

facts of his life—a succession of battles and defeats, widening influence and doctrinal exposition, a reach for power and glory, and finally gunshots and death—but not his personality or attitudes. Was he the same hopeful Joseph Smith of the Kirtland years, the person who yearned to be the friend of God, or did he develop an insatiable appetite for position and eminence. Did he give way to his lusts? The answers depend on who speaks.

## FANNY ALGER

There is evidence that Joseph was a polygamist by 1835. Was he also an adulterer? In an angry letter written in 1838, Oliver Cowdery referred to the “dirty, nasty, filthy affair” of Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger.<sup>2</sup> What did that mean? Had Joseph been involved in an illicit affair? Some of his critics tried to depict him as a libertine going back to the New York years. One of Emma’s cousins by marriage, Levi Lewis, said Martin Harris spoke of Joseph’s attempt to seduce Elizabeth Winters, a friend of Emma’s in Harmony. But the reports are tenuous. Harris said nothing of the event in his many descriptions of Joseph, nor did Winters herself when interviewed much later.<sup>3</sup> Considering how eager the Palmyra neighbors were to besmirch Joseph’s character, their minimal mention of moral lapses suggests libertinism was not part of his New York reputation. In Kirtland, the situation was more complicated.

Alger was fourteen when her family joined the Church in Mayfield, near Kirtland, in 1830. In 1836, after a time as a serving girl in the Smith household, she left Kirtland and soon married. Between those two dates, perhaps as early as 1831, she and Joseph were reportedly involved, but conflicting accounts make it difficult to establish the facts—much less to understand Joseph’s thoughts. Was he a blackguard covering his lusts with religious pretensions, or a prophet doggedly adhering to instructions from heaven, or something in between?

Rumors of Mormon sexual license were circulating by 1835, when an “Article on Marriage” published in the *Doctrine and Covenants* said that Church members had been “reproached with the crime of fornication and polygamy.” Coming from faithful Mormons, this evidence of marital irregularities cannot be ignored, but neither can it be taken at face value. From the Münster Anabaptists of the sixteenth century to the camp meetings of the nineteenth, critics expected sexual improprieties from religious enthusiasts. Marital experiments by contemporary radical sects increased the suspicions.<sup>4</sup> John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida community, concluded that “there is no more reason why sexual intercourse should be restricted by law, than why eating and drinking should be.” With old barriers coming down, people were on the lookout for sexual aberrations. What,

if anything, lay behind the accusations of the Mormons is uncertain. They were apparently on edge themselves; the seventies resolved to expel any of their members guilty of polygamy.<sup>5</sup>

No one intimated in 1835 that Joseph's actions caused the rumors. The sources written before 1839 indicate that most Church leaders knew nothing of a possible marriage. What they did know is suggested by the minutes of Oliver Cowdery's excommunication trial before the Far West High Council in April 1838, one of the few contemporaneous sources. Cowdery, long Joseph's friend and associate in visions, was a casualty of the bad times. In 1838, he was charged with "seeking to destroy the character of President Joseph Smith jr by falsly insinuating that he was guilty of adultery &c."<sup>6</sup> Fanny Alger's name was never mentioned, but doubtless she was the woman in question.

The Far West court did not accuse Joseph of being involved with Alger. Some councilors had heard the rumors, but concluded they were untrue. They were concerned only with Cowdery's insinuations. He was on trial for false accusations, not Joseph for adultery. David Patten, an apostle, "went to Oliver Cowdery to enquire of him if a certain story was true respecting J. Smith's committing adultery with a certain girl, when he turned on his heel and insinuated as though he was guilty." Thomas Marsh, another apostle, reported a similar experience. "Oliver Cowdery cocked up his eye very knowingly and hesitated to answer the question, saying he did not know as he was bound to answer the question yet conveyed the idea that it was true." George Harris testified that in conversation between Cowdery and Joseph the previous November, Cowdery "seemed to insinuate that Joseph Smith jr was guilty of adultery." Eventually the court concluded that Cowdery had made false accusations, and cut him off from the Church.<sup>7</sup>

Cowdery denied that he had lied about Joseph and Alger. Cowdery had heard the accusations against him when he wrote to Joseph in January 1838. "I learn from Kirtland, by the last letters, that you have publickly said, that when you were here I confessed to you that I had willfully lied about you." He demanded that Joseph retract the statement. In a letter to his brother Warren, Cowdery insisted he would never dishonor the family name by lying about anything, much less about the Smiths, whom he had always defended. In his conversations with Joseph, Cowdery asserted, "in every instance, I did not fail to affirm that what I had said was strictly true," meaning he believed Joseph did have an affair. His insinuations were not lies but the truth as he understood it.<sup>8</sup>

Cowdery and Joseph aired their differences at a meeting in November 1837 where Joseph did not deny his relationship with Alger, but contended that he had never confessed to adultery. Cowdery apparently had said otherwise, but backed down at the November meeting. When the question was

put to Cowdery “if he [Joseph] had ever acknowledged to him that he was guilty of such a thing . . . he answered No.”<sup>9</sup> That was all Joseph wanted: an admission that he had not termed the Alger affair adulterous. As Cowdery told his brother, “just before leaving, he [Joseph] wanted to drop every past thing, in which had been a difficulty or difference—he called witnesses to the fact, gave me his hand in their presence, and I might have supposed of an honest man, calculated to say nothing of former matters.”<sup>10</sup>

These scraps of testimony recorded within a few years of the Alger business show how differently the various parties understood events. In the contemporaneous documents, only one person, Cowdery, believed that Joseph had had an affair with Fanny Alger. Others may have heard the rumors, but none joined Cowdery in making accusations.<sup>11</sup> David Patten, who made inquiries in Kirtland, concluded the rumors were untrue. No one proposed to put Joseph on trial for adultery. Only Cowdery, who was leaving the Church, asserted Joseph’s involvement. On his part, Joseph never denied a relationship with Alger, but insisted it was not adulterous. He wanted it on record that he had never confessed to such a sin. Presumably, he felt innocent because he had married Alger.

After the Far West council excommunicated Cowdery, Alger disappears from the Mormon historical record for a quarter of a century. Her story was recorded as many as sixty years later by witnesses who had strong reason to take sides.<sup>12</sup> Surprisingly, they all agree that Joseph married Fanny Alger as a plural wife. Ann Eliza Webb Young, the notorious divorced wife of Brigham Young who toured the country lecturing against the Mormons, thought the relationship was scandalous but reported that Fanny’s parents “considered it the highest honor to have their daughter adopted into the Prophet’s family, and her mother has always claimed that [Fanny] was sealed to Joseph at that time.” Ann Eliza’s father, Chauncey Webb, who reportedly took Alger in when Emma learned of the marriage, said Joseph “was sealed there secretly to Fanny Alger,” Mormon language for marriage.<sup>13</sup>

On the believers’ side, Mosiah Hancock wrote in the 1890s about Joseph engaging Levi Hancock, Mosiah’s father, to ask Alger’s parents for permission to marry. Levi Hancock was Alger’s uncle and an appropriate go-between. He talked with Alger’s father, then her mother, and finally to Fanny herself, and all three consented. As in many subsequent plural marriages, Joseph did not steal away the prospective bride. He approached the parents first to ask for their daughter’s hand. Hancock performed the ceremony, repeating words Joseph dictated to him. The whole process was formal and, in a peculiar way, old-fashioned.<sup>14</sup>

Most of the other stories about Joseph’s plural marriage in Kirtland come from one individual without confirmation from a second source. Ann Eliza, for example, included a story of Fanny being ejected by a furious



Emma, one of the few scraps of information about her reaction. Ann Eliza could not have been an eyewitness because she was not yet born, but she might have heard the story from her parents, who were close to the Smiths. Are such accounts to be believed? One of the few tales that appears in more than one account was of Oliver Cowdery experimenting with plural wives himself, contrary to Joseph's counsel.<sup>15</sup> That pattern of followers marrying prematurely without authorization was repeated later when some of Joseph's followers used the doctrine of plural marriage as a license for marrying at will. Stories like these, all of them from intensely partisan witnesses, must be treated with caution.

On that principle, the date when plural marriage was begun will remain uncertain. Todd Compton, putting the evidence together in his massive history, concluded that Joseph began practicing plural marriage around 1833. The sources offer conflicting testimony on when the principle was revealed. When a plural marriage revelation was finally written down in 1843, it referred to a question about Old Testament polygamy: "You have enquired of my hand to know and understand wherein I the Lord justified my servants, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; as also Moses, David and Solomon, my servants, as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines." Joseph frequently inquired about biblical practices while revising the scriptures, and it seems possible that he received the revelation on plural marriage in 1831 while working on the Old Testament.<sup>16</sup>

Because plural marriage was so sexually charged, the practice has provoked endless speculation about Joseph's motives. Was he a libertine in the guise of a prophet seducing women for his own pleasure? The question can never be answered definitively from historical sources, but the language he used to describe marriage is known. Joseph did not explain plural marriage as a love match or even a companionship. Only slight hints of romance found their way into his proposals. He understood plural marriage as a religious principle. Levi Hancock remembered the Prophet telling him in 1832: "Brother Levi, the Lord has revealed to me that it is his will that righteous men shall take Righteous women even a plurality of Wives that a Righteous race may be sent forth upon the Earth preparatory to the ushering in of the Millennial Reign of our Redeemer."<sup>17</sup> As Joseph described the practice to Hancock, plural marriage had the millennial purpose of fashioning a righteous generation on the eve of the Second Coming.

The end of Joseph's relationship with Fanny Alger is as elusive as the beginning. After leaving Kirtland in September 1836, Alger, reportedly a comely, amiable person, had no trouble remarrying. Joseph asked her uncle Hancock to take her to Missouri, but she went with her parents instead. They stopped in Indiana for the season, and while there she married Solomon Custer, a non-Mormon listed in the censuses as grocer, baker, and

merchant. When her parents moved on, Alger remained in Indiana with her husband. She bore nine children. After Joseph's death, Alger's brother asked her about her relationship with the Prophet. She replied: "That is all a matter of my—own. And I have nothing to Communicate."<sup>18</sup>

#### CLAY COUNTY

Joseph had believed that the endowment of power in the temple would open the gates to Jackson County. Either an army of Saints would sweep through, or their enemies' hearts would be softened. Two days after the temple dedication, Joseph and the other presidents "met in the most holy place in the Lords house and sought for a revelation from Him to teach us concerning our going to Zion."<sup>19</sup> Suspension of Joseph's journal in early April obscures what happened next, but by the summer of 1836, the Saints were further than ever from their goal.

On June 29, 1836, a public meeting in Liberty, Missouri, voted that the Saints must leave Clay County, which had been their home since they were driven from Jackson County in late 1833. Now "the clouds of civil war are rolling up their fearful masses," the drafting committee reported, "and hanging over our devoted country. Solemn, dark terrible." The report recalled the sympathy shown the penniless Saints when they first arrived. Now, when they were purchasing land and increasing their numbers, their alien character was becoming obvious: "They are Eastern men, whose manners, habits, customs and even dialect, are essentially different from our own." Worst of all, "they are non-slave holders, and opposed to slavery; which, in this peculiar period, when abolition has reared its deformed and haggard visage in our land, is well calculated to excite deep and abiding prejudices."<sup>20</sup>

Mormon opposition to slavery had come up earlier in a Jackson County manifesto claiming that Mormons planned to introduce free blacks into the county. The Church had tried to neutralize the charge in a letter to the editor in the April 1836 *Messenger and Advocate* that responded to an abolitionist lecture in Kirtland, which Church leaders feared would be interpreted as a sign of friendship for the abolitionist cause. Writing in Joseph Smith's name, the author denied that there was any local sympathy for the speaker. "All except a very few, attended to their own avocations and left the gentleman to hold forth his own arguments to nearly naked walls." The letter echoed the antiabolitionist feeling that was peaking in the United States in 1836. Andrew Jackson had proposed that "incendiary publications" be barred from the mails. Southern congressmen successfully sponsored legislation to block petitions for ending the slave trade in Washington, D.C. Abolitionists were being mobbed everywhere. Caught up in this wave of

## MARRIAGE

Of all the events, the resumption of plural marriage was the most disturbing. After marrying Fanny Alger sometime before 1836, Joseph, it appears, married no one else until he wed Louisa Beaman on April 5, 1841, in Nauvoo. (Historians debate the possibility of one other wife in the interim.) In the next two and a half years, Joseph married about thirty additional women, ten of them already married to other men.<sup>1</sup> Nothing confuses the picture of Joseph Smith's character more than these plural marriages. What lay behind this egregious transgression of conventional morality? What drove him to a practice that put his life and his work in jeopardy, not to mention his relationship with Emma? Was he a dominant male whose ego brooked no bounds? Joseph exercised such untrammelled authority in Nauvoo that it is possible to imagine him thinking no conquest beyond his reach. In theory, he could take what he wanted and browbeat his followers with threats of divine punishment.

This simple reading of Joseph's motives is implicit in descriptions of him as "a charismatic, handsome man." They suggest he was irresistible and made the most of it. Other Mormon men went along out of loyalty or in hopes of sharing the power. But missing from that picture is Joseph's sense of himself. In public and private, he spoke and acted as if guided by God. All the doctrines, plans, programs, and claims were, in his mind, the mandates of heaven. They came to him as requirements, with a kind of irresistible certainty. The revelations weighed him down with impossible tasks like translation, gathering, constructing a temple, or building a city. More than once he told the Church he had completed the work and had no more to accomplish, as if he hoped the revelations would subside.<sup>2</sup> Then a new commandment would force itself upon him, and the work would resume.

Joseph ordinarily followed the commandments punctiliously, as if disobedience put him at risk. In the case of plural marriage, he held off for two or three years before marrying Fanny Alger, and then after this one unsuccessful attempt, waited another five years. The delay showed an uncharacteristic reluctance, hard for one who feared God. In some of Joseph's revelations the Lord speaks as a friend, but in others with the voice of thunder. Writing to a woman whom he hoped would be his wife, he described the two sides of the image: "Our heavenly father is more liberal in his views, and boundless in his mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive, and at the same time is as terrible to workers of iniquity, more awful in the executions of his punishments, and more ready to detect every false way than we are apt to suppose him to be."<sup>3</sup> God was both kind and terrible. By delaying plural marriage, Joseph risked provoking God's wrath. Mary



Rollins Lightner, one of his plural wives, later said Joseph told her about the pressure he was under. "The angel came to me three times between the year of '34 and '42 and said I was to obey that principle or he would [s]lay me." Others told the story with an additional detail: the angel held a drawn sword.<sup>4</sup>

The possibility of an imaginary revelation, erupting from his own heart and subconscious mind, seems not to have occurred to Joseph. To him, the words came from heaven.<sup>5</sup> They required obedience even though the demand seemed contradictory or wrong. The possibility of deception did occur to him. Satanic counterfeits concerned Joseph; he talked to the Saints about the detection of fraudulent angels. But when Lightner asked if perhaps plural marriage was of the devil, Joseph said no. In his mind, the revelation came from God, and he had to obey or suffer. The written form of the revelation, recorded in 1843 (later canonized as *Doctrine and Covenants* 132) said bluntly, "I reveal unto you a New and an Everlasting Covenant and if ye abide not that Covenant, then are ye damned."<sup>6</sup>

Joseph never wrote his personal feelings about plural marriage. Save for the revelation given in the voice of God, everything on the subject comes from the people around him. But surely he realized that plural marriage would inflict terrible damage, that he ran the risk of wrecking his marriage and alienating his followers. How could the faithful Emma, to whom he pledged his love in every letter, accept additional wives? His followers would see the revelation as an unforgivable breach of the moral law and reject it altogether, or, even worse, use it as a license for free love. Either way, their reactions would jeopardize the Zion project. As for the world at large, plural marriage would confirm all their worst fears. Sexual excess was considered the all too common fruit of pretended revelation. Joseph's enemies would delight in one more evidence of a revelator's antinomian transgressions. He also risked prosecution under Illinois's antbigamy law.<sup>7</sup>

In approaching Joseph Bates Noble in the spring of 1841 about marrying his wife's sister, Louisa Beaman, Joseph asked Bates, a man he had known since Kirtland, to keep quiet. "In revealing this to you I have placed my life in your hands, therefore do not in an evil hour betray me to my enemies." Louisa Beaman was twenty-six when she married Joseph Smith.<sup>8</sup> Alone since her mother's death in September 1840, Beaman had moved in with Joseph and Mary Noble. To disguise the wedding, Joseph asked Noble to perform the ceremony in a grove near Main Street with Louisa in man's clothing.

Partly to maintain secrecy, Joseph could not have spent much time with Beaman or any of the women he married. He never gathered his wives into a household—as his Utah followers later did—or accompanied them to public events. Close relationships were further curtailed by business. Joseph

had to look after Emma and the children, manage the Church, govern the city, and evade the extradition officers from Missouri. As the marriages increased, there were fewer and fewer opportunities for seeing each wife.

Even so, nothing indicates that sexual relations were left out of plural marriages; Noble testified many years later that Joseph spent the night with Louisa after the wedding. But there was no “mormon seraglio or Nauvoo harem,” as his enemies charged. Not until many years later did anyone claim Joseph Smith’s paternity, and evidence for the tiny handful of supposed children is tenuous. For the most part, the women went about their business as before. Only the slightest hints suggest that Joseph was in Louisa’s company after their marriage, though he may have contributed to her support.<sup>9</sup>

The marital status of the plural wives further complicated the issue. Within fifteen months of marrying Louisa Beaman, Joseph had married eleven other women. Eight of the eleven were married to other men. All told, ten of Joseph’s plural wives were married to other men. All of them went on living with their first husbands after marrying the Prophet. The reasons for choosing married women can only be surmised. Not all were married to non-Mormon men: six of the ten husbands were active Latter-day Saints.<sup>10</sup> In most cases, the husband knew of the plural marriage and approved. The practice seems inexplicable today. Why would a husband consent?

The only answer seems to be the explanation Joseph gave when he asked a woman for her consent: they and their families would benefit spiritually from a close tie to the Prophet. Joseph told a prospective wife that submitting to plural marriage would “ensure your eternal salvation & exaltation and that of your father’s household. & all your kindred.” A father who gave his daughter to the Prophet as a plural wife was assured that the marriage “shall be crowned upon your heads with honor and immortality and eternal life to all your house both old and young.” The relationship would bear fruit in the afterlife. There is no certain evidence that Joseph had sexual relations with any of the wives who were married to other men.<sup>11</sup> They married because Joseph’s kingdom grew with the size of his family, and those bonded to that family would be exalted with him.<sup>12</sup>

In October 1841, Joseph married Zina Huntington Jacobs, wife of Henry Jacobs. Zina was a pious young woman of twenty who had spoken in tongues and heard angels singing. Joseph and Emma had cared for Zina and her siblings for three months in 1839–40 after their mother died. When Joseph explained plural marriage to her the following year, her first response was to resist. Accepting Henry, who was courting her at the time, meant saying no to Joseph.<sup>13</sup> Zina changed her mind after her brother told her about the angel threatening Joseph’s “position and his life.” That image



plus her own inquiries convinced her. "I searched the scripture & buy humble prayer to my Heavenly Father I obtained a testimony for my self that God had required that order to be established in this church." Even after this assurance, she despaired of the consequences. "I mad[e] a greater sacrifice than to give my life for I never anticipated a gain to be looked upon as an honorable woman by those I dearly loved." On October 27, 1841, her brother Dimick performed the marriage on the banks of the Mississippi. Little more is known of Zina's relationship with Joseph. Her diary says nothing about visits. In 1843 while Henry was away on a mission, she, "being lonely," opened a school in her house. The records don't reveal how much Henry knew about the marriage at first, but in 1846 he stood by in the temple when Zina was sealed posthumously to Joseph Smith for eternity.<sup>14</sup>

The personal anguish caused by plural marriage did not stop Joseph Smith from marrying more women. He married three in 1841, eleven in 1842, and seventeen in 1843. Historians debate these numbers, but the total figure is most likely between twenty-eight and thirty-three. Larger numbers have been proposed based on the sealing records in the Nauvoo temple. Eight additional women were sealed to Joseph in the temple after his death, possibly implying a marriage while he was still alive. Whatever the exact number, the marriages are numerous enough to indicate an impersonal bond. Joseph did not marry women to form a warm, human companionship, but to create a network of related wives, children, and kinsmen that would endure into the eternities. The revelation on marriage promised Joseph an "hundred fold in this world, of fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, houses and lands, wives and children, and crowns of eternal lives in the eternal worlds."<sup>15</sup> Like Abraham of old, Joseph yearned for familial plentitude. He did not lust for women so much as he lusted for kin.

Romance played only a slight part. In making proposals, Joseph would sometimes say God had given a woman to him, or they were meant for each other, but there was no romantic talk of adoring love. He did not court his prospective wives by first trying to win their affections. Often he asked a relative—a father or an uncle—to propose the marriage. Sometimes one of his current wives proposed for him. When he made the proposal himself, a friend like Brigham Young was often present. The language was religious and doctrinal, stressing that a new law has been revealed. She was to seek spiritual confirmation. Once consent was given, a formal ceremony was performed before witnesses, with Joseph dictating the words to the person officiating.<sup>16</sup>

Joseph himself said nothing about sex in these marriages. Other marriage experimenters in Joseph's times focused on sexual relations. The Shakers repudiated marriage altogether, considering sex bestial and unworthy of a millennial people. John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida community objected to

the possessiveness of the marriage relationship and thought free intercourse was as necessary to openness and love as communal property.<sup>17</sup> Joseph, so far as can be told, never discussed the sexual component of marriage, save for his concern about adultery.

We might expect that Joseph, the kind of dominant man who is thought to have strong libidinal urges, would betray his sexual drive in his talk and manner. Bred outside the rising genteel culture, he was not inhibited by Victorian prudery. But references to sexual pleasure are infrequent. Years later, William Law, Joseph's counselor in the First Presidency, said he was shocked once to hear Joseph say one of his wives "afforded him great *pleasure*." That report is one of the few, and the fact that it shocked Law suggests such comments were infrequent.<sup>18</sup> As Fawn Brodie said, "There was too much of the Puritan" in Joseph for him to be a "careless libertine." Indeed, the practice of plural marriage went against the teachings of other revelations. In one of the Book of Mormon's most impassioned sermons, the prophet Jacob chastised the Nephite men for taking additional wives and concubines. "Ye have broken the hearts of your tender wives," Jacob preached. "For I, the Lord God, delighteth in chastity of women. And whoredoms is an abomination before me." The offenders would be visited with "a sore curse, even unto destruction." A revelation given in Kirtland in 1831 underscored the same prohibition: "Thou shalt not commit adultery; and he that committeth adultery and repenteth not, shall be cast out."<sup>19</sup>

With these prohibitions emblazoned in his own revelations, Joseph was torn by the command to take plural wives. What about the curses and destruction promised adulterers? What about the heart of his tender wife? In 1838 when Joseph was accused of a relationship with Fanny Alger, his only concern had been to insist that he had never confessed to adultery. The written revelation on marriage noted that "ye have asked concerning adultery," and defined precisely what constituted adultery.<sup>20</sup> The question obviously bothered him.

Joseph explained to Nancy Rigdon, Sidney Rigdon's daughter, who refused Joseph's proposal of marriage, how he justified the apparent breach of the moral code.<sup>21</sup> The path to happiness, he assured her, was "virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God." Even in taking additional wives, he had to think of himself as virtuous. But the phrase about "keeping the commandments of God" suggested how plural marriage was justified. "God said thou shalt not kill,—at another time he said thou shalt utterly destroy." What was a believer to do with conflicting injunctions? Joseph reached a terrifying answer: "that which is wrong under one circumstance, may be and often is, right under another." This unnerving principle was the foundation of the government of God. "Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is," he wrote Nancy,

“although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire.”<sup>22</sup>

The idea actually informed every revealed religion. A few years later the Christian evangelist and antislavery advocate Charles Finney was to say with respect to slavery that “no human legislation can make it right or lawful to violate any command of God.” To Finney the higher law—equality—prevailed over human law, and justified attacks on slavery. The same sentiment coming from Joseph with plural marriage in mind froze the heart.<sup>23</sup> He could not have chosen words better suited to strike terror into the rational mind. He was saying that any moral rule, any commonsense limitation on any human constraint, could be overthrown by a revelation. The assertion confirmed the fears of rational Christians for centuries about the social chaos inherent in revealed religion.

Joseph quickly qualified what he had said. Although “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,” casual liaisons were not authorized. A gift taken was not a gift given. “Blessings and enjoyments” taken arbitrarily “without law, without revelation, without commandment, those blessings and enjoyments would prove cursings and vexations in the end, and we should have to go down in sorrow and wailings of everlasting regret.”<sup>24</sup>

To Joseph’s mind, revelation functioned like law. The revelations came as “commandments,” the name he gave to all the early revelations. They required obedience. The marriage revelation laid down rules about adultery, binding partners to each other by covenant. If a woman “be not in the new and everlasting covenant, and she be with another man, she has committed adultery.” The same for men. “If her husband be with another woman, and he was under a vow, he hath broken his vow, and hath committed adultery.” The rules were as strict under plural marriage as under monogamy, except that revelation set the standard.<sup>25</sup>

The shock of plural marriage was further mitigated by precedents in the Bible. The sermon against adultery in the *Book of Mormon* began with the Old Testament. “David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines,” the prophet Jacob acknowledged, and they sinned in the practice. The Old Testament sanctioned plural marriage, but not for selfishly “multiply[ing] wives to himself,” as Solomon and David evidently did. But what about the other biblical polygamists not mentioned in the *Book of Mormon* who did multiply wives to themselves? Did Abraham sin in marrying Hagar? Implicitly recognizing the contradiction, the *Book of Mormon* offered an explanation. “For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me,” Jacob wrote, “I will command my people: otherwise, they will hearken unto these things.” Monogamy was the usual practice, but in certain instances God commanded polygamy.<sup>26</sup>



The disjuncture between the *Book of Mormon* prohibitions of polygamy and the Old Testament practice apparently caused Joseph to question. The plural marriage revelation, not written down until July 1843, opened with the observation that “you have enquired of my hand to know and understand wherein I the Lord justified my servants, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; as also Moses, David and Solomon, my servants, as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines.” In answer to the question, Joseph learned that plural marriage was a divine commandment. “God commanded Abraham,” the revelation said, “and Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to wife. And why did she do it? Because this was the Law.” Abraham was the precedent. The scriptural justification for plural marriage was the admonition to “go ye, therefore, and do the works of Abraham.”<sup>27</sup>

Joseph told the Twelve about plural marriage soon after their return in 1841, and they began marrying other women soon after. Before Joseph died, as many as twenty-nine other men had married at least one additional wife under his authorization.<sup>28</sup> The practice had to be generalized because the revelation tied marriage to the highest form of exaltation. Marriage was the basis for human exaltation, whether plural or not. Later in Mormon history, exaltation through marriage was separated from multiple wives. The plural marriage revelation still describes the modern Mormon view of marriage and family, although Latter-day Saints abandoned plural marriage more than a century ago.<sup>29</sup>

At the base was priesthood sealing, the practice of binding people together by priesthood authority. The revelation informed the Saints that no marriages, monogamous or plural, would last after death unless sealed by priesthood authority.

All Covenants, Contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations that are not made or entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise, of him who is anointed, both as well for time and for all Eternity . . . are of no efficacy, virtue, or force in and after the resurrection.<sup>30</sup>

The powers of this world ended at death; only the power of God could ordain eternal marriages.

To those sealed by the priesthood, the promises were startling. When out of the world, the revelation said, sealed couples would pass by the angels and go on to godhood. Their state was quite different from those married by worldly authority. In the afterlife, the worldly wed became single again, and a permanent cap limited their progress. “Therefore they cannot be enlarged, but remain separately and singly” and are appointed “angels in heaven, which angels are ministering servants, to minister for those who are worthy of a far more, and an exceeding, and an eternal

weight of glory." The key word in the passage was "enlarged." Single people could not expand; married pairs could. And how? Through "a continuation of the seeds forever and ever." They kept bearing children. This capacity to "enlarge" made them, in effect, gods:

Then shall they be Gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be Gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them.<sup>31</sup>

The great, godly power was procreation, the continuation of seed. The ultimate social order of heaven was familial.

Before the marriage revelation, women were in the shadows in Joseph's theology, implied but rarely recognized. Now they moved to the center. "The continuation of the seeds" involved bearing and nurturing children, the work of parents. In 1843, Joseph said that "in order to obtain the highest degree of celestial glory, a man must enter into this order of the priesthood; and if he dont, he cant obtain it. He may enter into the other but that is the end of his kingdom he cannot have an increase."<sup>32</sup> The marriage revelation was still addressed to men and spoke of their increase and their power, but they could have none of these alone. To be exalted, men and women must be bound together.

Joseph had never tried to demean women. Emma had gone to the Hill Cumorah with him to obtain the plates and later helped record the translation. When he lost the 116 pages, he thought first of her disappointment. The revelation to Emma in 1830 said her time was to be given "to writing, and to learning much"—no marginal activities. But like so many Victorians, Joseph thought of women in helping roles. Women nurtured children and cared for the sick. Revelations were addressed to the "Elders of my church," rarely to women.<sup>33</sup> In church as in politics or the economy of the day, women and children were subsumed under a male head.

The marriage revelation did not overturn the family order. If anything, women were more entrenched than ever in the roles of mother and wife. But procreation was lifted to the highest level of human and divine endeavor. Mothering was precisely what made "gods." And with mothering highlighted, the greatest work was not accomplished in the priesthood councils where women were absent, but at home, where women were present and central.<sup>34</sup> The marriage revelation redressed the balance of the political and the familial, shifting emphasis from the corporate to the personal. While women gained by this shift, the revelation also relieved the loneliness and burden of male autonomy. Men would not become gods alone. Through the continuation of seed, husbands and wives passed by the angels and

became gods together—and only together. Women—in partnership, not as individuals—were at last represented in Joseph's theology.

The revelation's tone was more political than sentimental. There are no scenes of smiling children playing at their parents' feet, the standard trope of later Victorian heavens. Men and women who married by God's law would inherit "thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights & depths." This was the language of government, not sentimentalism. Echoing the words of the Revelation of St. John, the Lord told Joseph, "I . . . prepare a throne for you in the kingdom of my Father, with Abraham your father," presumably with a queen or queens beside him.<sup>35</sup> The marriage covenant prepared the Saints less for wedded bliss than for heavenly rule.

The marriage revelation culminated the emergence of family theology. More than any previous revelation, this one put family first. In the first decade of the Church, the city (not the parish) was the primary social organization, and the council was the characteristic governing body: the First Presidency, the stake high councils, the council of the Twelve Apostles. In the middle of the decade, priesthood was associated with lineage. Revelations described the descent of the priesthood from father to son; the office of patriarch was by right passed to a son; and the bishopric ideally went to descendants of Aaron. The Book of Abraham described Abraham's quest for priesthood descending through "the fathers."<sup>36</sup>

In Nauvoo, the family side of priesthood came forward. Bonding families became the center of Joseph's doctrine. Malachi's phrase about turning the hearts of the children to the fathers inspired the practice of baptisms for the dead, tying family to family together through history, thus creating a "welding link" going back in time. The earth would be wasted, Joseph read Malachi to say, if families were not bound together across the generations. Priesthood marriage welded contemporary husbands, wives, and children together for eternity, making the family the one institution sure to survive death. Family did not displace councils in earthly Church government, but family was identified as the fundamental governing body in the hereafter. After death, husbands and wives as kings and queens would rule over principalities and powers.<sup>37</sup>

Joseph's family doctrine did not grow out of a diagnosis of social ills, like *The Peace Maker, or the Doctrines of the Millennium* by Udney Hay Jacob, a book favoring plural marriage published in 1842 by the Mormon press in Nauvoo. Jacob, who was not a Mormon at the time, argued for easy divorce and polygamous marriage in order to reduce the sexual influence of women and restore male authority. Society, Jacob believed, was suffering from the decay of patriarchal dominance and would perish unless men were put back in charge. Women were lording it over their husbands, Jacob thought,



because of men's sexual needs. Polygamy would liberate men and restore their rightful authority.<sup>38</sup> Joseph's plural marriage revelation also gave husbands the upper hand, but it said nothing about loss of control or family deterioration. The revelation was about bonding, not dominance; its concern was to preserve family into eternity.

#### THE RELIEF SOCIETY

In the same spring when Joseph was enlarging his circle of wives, he gave women a new role in Church organization. The formation of a women's society in Nauvoo in 1842 spurred his thinking. The society began with the benevolent impulse of twenty-three-year-old Sarah Granger Kimball, an eminent young matron. Her father, Oliver Granger, had been sheriff and colonel of the militia in Ontario County, the Smiths' home county in New York, before he joined the Mormons and moved to Kirtland in 1833. Sarah's non-Mormon husband, Hiram Kimball, was a merchant and land speculator. Sarah married him in 1840 and lived in the finest house in Nauvoo. Like others of her class, Sarah Kimball believed her social position carried a responsibility for helping the underprivileged, and in Nauvoo in 1842 the needs were evident on every street. For forty years, women's organizations around the country had pursued a host of worthy causes—aid to the poor, schools for indigent children, missionary work, and the distribution of Bibles. Thousands of benevolent societies had sprung up, especially in New England and in the path of Yankee westward settlement. To ambitious and improving women, forming a "Ladies' Society," as Sarah Kimball called it, was a natural extension of their nurturing office in the home. Kimball thought first of paying her seamstress to stitch shirts for the temple workmen, but then decided to organize a wider effort. At the first meeting on March 4, 1842, the group moved to organize formally.<sup>39</sup>

At the women's behest, Kimball went to Eliza R. Snow, well-known in Nauvoo for her literary experience, with a request for a constitution and bylaws. Joseph took an interest when Snow brought the documents to him for approval. He called them "the best he had ever seen," but said he had "something better for them than a written Constitution." He wanted to organize the women, he said, "under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood." Those words implied that he considered a women's organization part of the ancient order of things. When he met with the women on March 17, Joseph told the women they should put aside the usual model for benevolent societies. He told them to elect a president who would choose counselors to preside over the society, just as the First Presidency presided over the Church. Let additional officers "be appointed and set apart, as Deacons, Teachers, &C. are among us." The society's duties were to mesh