woman refused "on the grounds that she was unacquainted with the circumstances." Emma said, "We intend to look into the morals of each other, and watch over each other." She asked that the women keep secret within the membership "all proceedings that regard difficulties. . . . None can object to telling the good, but withhold the evil."¹³

Emma's request was impossible for any group, and apparently the word spread that the Relief Society was investigating Clarissa Marvel; the next meeting opened with the upper room of Joseph's red brick store "full to overflowing." The prophet was present and addressed the women. He spoke of the society's purposes. He commended the women's desire to "purge out iniquity" but cautioned them that "sometimes your zeal is not according to knowledge." Joseph left the meeting after he had spoken.¹⁴

The case of Clarissa Marvel was still pending and two women were assigned to investigate the charges; one of them objected. "We are going to learn new things," Emma encouraged them. "Our way is straight, we want none in this society but those who [can] and [will] walk straight." Three days later Clarissa Marvel put an "X" by her name on the following statement:

Nauvoo, April 2th, 1842

*This is to certify that I never have at any time or place, seen or heard any thing improper or unvirtuous in the conduct or conversation of either President Smith or Mrs. Agnes Smith. I also certify that I never have reported any thing derogatory to the characters of either of them.*¹⁵

Emma did not know that her sister-in-law Agnes had, in fact, become a plural wife of Joseph. As she put this particular issue to rest—at least in the Relief Society—she lamented that the "disagreeable business of searching out those who were iniquitous seemed to fall on her."¹⁶

One item of business remained after Emma had settled her concern about Clarissa Marvel. She had read to the women a document which Joseph and the church leaders had prepared for the Relief Society. The article informed the sisters that some men were approaching women to "deceive and debauch the innocent" saying they had authority from Joseph or other church leaders.

We have been informed that some unprincipled men, whose names we will not mention at present, have been guilty of such crimes— We do not mention their names, not knowing but what there may be some among you who are not sufficiently skill'd in Masonry as to keep a secret. . . . Let this epistle be had as a private matter in your Society, and then we shall learn whether you are good masons. We are your humble servants in the Bonds of the New & Everlasting Covenant.

Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Heber C. Kimball, Willard Richards, Vinson Knight, and Brigham Young signed their names.¹⁷

One of the “unprincipled men” of whom Joseph and the others wrote was John C. Bennett who had come to Nauvoo in 1840. By the spring of 1842 his political power in Nauvoo was almost as great as Joseph’s. His positions included major-general of the Nauvoo Legion, president of the Agriculture and Manufacturing Association, chancellor of the University of Nauvoo, mayor of the city, and *de facto* counselor to Joseph, as Sidney Rigdon was too ill to function.

Bennett’s fall from grace would be even more rapid than his rise. He most likely learned of plural marriage from Joseph but adapted the practice to his own standards.¹⁸ Bennett approached women with the logic of this argument: where there was no accuser, there was no sin; therefore, if the liaison were kept secret, it would not be sinful. Were a pregnancy to result, Bennett, as a medical doctor, could perform an abortion. When he encountered initial refusals, Bennett stated he came with Joseph’s approval. John C. Bennett taught his method to his close friends and a general pattern emerged. When one man was unsuccessful in seducing a woman, another man began to try. They called their system of seduction “spiritual wifery.”¹⁹

Observers and writers have speculated at Joseph’s motivation for initiating a practice that violated local laws and went against the prevailing Christian teachings of his time. Some postulated that he was either a brilliant imposter or he suffered from some mental disorder. Many concluded that the practice of polygamy stemmed from an insatiable sexual drive of Joseph’s, fueled by a quest for power. In an effort to defuse that charge somewhat, others have asked if Emma were frigid, implying that if Joseph had a problem it must be Emma’s fault. Intimate details of their married life will remain unknown, for Emma and Joseph were no more likely to reveal their personal intimacies than anyone else; but some aspects of their marital relationship may be worth considering. In 1841 she and Joseph had been married fourteen years and she had given birth to seven children. She would give birth to two more babies in the next three years. From Joseph’s letters to her, his journal entries, Lucy Mack Smith’s history, and other sources, one can conclude that Emma experienced considerable discomfort during her pregnancies which probably ranged from fainting spells to severe morning sickness. These symptoms sometimes lasted throughout her pregnancy, instead of diminishing as other women’s illnesses often do. But, as her mother-in-law indicated, Emma was not one to pamper herself or complain. At times she pushed herself to exhaustion to fulfill her responsibilities as a wife and mother. If Joseph found her unattractive or less desirable in the advanced stages of pregnancy, his own writings give no hint of it. He frequently referred to her as “my affectionate Emma,” an endearment that he used almost exclusively with her, even though he often stated his love for many of his friends and supporters.

The majority of faithful Mormons would give little consideration to Joseph’s own physical drives or to other charges. With “an almost compulsive emphasis on unquestioning loyalty to Priesthood authority as *the* cardinal virtue,” they would maintain simply that God commanded plural marriage through the Prophet Joseph Smith. Joseph taught the principle as a commandment of God, and the evidence indicates that he believed it was a commandment.²⁰

Over a period of time, the need to warn others of unauthorized practices such as Bennett’s, coupled with the demand for secrecy for their own teachings, led Joseph and the Twelve to develop a system of evasion. By employing what might be termed code words, the practitioners of the “new and everlasting covenant of marriage,” as taught by Joseph, felt they could publicly deny what they privately lived, and do it with a clear conscience. George A. Smith in an 1869 letter to Joseph III identified for his cousin the method they used.

*Any one who will read carefully the denials, as they are termed, will see clearly that they denounce adultery, fornication, brutal lust and the teaching of plurality of wives by those who were not commanded to do so; shewing clearly that it was understood that such commandment would be given to others.*²¹

An 1886 article in the *Deseret News* also reflected on this topic, giving a detailed account of specific code words as well as the rationale for their use.

When assailed by their enemies and accused of practicing things which were really not countenanced in the Church, they were justified in denying those imputations at the

same time avoiding the avowal of such doctrines as were not yet intended for the world. This course which they have taken when necessary, by commandment, is all the ground which their accusers have for charging them with falsehood.

The article detailed the special code words:

Polygamy, in the ordinary and Asiatic sense of the term, never was and is not now a tenet of the Latter-day Saints. That which Joseph and Hyrum denounced . . . was altogether different to the order of **celestial marriage** including a **plurality of wives**. . . . Joseph and Hyrum were consistent in their action against the **false doctrines of polygamy and spiritual wifelyism**, instigated by the devil and advocated by men who did not comprehend sound doctrine nor the purity of the **celestial marriage** which God revealed for the holiest of purposes.²² (Emphasis added.)

According to the writer, then, the Mormons denied polygamy “in the Asiatic sense,” indicating perhaps that their form was considered a spiritual requirement rather than a cultural practice. They also denied spiritual wifery and other “false doctrines” while they practiced celestial marriage and a plurality of wives. Included in the balance of the article were other acceptable terms synonymous with plurality of wives: “the true and divine order,” “eternal marriage,” and “the Holy order of celestial marriage.” Phrases such as “a man’s privileges,” “new and everlasting covenant,” and “we may have different views of things,” signified to informed listeners that the speakers were denouncing the traditional sins of the world for the benefit of non-Mormons, newspaper reporters, and the uninitiated, but they were supporting a system of plural marriage under the very noses of the suspicious. Perhaps the most confusing of the code words was “spiritual wifery.” Joseph and the Twelve used the term and a few women who were his plural wives later referred to themselves as “spiritual wives,” but when Bennett began to engage in widescale promiscuity while claiming authorization from Joseph, the “spiritual wife” term rapidly fell into disrepute. The leaders of the church began to use it as a means of attacking Bennett while they practiced a tightly regulated system of plurality of wives. Clearly, Emma was not aware of these “code words” when she spoke against iniquity in the Relief Society meetings, and some of the women were confused.

During this time the Relief Society tried to deal with other needs. Joseph attended the April 28 meeting and gave the women some advice: “Let this Society teach how to act towards husbands,” namely to

treat them with mildness and affection. When a man is borne down with troubles—when he is perplexed, if he can meet a smile, not an argument—if he can meet with mildness it will calm down his soul and sooth his feelings. When the mind is going to despair it needs a solace.

If Joseph’s message was for Emma, events of the following twenty-four hours made her forget about mildness and long suffering. Someone apparently told her about Joseph’s involvement in plural marriage. The day after the Relief Society meeting, the prophet’s history reads:

A conspiracy against the peace of my family was made manifest, and it gave me some trouble to counteract the design of certain base individuals, and restore peace. The Lord makes manifest to me many things, which it is not wisdom for me to make public, until others can witness the proof of them.²³

The confrontation between Joseph and Emma was serious. It may have been the reason the Relief Society did not meet the following week. Two weeks after the incident Joseph was present, but the minutes do not mention Emma’s name. Joseph did not elaborate on the process by which he reestablished his peace with Emma, but a clue lies in the recollections of a fifty-four-year-old woman, Vienna Jacques, whose name had been linked with Joseph’s by gossip in Kirtland. Many years later Joseph Smith III interviewed her when she was over ninety. She recalled “the subject of spiritual wifery” was discussed at a Relief Society meeting when Emma was not present. Miss Jacques claimed she did not believe it was being taught as doctrine and said she went to Emma against the protests of some of the women in the group:

She told me she had asked her husband, the prophet, about the stories which were being circulated among the women concerning such a doctrine being taught, and that

he had told her to tell the sisters of the society that if any man, no matter who he was, undertook to talk such stuff to them in their houses, just to order him out at once, and if he did not go immediately, to take the tongs or the broom and drive him out, for the whole idea was absolutely false and the doctrine an evil and unlawful thing.²⁴

It appears from Emma's remarks at the next Relief Society meeting she attended that Joseph had deflected her anger by explaining that he had neither sanctioned nor participated in Bennett's spiritual wife doctrine. Eliza Snow's minutes state,

Mrs. Prest. said this day was an evil day—that there is as much evil in this as in any other place—said she would that this society were pure before God—that she was afraid that under existing circumstances the sisters were not careful enough to expose iniquity—the time had been when charity had covered a multitude of sins—but now it is necessary that sin should be exposed. . . . [Emma said] that heinous sins were among us—that much of this iniquity was practiced by some in authority, pretending to be sanctioned by Pres. [Joseph] Smith. Mrs. Prest. continued by exhorting all who had erred to repent and forsake their sins—said that Satan's forces were against this church—that every Saint should be at the post.²⁵

Between December of 1841 and March of 1843 Joseph married at least twelve women: Presindia Huntington (December 11, 1841), Marinda Johnson (May 1843), Louisa Beaman (April 5, 1841), Zina Huntington (October 27, 1841), Mary Rollins (February 1842), Patty Sessions (March 9, 1841), Eliza Snow (June 29, 1842), Sarah Whitney (June 27, 1842), Ruth Vose (February 1843), Lucy Walker (May 1, 1843), Eliza Partridge (March 8, 1843), and her sister, Emily Partridge (March 4, 1843).²⁶

Once Emma knew that Joseph was taking plural wives she steadfastly refused to accept the practice as doctrine. Her refusal was no doubt a source of consternation for Joseph, particularly since some of Emma's friends, who were married to other church leaders, not only accepted the new doctrine, but had given permission for their husbands to marry other women. In the two months from March to May of 1843 Joseph appears to have talked with Emma about plural marriage during their rides together around the city and through the countryside. Apparently he also used these occasions to teach Emma the necessity of the endowment and sealing. She had accepted other theological practices including her own baptism by immersion, her patriarchal blessing, and baptism for her kindred dead by proxy. There is no indication that she ever opposed him on any doctrine but plural marriage.

The evidence indicates that Joseph was able to convince her that "the new and everlasting covenant" was necessary for salvation and his conversations no doubt included a new theological awareness—that marriage could continue past death. One of the first enunciations of this concept came in 1840. Parley P. Pratt said Joseph talked with him while they were in Philadelphia together early that year. Joseph spoke to him about the "idea of eternal family organization, and the eternal union of the sexes." Until this time Pratt believed close affections to be "something from which the heart must be entirely weaned," before one was prepared for heaven.

It was from [Joseph] that I learned that the wife of my bosom might be secured to me for time and all eternity; . . . while the result of our endless union would be an offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, or the sands of the sea shore.

Pratt added another significant remark:

Joseph Smith had barely touched a single key; had merely lifted a corner of the veil and given me a single glance into eternity.²⁷

Even Joseph's early personal letters to Emma refer to a separation at death. In October 1832, when he wrote to her from New York, Joseph signed his letter, "Your affectionate Husband until Death." Two years later, on May 18, 1834, he addressed her from Richmond, closing with "O may the blessings of God rest upon you is the prayer of your Husband until death." Then from Philadelphia in January of 1840 he ended his letter to Emma "Yours in the bonds of love, Your Husband until death." Not until he wrote to Emma from a hiding place within the city of Nauvoo in 1842 did his letters to her hint of marriage for eternity. He said, "Yours in haste, your affectionate husband until death, through all eternity,

and for evermore.”²⁸ Emma seems to have become convinced that celestial or plural marriage and eternal marriage were indeed inseparably linked. In May 1843 she finally consented to give Joseph other wives if she could choose them herself. Joseph agreed and Emma chose two sisters then living in her house, Emily and Eliza Partridge.²⁹

Joseph had finally converted Emma to plural marriage, but not so fully that he dared tell her that he had already married the Partridge sisters two months earlier. Emily Partridge said that “to save family trouble Brother Joseph thought it best to have another ceremony performed.” She further added that Emma “had her feelings, and so we thought there was no use in saying anything about it so long as she had chosen us herself.” Emily also remembered that Emma “helped explain the principles to us.”³⁰

On May 23, 1843, Emma stood in her own home and watched Judge James Adams, a high priest in the church visiting from Springfield, marry Joseph for the second time to Emily and Eliza Partridge. About this marriage ceremony, Emily wrote, “We did not make much trouble, but were sealed in her presence” and reiterated her point clearly: “Emma was present. She gave her free and full consent.”³¹

Although Emma’s capitulation was short-lived, she had made the sacrifice, and she finally received her reward: five days later on May 28, 1843, Emma was sealed to Joseph for “time and all eternity.” On this same day she became the first woman admitted into Joseph Smith’s prayer circle where he later initiated her into the endowment.³²

The atmosphere in the Smith family home was tense during the summer of 1843 as Emma’s regret intensified. July 10 was her thirty-ninth birthday and she and Joseph rode out to their farm. The next day they rode together again. Although there is no record of their conversations on those two occasions, the events of the next day clearly indicate that they discussed plural marriage and Emma voiced her objections. William Clayton’s Nauvoo Diary records that on July 12, at Hyrum’s request, Joseph dictated a revelation “on the order of the priesthood, showing the designs in Moses, Abraham, David and Solomon having many wives & concubines.”³³ In a later statement he gave more details to the diary entry. He said that during a conversation between Hyrum and Joseph, Hyrum told his brother to write the revelation down and he would take it to Emma. “I believe I can convince her of its truth,” he said, “and you will hereafter have peace.”

Joseph replied, “You do not know Emma as well as I do.”

“The doctrine is so plain, I can convince any reasonable man or woman of its truth, purity and heavenly origin,” said Hyrum.

Joseph agreed to write the revelation which he said he had memorized “perfectly from beginning to end.” Clayton acted as scribe while Joseph dictated.³⁴

Hyrum took the document to Emma and reported back to Joseph that he had “never received a more severe talking to” and that Emma was “very bitter and full of resentment and anger.”³⁵ Joseph’s journal entry for the following day was brief: “I was in conversation with Emma most of the day.”³⁶

According to William Clayton, Joseph C. Kingsbury copied the revelation and several church leaders heard it read that same day. Joseph apparently took the original back, for Clayton wrote:

*Two or three days after the revelation was written Joseph related to me and several others 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.³⁷ [Emphasis added.]*

Other accounts involve Joseph more directly in the document’s destruction. According to William McLellin’s 1872 letter to Joseph III, Emma said that after she 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 revelation in and burned it up.

Again in an 1856 interview Emma 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.”³⁸ But Emma’s oldest son pursued the question long after his mother’s death. His diary entry for April 20, 1885, reads: Visited James Whitehead had chat with him. He says he saw the Revelation—about 1 page of foolscap paper. Clayton copied it and it was this copy that Mother burned.”³⁹ Apparently the incident was later talked about in the larger Smith family. 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.⁴⁰

The entire incident raises several questions which remain unanswered. Did Joseph burn the plural marriage revelation or did Emma? When Emma denied burning the revelation, was she denying that she put a paper in the fire at all, or was she saying that she did not believe that the paper which she burned contained an authentic revelation from the Lord?

Periods of calm often followed Emma and Joseph’s stormy sessions. One such time came on January 8, 1844. Joseph and Emma celebrated their seventeenth wedding anniversary with a party in the Mansion House. Music and dancing enlivened the occasion. Five days later Joseph leased the Mansion House to Ebenezer Robinson. The Smiths retained several rooms for their own family and Robinson rented the rest to others. One source states that Joseph gave control of the house to Robinson because Emma had insisted that he turn out all his “spiritual wives” who had been living there.

Other evidence suggests that Emma believed that Joseph had abandoned plural marriage. Several months earlier Joseph had told William Clayton that he would eventually have to tell Emma that he would give up his wives, but that he had no intention of actually doing so.⁴¹ A few plural marriages were contracted by others after the first of the year, but apparently Joseph did not take additional wives after November of 1843. Still there is conflicting evidence about whether he actually intended to abandon the practice, as Emma seemed to believe, or whether he only wanted to let his opponents think he was abandoning it. William Marks, who had never embraced the principle, later recalled a conversation he had with Joseph early in June 1843.

Joseph, however, became convinced before his death that he had done wrong; for about three weeks before his death, I met him one morning in the street, and he said to me, Brother Marks, I have something to communicate to you, we retired to a by-place, and set down together, when he said: “We are a ruined people.” I asked, how so? he said: “This doctrine of polygamy, or Spiritual-wife system, that has been taught and practiced among us, will prove our destruction and overthrow. I have been deceived,” said he, “in reference to its practice; it is wrong; it is a curse to mankind, and we shall have to leave the United States soon, unless it can be put down, and its practice stopped in the church. Now,” said he, “Brother Marks, you have not received this doctrine, and how glad I am. I want you to go into the high council, and I will have charges preferred against all who practice this doctrine, and I want you to try them by the laws of the church, and cut them off, if they will not repent, and cease the practice of this doctrine; and” said he, “I will go into the stand, and preach against it, with all my might, and in this way we may rid the church of this damnable heresy.”⁴²

Since Marks did not remember the exact date of his conversation, there is no way to determine if it came before or after the only issue of the *Nauvoo Expositor* which was published on June 7. Joseph was surely affected by the fevered pitch of his opponents’ campaign to expose him and his “unlawful marital practices.” In six weeks he and Hyrum would flee across the Mississippi River rather than face arrest and sure death.

Contrary to popular LDS belief, Joseph and his brother planned to seek redress in Washington, D.C., rather than ride west to the mountains. They had discussed the latter option as one of several plans, but a letter that he sent back across the river to two of his plural wives, Sarah and Maria Lawrence, confirms his Eastern plan. But even more interesting, it confirms that he had no intention of abandoning plural marriage. The letter reads:

I take opportunity this morning to communicate to you two some of the peepings of my heart; for you know my thoughts for you. . . . I do not know what I shall do, or where I shall go, but if possible I will try to interview with President Tyler. Perhaps California or Austin will be more sympthetic. . . . Speak of this to no one I want you

*two to make arrangements with R. Cahoon for passage at your earliest convenience. I want for you to Tarry in Cincinnati until you hear from me. Keep all things treasured up in your breasts, burn this letter as you read it. I close in hast. Do not despair. Pray for me as I bleed my heart for you.*⁴³

Joseph had also written a letter to Emma that same morning telling her that he hoped “to get to the city of Washington,” and requested her to let him know by evening if she planned to go to Kirtland or Cincinnati.⁴⁴ Instead Joseph and Hyrum crossed back to Nauvoo and gave themselves up the following day. On June 27 the brothers were dead at the hands of a mob.

Emma believed that Joseph had tried to rid himself and the church of plural marriage before his death. She had witnessed him shaking hands with the Partridge sisters and telling them their marriage was dissolved.⁴⁵ Joseph Coolidge, onetime executor of Joseph’s estate, told Joseph F. Smith that Emma “remarked to him that Joseph had abandoned plurality of wives before his death.”⁴⁶

Sometime between Joseph’s death and the adulthood of her sons, Emma began to ignore or deny plural marriage in her own life. When she had received her endowments she had taken upon herself covenants and promises that she swore never to reveal. She may have chosen not only to keep the forms and procedures of celestial marriage secret, but its very existence as well. She finally understood the code words the church leaders had used in Nauvoo to protect themselves and continued to use them throughout the remainder of her life to protect herself and her family. Her denials do not refute “the true order of marriage,” the “new and everlasting covenant,” “celestial marriage,” or any of the other recognized terminology. But once Joseph III had firmly decided that his father had nothing to do with polygamy, his position trapped both himself and his mother. He could not bring himself to confront reasonable evidence that his father founded plural marriage, and Emma, isolated in Nauvoo, and unaware of the continuing debate, did not disclose her knowledge of it to her son.

During the 1870s Joseph III began to feel pressure from within the church to ask his mother about plural marriage, something he admitted he had never done. Zenas H. Gurley, Jr., an apostle in the Reorganization, became increasingly impatient with Joseph over this blind spot in his logic.⁴⁷

William W. Blair who encouraged Joseph III in his pronouncements, had an unsettling conversation with James Whitehead in April 1874. He recorded the conversation in an abbreviated form in his journal. Whitehead told him that

*J[oseph] did te[ach] p[olygamy] and pr[actice] too. That E[mma] knos it too that she put [the] hand—of wives [in] Jos. hand. W[hitehead] says Alex. H. Smith asked him . . . if J[oseph] did P[ractice] and tea[ch] P[olygamy] and he, W[hitehead] told him he did.*⁴⁸

Blair and others confronted both Joseph and Alexander who stated in the *Saints Advocate* that they had been hounded by statements like: “Ask your mother, she knows.” “Why don’t you ask your mother; she dare not deny these things.” “You do not dare to ask your mother!” The brothers explained, “Our thought was that if we had lacked courage to ask her, because we feared the answers she might give, we would put aside that fear; and, whatever the worst might be, we would hear it.” Early in 1879 Joseph and Alexander met with other leaders of their church in the *Herald* offices to discuss the issue they had so long avoided. They “decided to present to her a few prominent questions, which were penned and agreed upon.”⁴⁹

In February 1879 Alexander and Joseph Smith traveled to a cold, snowy Nauvoo to interview their mother. Lewis Bidamon was present in the sitting room of the Riverside Mansion for the interview. Although Joseph’s notes on the interview are extant, the source used here is the final published account which appeared six months after Emma’s death.⁵⁰

Joseph eased into the conversation with the more benign questions, asking about Emma’s marriage to his father—to which she responded with details of her decision to marry Joseph. She discussed with them the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon, and her role as scribe, and answered questions about the deaths of her first three children. In all, Emma’s sons asked twenty-six questions; Lewis asked another one. Of those, only six were about plural marriage. Emma’s conflicting loyalties were to the truth and to her sons.

“What about the revelation on polygamy? Did Joseph Smith have anything like it? What of spiritual wifery?”

“There was no revelation on either polygamy or spiritual wives.” Emma’s reply denounced the old John Bennett term. The question had not been about “patriarchal marriage” or the “new and everlasting covenant” or any of the other code words for the system instigated by early church leaders. Her answer continued,

There were some rumors of something of the sort which I asked my husband. He assured me that all there was of it was, that, in a chat about plural wives, he had said, “Well such a system might possibly be, if everybody was agreed to it, and would behave as they should; but they would not; and, besides, it was contrary to the will of heaven.”

It is not inconceivable that in the early process of establishing the doctrine of plural marriage, Joseph tried to calm Emma’s fears and deflect her suspicions in such a conversation. Her son’s account suggests that they did not ask her if that were the only conversation she ever had with her husband on the subject, and the notes of the interview indicate that she did not volunteer any additional information. She continued,

“No such thing as polygamy, or spiritual wifery, was taught, publicly or privately, before my husband’s death, that I have now, or ever had any knowledge of.”

“Did he not have other wives than yourself?”

“He had no other wife but me; nor did he to my knowledge ever have.”

The first part of that answer is in keeping with Emma’s view, if she believed Joseph when he told her he would “forsake all for her.” It is also true in a legal sense, for no plural marriage could be seen as legal in the eyes of the law. Even the last half of that answer could be considered true, if looked at in a strict legal form.

Joseph pressed her more closely, “Did he not hold marital relations with women other than yourself?”

“He did not have improper relations with any woman that ever came to my knowledge.” Years earlier Emma had established that she did not pretend to have knowledge of anything that she did not witness herself.⁵¹ The choice of “improper relations” rather than “marital relations” also indicates that she may have been side-stepping her sons’ questions very adeptly.

“Was there nothing about spiritual wives that you recollect?” they asked.

At one time my husband came to me and asked me if I had heard certain rumors about spiritual marriage, or anything of the kind; and assured me that if I had, that they were without foundation; that there was no such doctrine, and never should be with his knowledge, or consent. I know that he had no other wife or wives than myself, in any sense, either spiritual or otherwise.”

Joseph III’s belief that establishing his father’s innocence would clear his own name and that of his mother, and therefore give legitimacy to the RLDS church,⁵² caused him to disregard testimony that contradicted his own views. William McLellin had warned him not to take that course only months after he was elevated to president and prophet of the Reorganization. As early as 1861 William McLellin had urged him to ask his mother because she would tell him the truth. Yet he refused to ask her until eighteen years later. By this time he had made such an issue of his own denials that Emma could not disclose all she knew without damaging her son’s credibility within the Reorganization.

A month after the interview with her sons, the son of Thomas B. Marsh, an early church apostle, visited Emma. When he asked her if Joseph had been a polygamist, Emma “broke down and wept, and excused herself from answering directly, assigning as a reason . . . that her son was the leader of the Re-organized Church.” Marsh interpreted Emma’s response as “acknowledgement to him that her husband was a polygamist.”⁵³

Joseph and Alexander did not publish “Emma Smith’s Last Testimony” until six months after her death, and only after pressure to do so from outside as well as inside the church. Eliza R. Snow, a plural wife of Joseph Smith, Jr., responded publicly through the *Woman’s Exponent*. She placed the responsibility for the content of the interview on Joseph and Alexander.

*I once dearly loved "Sister Emma," and now, for me to believe that she, a once honored woman, should have sunk so low, even in her own estimation, as to deny what she knew to be true, seems a palpable absurdity. . . . Her son has fastened a stigma on the character of his mother, that can never be erased.*⁵⁴

Ultimately, Joseph III's quest to clear his father's (and thus the family's) name overshadowed the real strength of the RLDS position which he had enunciated in his first speech to the Reorganization on April 6, 1860: "If such things were done they never were done by Divine Authority."⁵⁵

ENDNOTES

1. *Amboy Times*, Illinois, April 12, 1860.
2. William E. McLellin to Joseph Smith III, January 10, 1861, RLDS Library and Archives, Independence, Missouri.
3. Edmund C. Briggs, "A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856," *Journal of History* 9 (October 1916):445-62.
4. For the purpose of this study I have tried, for the most part, to use either public accounts or documents that are available either in the RLDS Library and Archives or other repositories outside of Utah. These include microfilm copies of the Joseph Smith, Jr., Diaries and "A Record of the Organization and Proceedings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo" (hereafter cited as Relief Society Minutes) which were included in a 1974 exchange of authenticated documents between the RLDS and LDS churches. Only when I have felt it necessary to broaden the context for a clearer understanding of the issue have I used sources that are available exclusively in the various Utah archives.
5. Richard Howard, "The Changing RLDS Response to Mormon Polygamy: A Preliminary Analysis," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 3 (1983):19.
6. *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 6, 1875. This newspaper was independent of church control in Utah and was critical of the Mormons there.
7. William McLellin to Joseph Smith III, (no day) July 1872, RLDS Library and Archives.
8. Oliver Cowdery to Joseph Smith, January 21, 1838, Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California, Hereafter Huntington Library.
9. Oliver Cowdery to Warren Cowdery, January 21, 1838, Huntington Library.
10. Emma Smith to Joseph Smith, April 25, 1837, and May 3, 1837, Joseph Smith Letterbook, Joseph Smith Collection, LDS Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah, microfilm copy in RLDS Library and Archives.
11. Sources for the Louisa Beaman marriage are numerous. They include: Joseph B. Noble, address, June 11, 1883, at LDS stake conference in Centerville, Utah; "Journal History," LDS archives; Joseph Bates Noble, deposition, United States Circuit Court (8th Circuit) Testimony, 1892, carbon copy of court transcript, LDS Archives. Original is in Independence, Missouri. Hereafter cited as U.S. Circuit Court Testimony. Andrew Jensen, *The Historical Record: A Monthly Periodical Devoted Exclusively to Historical, Biographical, Chronological, and Statistical Matters*, 9 vols. (Salt Lake City: published by the author: 1887) 6:232. Hereafter cited as Historical Record. Journal of Franklin D. Richards, January 1869 (loose sheet), Franklin D. Richards papers, LDS Archives; Journal of Wilford Woodruff, January 22, 1969, microfilm of original, LDS Archives; Joseph F. Smith, "40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage," Book 1, p.38. Also see Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 2nd Edition (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 1975), 465, for composite accounts of the Noble-Beaman story.
12. "Relief Society Minutes, 2nd meeting," March 24, 1842, microfilm of original in LDS Archives and RLDS Library and Archives.
13. *Ibid.*, 3rd meeting, March 30, 1842.
14. *Ibid.*, 4th meeting, April 14, 1842.
15. For Clarissa Marvel's statement, see Relief Society Minutes, 18th meeting, September 28, 1842.
16. For Emma's statement see 6th meeting, April 28, 1842. Agnes Coolbrith Smith, widow of Don Carlos Smith, is not included on any lists of Joseph's wives. Fawn Brodie in *No Man Knows My History*, 469, lists a Mrs. A****S**** and gives John C. Bennett's *History of the Saints; or an Expose of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston, 1842), as her source. That the woman in question is a Mrs., and the number of asterisks in the name matches "Agnes Smith" suggest that it is she to whom he alluded. Willard Richards and Joseph dined with Agnes Smith January 17, 1842, see Joseph Smith, Jr., Diary, Joseph Smith Collection, LDS Archives, microfilm RLDS Library and Archives, see also D. Michael Quinn, "Latter-day Saint Prayer Circles" *Brigham Young University Studies* 19, no. 1 (Fall 1978):79-105.
17. This article does not appear in the March 30 Relief Society minutes, but is inserted after the last meeting of 1842 on September 28. The secretary was absent "at the time of its reading else it would have appear'd in its proper place."
18. Joseph presented an elaborate theological framework when he taught the principle of plural marriage to others. The basis for those teachings can be found in the LDS Doctrine and Covenants, Section 132. Evidence that William Marks and others heard this read as a revelation appears elsewhere in this paper. There is no evidence that Bennett was hampered by either theological or ethical considerations.
19. *Times and Seasons* 3 (August 1, 1842): 868-77. Affidavits concerning John C. Bennett, Chauncy Higbee, and Darwin Chase's proposals to women were, according to the *History of the Church*, published in the *Nauvoo Neighbor*. See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 6:407. Hereafter cited as *History of the Church*. Originals of the above affidavits are in the LDS Archives.

20. Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality, Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 142-55. Hereafter cited as *Religion and Sexuality*. For evidence that Joseph believed and taught that plural marriage was a commandment of God see LDS Doctrine and Covenants, 132. Also see Danel Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith" (M.A. thesis, Purdue University, 1976), hereafter cited as "Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith," available at the RLDS Library and Archives. Bachman has done a remarkable job of pulling together the various accounts of Joseph's teaching the practice to various individuals. Traditionally the RLDS position has been to reject documents in the LDS Archives as being suspect in nature. In light of the additional evidence from the RLDS Library and Archives, that position must be reconsidered.

21. George A. Smith to Joseph Smith III, October 9, 1869, RLDS Library and Archives.

22. *Deseret News*, May 20, 1866, reprinted in *Exponent* 15 (1886):10. The probable author was Joseph F. Smith.

23. Relief Society Minutes, 6th meeting, April 28, 1842.

24. Vienna Jacques, whom Joseph III had heard was a plural wife of his father, told her story when he visited her in the Utah territory in 1876. Joseph III said of that interview, "I need not attempt to relate all the communication which passed between us," then proceeded with the parts of the conversation that supported his position of his father's innocence in the practice of plural marriage.

25. Relief Society Minutes, 8th meeting, n.d., 1842.

26. Danel Bachman in "Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith," Appendix C, 333-36, lists forty-eight women who were possibly married to Joseph Smith. Although Bachman says that some of these are questionable, most can be documented. The marriages listed here are only those with a known date. Bachman also included a Mrs. A. S. with no known date. This is Agnes Coolbrith Smith, widow of Joseph's brother Don Carlos. She became Joseph's plural wife early in 1842. Bachman named twelve more women who were presumed to have been married to Joseph by the spring of 1843: Fanny Alger, Lucinda Morgan, Delcena Johnson, Mrs. Durfee, Sally Fuller, Sarah Cleveland, Flora Woodworth, Hanna Ellis, Olive G. Frost, Sylvia Sessions, Sarah Lawrence and her sister Maria Lawrence (listed incorrectly by Bachman as Mona Lawrence). The rest of the forty-eight he lists were either married after the spring of 1843, or their date of marriage is not known, or they have questionable documentation as plural wives of Joseph Smith. For short biographical sketches of most of the above women, see Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, Appendix C, 457-88. To date the best discussion of children fathered by Joseph Smith, Jr., through his plural wives can be found in Bachman's thesis, 136-42. See also Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 156-59.

27. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt: One of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Embracing His Life, Ministry and Travels, with Extracts, in Prose and Verse, from His Miscellaneous Writings* (1874, 3rd ed., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1938), 197-98.

28. Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, October 13, 1832, RLDS Library and Archives; Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, May 18, 1834, RLDS Library and Archives; Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, January 20, 1840, Chicago Historical Society; Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, August 16, 1842, *History of the Church* 5:103.

29. Emily D. P. Young, "Incidents in the Early Life of Emily Dow Partridge," typescript, 5, University of Utah Marriott Library Special Collections. See also Charles A. Shook, *The True Origins of Mormon Polygamy* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1914), 137.

30. The three short quotations in this paragraph come from Andrew Jensen, comp., *Historical Record* 6:240; U. S. Circuit Court, Testimony, 241 (answers to question 31); and Emily D. P. Young, "Incidents in the Early Life of Emily Dow Partridge," typescript, 5, University of Utah Marriott Library Special Collections.

31. The first quotation is taken from Emily D. P. Young, "Incidents of Early Life," typescript, 5. The second appears in her "Autobiography," *Woman's Exponent* 14:37. Joseph's diary entry for May 23, states: "At home. In conversation with Judge Adams and others."

32. For Emma and Joseph's sealing date, see Diary of Joseph Smith, May 28, 1843, LDS Archives, microfilm of original in RLDS Library and Archives. Part of this entry is written in the now discontinued Taylor shorthand. La Jene Purcell, Harold B. Lee Library, aided Andrew F. Ehat in transcribing portions of the shorthand, thus revealing the sealing date for Emma and Joseph. Andrew F. Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the 1844 Mormon Succession Question" (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1982), 61-62.

33. William Clayton diary as quoted in Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Seventy's Mission Bookstore, 1981), 294.

34. William Clayton Statement, Jensen, *Historical Record*, 226.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Diary of Joseph Smith, July 13, 1843.

37. William Clayton Statement, Jensen, *Historical Record*, 226. Isaac Sheen, who later became editor of the *Saints' Herald*, discussed the doctrine of plural marriage in the March 1860 issue of that publication, then wrote that Joseph "caused the revelation on that subject to be burned."

38. Edmund C. Briggs, "A Visit to Nauvoo," *Journal of History* 9, no. 4 (October 1916):462.

39. Diary of Joseph III, April 20, 1885, RLDS Library and Archives.

40. Mary Bailey Norman to Ina Coolbrith, March 27, 1908, RLDS Library and Archives.

41. Diary of William Clayton as quoted in James B. Allen, "One Man's Nauvoo," *Journal of Mormon History* 6(1979):45.

42. William Marks, "Epistle of Wm. Marks, . . ." *Zion's Harbinger and Baneemy's Organ*, July 1853, p. 53. There are at least two similar accounts by Marks. They are William Marks to Isaac Sheen, October 23, 1859, published in the *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* 1 (January 1860):22,23; and William Marks to Hiram Falk and Josiah Butterfield, October 1, 1865, RLDS Library and Archives.

43. Joseph Smith, Jr., to Sarah and Maria Lawrence, June 23, 1844, LDS Archives. Mark Hofman found this document in the same papers in which he found the transcript of Joseph Smith, Jr.'s blessing of Joseph III.

44. Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, June 23, 1844, RLDS Library and Archives.

45. Emily D. P. Young, "Incidents in the Early Life of Emily Dow Partridge," December 1876, p. 5, University of Utah Marriott Library Special Collections.

46. Joseph F. Smith interview with Joseph W. Coolidge, Joseph F. Smith Diary, August 28, 1870.

47. For a discussion of this issue see Richard P. Howard, "The Changing RLDS Response to Mormon Polygamy: A Preliminary Analysis," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 3 (1983): 17-19.

48. Journal of W. W. Blair, June 13 and 17, 1874, RLDS Library and Archives. Only five years earlier on June 16, 1869, Hyrum Smith's daughter in Utah signed an affidavit that Emma had discussed the marriage of the Lawrence and Partridge sisters with her. It states: "I Lovina Walker hereby certify, that while I was living with Aunt Emma Smith, in Fulton City, Fulton Co., Illinois, in the year 1846, that she told me, that she, Emma Smith was present and witnessed the marrying or sealing of Eliza Partridge, Emily Partridge, Maria Lawrence, and Sarah Lawrence to her husband, Joseph Smith, and that she gave her consent thereto." Joseph F. Smith Affidavit book No. 1, vault, LDS Archives.

49. *Saints' Advocate* 2, no. 4 (October 1879):49-52.

50. *Ibid.*, *Saints' Herald* 26:289-90. All questions and answers quoted directly or paraphrased during this interview are as they appear in these sources.

51. Emma Smith to Mr. Gregg, April 21, 1846, Buddy Youngreen collection. Used with permission. In this letter Emma responded to questions about historical events in Nauvoo, "Everything that has not come within my immediate observation remains doubtful in my mind until some circumstance occurs to prove the report either true or false."

52. Richard P. Howard, "The Changing RLDS Response to Mormon Polygamy: A Preliminary Analysis," 16-17.

53. Marsh's conversation with Emma is related in a letter from Lorenzo Snow to Francis M. Lyman, August 10, 1901, "Correspondence to the First Presidency, January 1901—May 1902," vol. 36, LDS Church Archives.

54. *Woman's Exponent* 8 (November 1, 1896): 85.

55. *Amboy Times*, Illinois, April 12, 1860.

