

Chapter 21

John C. Bennett, Sarah Pratt, and Orson Pratt

Both Orson and Sarah Pratt became entangled in dramatic events initiated by John C. Bennett. At the heart of the controversy was Sarah's involvement with Bennett and/or Joseph Smith. Born on February 5, 1817, Sarah Marinda Bates accepted the Restoration, was baptized on June 18, 1835, fell in love with one of her missionaries, twenty-four-year-old Apostle Orson Pratt, and married him the next year.¹ By the early 1840s, Sarah was living alone in Nauvoo while Orson, by then an apostle, served a mission from August 1839 to July 1841 to the British Isles. Two contradictory stories regarding Sarah Pratt in 1840 and 1841 before Orson's return are chronicled in the historical record.

1. While serving as a missionary, Orson Pratt recorded that Sarah M. Bates (his own future wife) had received a polygamous proposal from a Church member who was excommunicated for the attempt: "The 10th Elder Luke Johnson who had been labouring a few weeks in those parts came to Bro Bates'. We held a meeting about 3 miles distant in afternoon. In the evening Elders Johnson & Dutcher & myself & Bro. Bates come together in order to deal with Elder Blakesly who was also present who was guilty of some verry improper conduct towards \one of the/ Sisters Sally M. Bates such as telling her that she had won his affections & that he loved her as much as he did his own wife; requesting her [to] break her engagements with me \a young man with whom she had had some acquaintance/ & remain single saying that he did not think that his own wife would live a great while—those the above I learned from \the/ Sister's [illegible name] own mouth who felt much disgusted at his conduct & desired that he should be dealt with. Elder Blakesly did not deny the above but at first said his motives were pure but afterwards after [sic] acknowledged that he had done very wrong Sister [written over Sally] we told him that his conduct had been such that we considered him unworthy to hold a license for a period of time & that it was necessary for him to make his acknowledgments to Sally \we & [?] the/ family \he had offended/ & also to the church & some individuals who did not belong to the church who resided in Mexico [Jefferson County, New York] at which place he had not been sufficiently reserve[d] in his conduct towards \the/ Sister [illegible] \mentioned/ () & in other branches where his conduct had not been such as becomes an Elder he agreed to do as was required & the same evening made his confessions to the [name erased] family \whom he had offended/ we took his license from him until he should \make/ satisfaction among the different Branches of the church where he had offended and also until he should be sufficiently chastened." Orson Pratt, Journal, June 10, 1836; terminal punctuation and initial capitals added.

Story One: Joseph Smith Attempts to Make Sarah Pratt a “Spiritual Wife”

In a letter published in the *Sangamo Journal* on July 15, 1842, John C. Bennett alleged that Joseph Smith had surreptitiously requested Bennett’s assistance in securing Sarah Pratt as a “Spiritual Wife”:

Joe Smith stated to me at an early day in the history of that city, that he intended to make that amiable and accomplished lady one of his *spiritual wives*, for the Lord had given her to him, and he requested me to assist him in consummating his hellish purposes, but I told him that I would not do it—that she had been much neglected and abused by the church during the absence of her husband in Europe, and that if the Lord had given her to him he must attend to it himself. I will do it, said he, for there is no harm in it if her husband should never find it out. I called upon Mrs. Pratt and told that Joe contemplated an attack on her virtue, *in the name of the Lord*, and that she must prepare to repulse him in so infamous an assault. . . . Accordingly in a few days Joe proposed to me to go. . . . We then proceeded to the house where Mrs. Pratt resided, and Joe commenced discourse as follows: “Sister Pratt, the Lord has given you to me as one of my spiritual wives. I have the blessings of Jacob granted me, as he granted holy men of old, and I have long looked upon you with favor, and hope you will not deny me.” She replied: “I care not for the blessings of Jacob, and I believe in no such revelations, neither will I consent under any circumstances. I have one good husband, and that is enough for me.” . . . Three times afterwards he tried to convince Mrs. Pratt of the propriety of his doctrine, and she at last told him: “Joseph, if you ever attempt any thing of the kind with me again, I will tell Mr. Pratt on his return home. I will certainly do it.”²

An 1884 document purportedly associated with Sarah Pratt (misidentified throughout the document as “Hyde,” no doubt because both apostles were named “Orson”) recounts:

As the wife of Orson ~~Hyde~~ \Pratt/ the Apostle, Mrs. ~~Hyde~~ \Pratt/ was very familiar with the workings of Mormonism for many years. Mrs Emma Smith and Mrs Heber C. Kimball were among her most intimate friends; specially intimate as she was left without any relative but her infant son while her husband was off on his missions to England. . . .

In Joseph Smith she had implicit confidence. ~~in~~. She accepted his inspired revelations; her husband had written many at his dictation. He appeared much interested in her affairs and brought Dr. John C. Bennett once

2. John C. Bennett, “Bennett’s Second and Third Letters,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1842; italics in original. He reprinted an edited version in *The History of the Saints: Or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*, 228–31.

or twice with him when he called: At first his calls were made upon her in her home where she was living with another family; then when she moved into a little house by herself his attentions became more frequent. He told her at one time that his wife Emma had become jealous of her; she at once called upon Emma and assured her of the folly of such an idea; she told her that she was thoroughly bound up in her husband, Mr. Hyde [sic], and had no thought for any one else. At one of his calls with Dr. Bennet, Joseph told Mrs. Hyde [sic] that there was something he wanted to say to her but dare not for fear she would lose respect for him. That seemed impossible to her, ~~but~~ \as/ she told him; he however postponed the announcement. . . .

Sometime after this Joseph called again and said that now he should tell her what he meant to have told her before. He said ~~it~~ that he knew she must be lonely now that her husband was away, and that it was not at all necessary that it should be so. She needed the company of some man, and he would stay with her when ~~the~~ she wished it; that there was no sin in it as long as she kept it to herself; that the sin was wholly in making it known ~~to~~ herself ~~or~~ to her husband or any one else. She replied to Joseph's proposal most indignantly; she told him she loved her husband most devotedly, and upbraided him \sharply/ for what he had suggested. He replied that if she told of it he had it in his power to ruin her character. From that time she discontinued her habit of going to his house to sew, and asked Emma Smith to send the work to her instead.

After he had left her ~~she~~ Mrs. Hyde [sic] was in \great/ distress of mind. Here she was ~~friendless and~~ alone scarcely more than twenty years of age, with one who was almost as a god to her counselling her in this way. . . . There was nothing said then as to Celestial Marriage or revelation.

One day Dr. Bennet, who knew of Smith's proposal to Mrs. Pratt and its rejection, and who in consequence confided to her some of Smith's iniquities, one day ~~he~~ called upon her, and told her that a revelation was to be made five days later, to Joseph Smith, authorizing polygamy; that Smith had been so general in his attentions ~~that~~ to the women that he was obliged to shield himself by these means.³

The author of this document is unknown; but it seems unlikely that Sarah was closely involved with its composition, if she was associated with it at all. The writer mistakenly substitutes the surname "Hyde" for "Pratt" in six different places, three times correcting it and three times not. It is an error Pratt herself would not have made and would have quickly rectified in the document if she had been given the opportunity. In addition, it contains numerous unsubstantiated claims and factual errors. I have found no documentation corroborating that Sarah Pratt was an "intimate friend" of "Mrs. Emma Smith and Mrs. Heber C. Kimball," nor have I found any evidence that Joseph Smith

3. [Anon.] "Workings of Mormonism Related by Mrs. Orson Pratt," 1-3.

paid “frequent” visits to Sarah Pratt’s home. Also undocumented is Emma’s alleged jealousy of Sarah, any teaching by Joseph Smith that adultery was not sinful if kept secret, or that Sarah Pratt was in the “habit of going to his [Joseph Smith’s] house to sew.” At the time, the Smiths lived in the Homestead, a small three-room dwelling with one room upstairs. It would have been crowded to have a sewing woman present on a daily basis. Chronologically the discussion that a “revelation was to be made five days later” is problematic. The alleged interaction between Joseph and Sarah occurred prior to July of 1841, but the revelation of celestial marriage (now D&C 132) was not written until two years later. Despite these numerous problems, Gary Bergera characterizes Bennett’s account as “accurate in many details.”⁴

In 1886, Sarah was quoted by anti-Mormon Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal, writing under the pseudonym of Wilhelm Wyl, who said she told him this version of the events:

When my husband went to England as a missionary, he got the promise from Joseph that I should receive provisions from the tithing-house.⁵ Shortly afterward Joseph made his propositions to me and they enraged me so that I refused to accept any help from the tithing-house or from the bishop. Having been always very clever and very busy with my needle, I began to take in sewing for the support of myself and children, and succeeded soon in making myself independent. When Bennett came to Nauvoo, Joseph brought him to my house, stating that Bennett wanted some sewing done, and that I should do it for the doctor. I assented and Bennett gave me a great deal of work to do. He knew that Joseph had his plans set on me; Joseph made no secret of them before Bennett, and went so far in his impudence as to make propositions to me in the presence of Bennett, his bosom friend. Bennett, who was of a sarcastic turn of mind, used to come and tell me about Joseph to tease and irritate me.⁶

These three reports are not corroborated by other witnesses other than the two participants, John C. Bennett and Sarah Bates Pratt, but are generally consistent with each other and claim, among other things, that Joseph Smith sought an illicit relationship with Sarah.

4. Gary James Bergera, “John C. Bennett, Joseph Smith, and the Beginnings of Mormon Plural Marriage in Nauvoo,” 60 note 50; see also Bergera, *Conflict in the Quorum: Orson Pratt, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith*, 16.

5. The Twelve Apostles left for England on April 26, 1839, from Far West, Missouri (D&C 118:5). At that time, there was no tithing office in the Church and the city of Nauvoo had yet to be chosen as the next gathering place.

6. W. Wyl [pseud. of Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal], *Mormon Portraits, or the Truth about Mormon Leaders from 1830 to 1886, Joseph Smith the Prophet, His Family and His Friends: A Study Based on Fact and Documents*, 61.

Story Two: John C. Bennett and Sarah Pratt Were Sexually Involved

Accounts from several other witnesses describe a very different situation concerning Sarah Pratt and John C. Bennett in 1840 and early 1841. As quoted in Chapter 19, Nauvoo resident and Church member Stephen Goddard signed an affidavit stating that, on October 6, 1840, “from the first night, until the last, with the exception of one night it being nearly a month, the Dr. was there as sure as the night came, and generally two or three times a day—for the first two or three nights he left about 9 o’clock—after that he remained later, sometimes till after midnight.”⁷ He also claimed that Sarah later moved into a separate house where she and Bennett were seen there “together, as it were, man and wife.”⁸

Goddard’s wife, Zeruah, not only made an affidavit confirming her husband’s statement, but swore out her own affidavit on August 28, 1842:

Dr. Bennett came to my house one night about 12 o’clock, and sat on or beside the bed where Mrs. Pratt was and cursed and swore very profanely at her; she told me next day that the Dr. was quick tempered and was mad at her, but gave no other reason. I concluded from circumstances that she had promised to meet him somewhere and had disappointed him; on another night I remonstrated with the Dr. and asked him what Orson Pratt would think, if he should know that you were so fond of his wife, and holding her hand so much; the Dr. replied that he could pull the wool over Orson’s eyes. . . .

My husband and I were frequently at Mrs. Pratt’s and stayed till after 10 o’clock in the night, and Dr. Bennett still remained there with her and her little child alone at that late hour.

On one occasion I came suddenly into the room where Mrs. Pratt and the Dr. were; she was lying on the bed and the Dr. was taking his hands out of her bosom; he was in the habit of sitting on the bed where Mrs. Pratt was lying, and lying down over her.

I would further state that from my own observation, I am satisfied that their conduct was anything but virtuous, and I know Mrs. Pratt is not a woman of truth, and I believe the statements which Dr. Bennett made concerning Joseph Smith are false, and fabricated for the purpose of covering his own iniquities, and enabling him to practice his base designs on the innocent.⁹

7. Stephen H. Goddard, Letter to Orson Pratt, July 23, 1842, in *Affidavits and Certificates, Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett’s Letters*. His wife, Zeruah, in the immediately following paragraph, certified the accuracy of her husband’s statement, and George W. Harris, a city alderman, certified their affidavits.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.* She also subscribed to this affidavit before George W. Harris, a Nauvoo alderman.

On July 28, 1842, J. B. Backenstos, the non-Mormon sheriff of Hancock County, signed the following affidavit:

Personally appeared before me Ebenezer Robinson an acting Justice of the Peace, in and for said county, J. B. Backenstos, who being duly sworn according to law, deposeth and saith, that some time during last winter, he accused Doctor John C. Bennett, with having an illicit intercourse with Mrs. Orson Pratt, and some others, when said Bennett replied that she made a first rate go, and from personal observations I should have taken said Doctor Bennett and Mrs. Pratt as man and wife, had I not known to the contrary, and further this deponent saith not.¹⁰

Richard Van Wagoner discounts this affidavit: "Backenstos's statement may be dismissed as slander—during the winter mentioned, Orson was in Nauvoo, and Sarah sick and pregnant with their daughter Celestia Larissa."¹¹ In fact, Backenstos did not date his accusation more precisely than "last winter" (1841–42), which accused Bennett of a previous sexual involvement (date unspecified) with Sarah Pratt. What prevented Backenstos from making the accusation closer to the alleged moral transgression? Backenstos, as one of Bennett's former followers, was clearly positioned to have had such a conversation with the Doctor.¹²

Ebenezer Robinson reported in 1890: "In the spring of 1841 Dr. Bennett had a small neat house built for Elder Orson Pratt's family [Sarah and one male child] and commenced boarding with them. Elder Pratt was absent on a mission to England."¹³ John D. Lee recalled: "[John C. Bennett] became intimate with Orson Pratt's wife, while Pratt was on a mission. That he built her a fine frame house, and lodged with her, and used her as his wife."¹⁴

Mary Ettie V. Coray Smith, a sometimes confused informant, related:

Orson Pratt, then, as now [1858], one of the "Twelve," was sent by Joseph Smith on a mission to England. During his absence, his first (*i.e.* his lawful) wife, Sarah, occupied a house owned by John C. Bennett, a man of some note, and at that time, quartermaster-general of the Nauvoo Legion. Sarah was an educated woman, of fine accomplishments, and attracted the attention of the Prophet Joseph, who called upon her one day, and alleged he found John C. Bennett in bed with her. As we lived

10. "Affidavit of J. B. Backenstos," in *ibid.*

11. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History*, 34.

12. Catherine Fuller Warren named Backenstos and several others of Bennett's followers in her testimony before the Nauvoo High Council, May 25, 1842, admitting that Backenstos had paid her two dollars for sex.

13. Ebenezer Robinson, "Items of Personal History," *The Return*, 1, no. 11 (November 1890): 362.

14. John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 148.

but across the street from her house we heard the whole uproar. Sarah ordered the Prophet out of the house, and the Prophet used obscene language to her.¹⁵

Other witnesses provided similar testimony that a relationship existed between John C. Bennett and Sarah Pratt that exceeded the bounds of propriety. After reviewing the available evidence, historian D. Michael Quinn concluded it to be a sexual relationship or even a marriage by referring to her as “Sarah M. Bates (Pratt, Bennett, Pratt).”¹⁶

Orson Pratt’s “Mind Temporarily Gave Way”

Returning from England on July 19, 1841, Orson Pratt apparently heard little concerning Sarah’s alleged extramarital involvement with Joseph Smith or John C. Bennett or he was unimpressed by the accusations.¹⁷ It is not clear whether Joseph Smith personally introduced him to the principle of plural marriage, as he had done with Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, John Taylor, and other apostles—indeed, almost as soon as they arrived.¹⁸ Biographer Breck England wrote: “If he [Orson Pratt] did hear it [plural marriage] that summer, his reaction is unknown. He was not at that time required to enter the plural marriage covenant.”¹⁹ Joseph Smith may have chosen to deal with Orson Pratt differently than with the other members of the Quorum of the Twelve.

The first signal of Orson Pratt’s discontent occurred on May 11, 1842, ten months after his return from England, when his signature was not included on a document withdrawing fellowship from General John C. Bennett that was signed by all other members of the Twelve who were present in Nauvoo.²⁰ The absence of Orson’s name is conspicuous, but the precise reason is not known. The schism apparently continued to widen in ensuing weeks, though no contemporary details are available. On July 5, William M. Allred, the husband of Sarah Pratt’s sister, Orissa,²¹ wrote to John C. Bennett stating: “Mr.

15. Nelson Winch Green, ed., *Fifteen Years among the Mormons: Being the Narrative of Mrs. Mary Ettie V. Smith*, 31.

16. D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, 503, 536.

17. Elden J. Watson, ed., *The Orson Pratt Journals*, 143–77.

18. According to Bergera, *Conflict in the Quorum*, 15, “Nor did Pratt reveal the extent of his own knowledge, if any, of ‘the new and everlasting covenant’ of marriage before mid-1842.”

19. Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt*, 77.

20. “Notice,” *Times and Seasons*, June 15, 1842, 830.

21. Born December 24, 1819, near Nashville, Tennessee, William Moore Allred was baptized in 1832 and married Sarah Pratt’s sister, Orissa Bates, January 9, 1842.

Pratt would write, but he is *afraid to*. He wishes to be *perfectly still*, until your second letter comes out—then you may hear.”²²

John C. Bennett's story of Joseph Smith seeking Sarah as a spiritual wife was published in the July 15 issue of the *Sangamo Journal*.²³ Unsurprisingly, Bennett painted himself as a noble and virtuous gentleman. Sarah apparently sided with Bennett, thus creating a profoundly distressing situation for Orson. Joseph Smith's diary for that day notes:

This A.M. early a report was in circulation that O.P. [Orson Pratt] was missing. A letter of his writing was found directed to his wife stating to the effect that he was going away. Soon as this was known Joseph summoned the principal men of the city and workmen on the Temple to meet at the Temple Grove where he ordered them to proceed immediately throughout the city in search of him lest he should have laid violent hands on himself. After considerable search had been made, but to no effect a meeting was called at the Grove where Joseph stated before the public a general outline of J.C. Bennetts conduct and especially with regard to sis P [Sarah Pratt] . . . O. P. [Orson Pratt] returned at night. He was seen about 2 miles this side Warsaw, set on a log. He says he has concluded to do right.²⁴

In 1890, Ebenezer Robinson recalled: “Under these circumstances his [Orson's] mind temporarily gave way, and he wandered away, no one knew where. . . . He was found some five miles below Nauvoo, sitting on a rock on the bank of the Mississippi river.”²⁵ The explanation of temporary insanity, while extreme, would not be required to explain the intense emotional dilemma of a young husband and devoted apostle who found himself in a situation where he had to confront apparently irreconcilable contradictions; it would be natural for Orson to seek solitude in which to appraise the information and try to come to emotional terms with it. At some point, apparently during that agonizing day, Orson captured his turmoil in poignant prose:

I am a ruined man! My future prospects are blasted! The testimony upon both sides seems to be equal: The one in direct contradiction to the other—how to decide I know not neither does it matter for let it be either way my temporal happiness is gone in this world if the testimonies of my wife and others are true then I have been deceived for twelve years past—

22. William M. Allred, Letter to John C. Bennett, July 5, 1842; printed in Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 46; emphasis Allred's.

23. John C. Bennett, “Bennett's Second and Third Letters,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1842; also printed in Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 226–32.

24. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Vol. 2, Journal, 1832–1842*, 398–99.

25. Ebenezer Robinson, “Items of Personal History of the Editor—Including Some Items of Church History Not Generally Known,” *The Return* 2, no. 11 (November 1890): 363. See also *History of the Church*, 5:60–61.

my hopes are blasted and gone as it were in a moment—my long toils and labors have been in vain. If on the other hand the other testimonies are true then my family are ruined forever. Where then is my hope in this world? It is gone—gone not to be recovered!! Oh God, why is it thus with me! My sorrows are greater than I can bear! Where I am henceforth it matters not.²⁶

Two days later on July 17, the day after Orson's safe return, Brigham Young wrote to Orson's brother, Parley, who was still in England on his mission: "Br Orson Pratt is in trubble in consequence of his wife, his feelings are so rought up that he dos not know whether his wife is wrong, or whether Josephs testimony and others are wrong and due Ly and he decived for 12 years or not; he is all but crazy about matters, you may aske what the matter is concirning Sister P.—it is enoph, and doct. J. C. Bennett could tell all about it if he himself & hir- - - - "27

Just five days later on July 22, Wilson Law presented a resolution attempting to suppress Bennett's influence at a public meeting. Whatever Orson meant, by the report that he had resolved to "do right," it apparently did not mean that he fully accepted Joseph Smith's account. The *Times and Seasons* description of the meeting, published on August 1, reported:

At a meeting of the citizens of the city of Nauvoo held in said city at the meeting ground [near the temple site], July 22d 1842. . . . The meeting was called to order by the chairman, who stated the object of the meeting to be to obtain an expression of the public mind in reference to the reports gone abroad, calumniating the character of Pres. Joseph Smith. Gen. Wilson Law then rose and presented the following resolution.

(Resolved) That, having heard that John C. Bennett was circulating many base falsehoods respecting a number of the citizens of Nauvoo, and especially against our worthy and respected Mayor, Joseph Smith, we do hereby manifest to the world that so far as we are acquainted with Joseph Smith we know him to be a good, moral, virtuous, peaceable and patriotic man, and a firm supporter of law, justice and equal rights; that he at all times upholds and keeps inviolate the constitution of this State and of the United States.

A vote was then called and the resolution adopted by a large concourse of citizens, numbering somewhere about a thousand men. Two or three, voted in the negative.

26. Orson Pratt, Letter, addressee unnamed, n.d., ca. July 15–19, 1842. Bergera, *Conflict in the Quorum*, 23 note 52, clarifies: "This document, apparently in Pratt's hand, is in the uncatalogued Orson Pratt Papers, LDS Church Archives. It has been in the possession of the LDS Church History Department since at least the early 1970s when historian D. Michael Quinn examined it." Although this document is restricted, I received permission to view it on microfilm.

27. Brigham Young, Letter to Parley P. Pratt, Nauvoo, July 17, 1842.

Elder Orson Pratt then rose and spoke at some length in explanation of his negative vote. Pres. Joseph Smith spoke in reply

Question to Elder Pratt, "Have you personally a knowledge of any immoral act in me toward the female sex, or in any other way?" Answer, by Elder O. Pratt, "Personally, toward the female sex, I have not."

Elder O. Pratt responded at some length.²⁸

Church leaders sought to assist their troubled apostle-colleague during the ensuing weeks. Brigham Young recorded on August 8, 1842: "Assisted by Elders H. C. Kimball and Geo. A. Smith, I spent several days laboring with Elder Orson Pratt, whose mind became so darkened by the influence and statements of his wife, that he came out in rebellion against Joseph, refusing to believe his testimony or obey his counsel. He said he would believe his wife in preference to the Prophet. Joseph told him if he did believe his wife and follow her suggestions, he would go to hell."²⁹ Apostle John Taylor similarly recalled: "When I saw that he was very severely tried, as I had always held pleasant relations with him, I took every pains that I possibly could to explain the situation of things, to remove his doubts, and to satisfy his feelings, but without avail. At one time I talked with him for nearly two hours, to prevent, if possible, his apostasy or departure from the church. But he was very sorely tried, and was very self-willed and stubborn in his feelings, and would not yield. His feelings were bitter towards the Prophet Joseph Smith and others."³⁰

Caught between two stories, one from his wife whom he loved and the other from his Prophet, to whom he had been unquestionably devoted for twelve years, Orson wavered between the two, unable to find a resolution that honored both. After a month of turmoil, he apparently took enough of a stand in accepting Sarah's story that both were excommunicated on August 20, 1842, he for "insubordination," and she for "adultery."³¹ Apparently this

28. "John C. Bennett," *Times and Seasons* 3 (August 1, 1842): 869. The Prophet's diary for July 22 records: "A.M. at the stand conflicting with O.P. and correcting the public mind with regard to reports put in circulation by Bennett & others." In Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Volume 2, Journal, 1832-1842*, 400.

29. Elden Jay Watson, ed., *Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1801-1844*, 120-21.

30. G. Homer Durham, comp. and ed., *The Gospel Kingdom: Selections from the Writings and Discourses of John Taylor*, 193.

31. Richard S. Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, *A Book of Mormons*, 212. I have been unable to find primary historical documentation of the Church disciplinary action against Sarah Pratt that Van Wagoner and Walker describe. Michael Marquardt explained: "As far as I know there is no actual record that Sarah Pratt was excommunicated. She was rebaptized, along with Orson Pratt and Lydia Granger on January 20, 1843. It is possible that there were no minutes taken of the meeting when Orson Pratt was cut off from the church by three members of the Quorum of the Twelve. Willard Richards was out of town and would not have recorded the meeting."

punishment and signal of separation from Orson's identity community had so sharp an effect on his mind that, the very next day, Orson swerved back to allegiance to the Prophet. Joseph Smith's diary noted on August 21: "Orson Pratt has also signified his intention of coming out in defence of the truth and go to preaching."³² He did not immediately depart on a mission, but his announcement indicates the depths of his turmoil.

Rumors concerning Orson Pratt's possible collaboration with John C. Bennett prompted Orson to publish a letter in *The Wasp*, then being published in Nauvoo by William Smith, on September 3, 1842: "I hereby certify, that I have not been absent from Nauvoo during twenty four hours, at any one time, since I returned from my English Mission, which was upwards of one year ago. Neither have I renounced the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, but believe that its doctrine, which has been extensively published in both America and Europe, is pure and according to the scriptures of eternal truth, and merits the candid investigation of all lovers of righteousness."³³

Furthermore, in addition to making a strong declaration of faith, Orson continued by distancing himself completely from Bennett saying: "We have never at any time written any letter or letters to Dr. J. C. Bennett, on any subject whatever. Neither are we 'preparing to leave and expose Mormonism' but intend to make NAUVOO OUR RESIDENCE AND MORMONISM OUR MOTTO."³⁴ No contemporary record of Sarah's reaction to these turbulent events is known. However, the fact that she did not leave Orson, the Church, or Nauvoo must be interpreted as a statement of continued loyalty, even though her personal and marital history would continue to prove complicated in the following years.

Sorting through the Conflicting Claims

Gary James Bergera observed that Bennett's "mixture of fact and fantasy makes it difficult to know when he is telling the truth."³⁵ As discussed in the last chapter, I find it unlikely that Bennett learned about eternal marriage in Nauvoo, thus lessening the likelihood that the Prophet would have divulged to Bennett secret plans to marry Sarah polygamously or to get her as a "spiritual

Email to Brian Hales, October 3, 2008. Bergera, *Conflict in the Quorum*, 27, notes that Orson Pratt was "cut off from the church. . . . Surprisingly, no mention is made of any action against Sarah."

32. Jesse, *The Papers of Joseph Smith—Journal, 1832–1842*, 2:421.

33. Orson Pratt, "For the Wasp," *The Wasp* 1, no. 20 (September 3, 1842): 4.

34. *Ibid.*; emphasis Pratt's. By "we," Orson was using a common nineteenth-century authorial device, which should not necessarily be read as speaking for Sarah as well.

35. Gary James Bergera, "'Illicit Intercourse': Plural Marriage, and the Nauvoo Stake High Council, 1840–1844," 70 note 55. See also Andrew F. Smith, *The Saintry Scoundrel: The Life and Times of Dr. John Cook Bennett*, 80–83.

wife" (a term Joseph Smith never used when referring to his plural spouses), even assuming that Joseph had such intentions.

Larry Foster has suggested the possibility that it was Sarah who made advances to Joseph Smith: "Allegations that Smith asked married women to become his wives may be instances of what might be called the 'Potiphar's wife syndrome,' in which women to whom Smith refused his attentions alleged that he had attempted to seduce them."³⁶

In Salt Lake City, Joseph Smith III visited Sarah Pratt in 1876 when she was fifty-nine and had been separated from Orson, who by then had ten plural wives, for thirteen years. He recorded yet another version of uncertain accuracy due either to Sarah's willingness to prevaricate, her reshaping of her experience to a version that exonerated her, or to Joseph's rosy recollection of problematic testimony or a combination.³⁷

She [Sarah Pratt] told me to proceed [with the interview] and the following conversation took place.

"Did you know my father in Nauvoo?"

"Yes, I knew him well."

Were you acquainted with his general deportment in society, especially towards women?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever know him to be guilty of any impropriety in speech or conduct towards women in society or elsewhere?"

"No sir, never. Your father was always a gentleman, and I never heard any language from him or saw any conduct of his that was not proper and respectful."

"Did he ever visit you or at your house?"

"He did."

Did he ever at such times or at any other time or place make improper overtures to you, or proposals of an improper nature—begging your pardon for the apparent indelicacy of the question?"

To this Mrs. Pratt replied, quietly but firmly, "No, Joseph; your father never said an improper word to me in his life. He knew better."

"Sister Pratt, it has been frequently told that he behaved improperly in your presence, and I have been told that I dare not come to you and ask you

36. Larry Foster, "Between Two Worlds: The Origins of Shaker Celibacy, Oneida Community Complex Marriage, and Mormon Polygamy," 254. This view is supported by two accounts: Alexander Neibaur, *Diary*, May 24, 1844, and Bathsheba Smith, *Deposition*, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent's Testimony, Part 3, p. 318, questions 564–77.

37. See, for example, Sarah Pratt's inaccurate claims in Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 54. For a contrasting account from Joseph Smith III and Malissia Lott concerning their October 20, 1885 visit, see Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 593–95.

about your relations with him, for fear you would tell me things which would be unwelcome to me.”

“You need have no such fear,” she repeated. “Your father was never guilty of an action or proposal of any improper nature in my house, towards me, or in my presence, at any time or place. There is no truth in the reports that have been circulated about him in this regard. He was always the Christian gentleman, and a noble man.”

That I thanked Mrs. Pratt very warmly for her testimony in these matters my readers may be very sure.³⁸

The scenario is further complicated by the possibility that the Prophet may, in fact, have discussed the possibility of an “eternity only” sealing with Sarah. Interviewed in Salt Lake City by Wilhelm Wyl in 1886, she reportedly told Wyl that Joseph “made his propositions to me and they enraged me.”³⁹ In a meeting of the Twelve Apostles on January 20, 1843, Joseph Smith told Orson that Sarah “lied about me.” The Prophet continued: “I never made the offer which she said I did.”⁴⁰ What would he have meant by “offer”? Scanty documentation of Joseph’s other plural relationships establishes that at least some of his proposals during that period to legally married women were for “eternity only.” Thus, he may, in fact, have had such a discussion with Sarah, which she either misunderstood or sensationalized, especially if she was, in fact, improperly involved with Bennett and was attempting to deflect attention from that relationship.

Orson and Sarah Pratt Are Rebaptized

On January 10, 1843, a little over two months after John C. Bennett published his book, he continued his hostilities with the Prophet by sending a letter addressed to both Sidney Rigdon and Orson Pratt that obviously assumed they were disillusioned with Joseph and would assist him in his attacks.⁴¹ Bennett wrote:

Dear Friends:—It is a long time since I have written you, and I should now much desire to see you; but I leave tonight for Missouri, to meet the

38. Mary Audentia Smith Anderson, ed., *The Memoirs of President Joseph Smith (1832–1914)*, 33–34.

39. Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 61.

40. Minutes of the Quorum of the Twelve, January 20, 1843. See also Richard S. Van Wagoner, “Sarah M. Pratt: The Shaping of an Apostate,” 80. Reportedly visitors heard Joseph Smith refer to Sarah Pratt on July 14, 1842, as a “[Whore] from her mother’s breast.” John C. Bennett, “A Rumor—Holy Joe Demanded,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 29, 1842.

41. See discussion in Watson, *The Orson Pratt Journals*, 177–88.

messenger charged with the arrest of Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Lyman Wight and others, for murder, burglary, treason, etc., etc., who will be demanded in a few days on new indictments, found by the grand Jury of a called court, on the original evidence and in relation to which a *nolle prosequi* was entered by the district attorney. New proceedings have been gotten up on the old charges and no habeus corpus can then save them. We shall try Smith on the Boggs case⁴² when we get him into Missouri. The war goes bravely on; and, although Smith thinks he is now safe, the enemy is near, even at the door. He is a murderer, and must suffer the penalty of the law. . . .

P.S. Will Mr. Rigdon please hand this letter to Mr. Pratt after reading.⁴³

Sidney Rigdon received the letter first; and rather than warning Joseph Smith of the grand jury and the “new proceedings,” he gave the letter to Orson who immediately informed the Prophet. Orson’s behavior signaled a change of heart, confirming his loyalty to Joseph. Both he and Sarah were rebaptized on January 20.⁴⁴ The Prophet then rather ambiguously counseled Orson: “I will not advise you to break up your family—unless it were asked of me. Then I would council [sic] you to get a bill from your wife and marry a virtuous woman.”⁴⁵ Obviously, the Prophet did not hold Sarah Pratt and her morals in high esteem in 1842.

In May 1843, Orson wrote to his friend John Van Cott saying: “J. C. Bennett has published lies concerning myself & family & the people with which I am connected. His book I have read with the greatest disgust[.] No candid honest man can or will believe it. He has disgraced himself in [the] eyes of all civilized society who will dispise his very name.”⁴⁶ In 1878, when Orson had married ten plural wives and had been separated from Sarah for fifteen years, he co-authored a report with Joseph F. Smith in which he recalled “his own trial in regard to this matter in Nauvoo, and said it was because he got his information from a wicked source, from those disaffected, but as soon as he learned the truth he was satisfied.”⁴⁷ Although he speaks in generalities here, obviously by the “wicked source,” he meant Sarah herself.

42. Morris A. Thurston, “The Boggs Shooting and Attempted Extradition: Joseph Smith’s Most Famous Case,” 5–56.

43. John C. Bennett, Letter to Sidney Rigdon and Orson Pratt, erroneously dated January 10, 1842—likely one year later; typescript in Journal History, misfiled under January 10, 1842. See also *History of the Church*, 5:250–51.

44. Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 294–95.

45. Minutes of the Quorum of the Twelve, January 20, 1843, See also Van Wagoner, “Sarah M. Pratt,” 80.

46. Parley P. Pratt, Letter to John Van Cott (his cousin), May 7, 1843, with a postscript by Orson Pratt.

47. Joseph F. Smith and Orson Pratt, “Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F.

In late 1845, more than a year after the Prophet's death, Sidney Rigdon reported that in Nauvoo three years earlier: "Pratt resented the insult offered his wife, and on the public stand, called Smith a liar, and said he knew him [Smith] to be a liar."⁴⁸ Orson repudiated this 1842 statement and told Rigdon: "He said that he had got a bad spirit when he said so, and that he had repented of it. Thus literally telling the people that all Smith said about his wife was true."⁴⁹

In the spring of 1848, Sarah, Orson's legal wife, accompanied her husband when he was called to preside over the European Mission; they returned in July 1849. Other than this time together, Orson served alone on numerous other missions until 1868. Men typically did not take their plural wives with them on missionary assignments because the woman would not be recognized by local law enforcement as a legal spouse and could expose the man to bigamy or adultery charges. Sarah lived alone in Salt Lake City in a home arranged for by Orson; how she managed financially is not clear, and Orson was never in comfortable circumstances; but she presumably received some support from him. In 1874, she was excommunicated for "apostasy." The following year, she was called as a witness before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Elections to testify regarding polygamy charges against Apostle George Q. Cannon, elected delegate from the Territory of Utah. She began by assuring her audience that Cannon had three wives. When questioned about her own beliefs, she responded: "I have not been a believer in the Mormon doctrines for thirty years and am now considered an apostate, I believe."⁵⁰

1886 Accusations of Sarah Pratt

On May 21, 1886, as already noted, Wyl interviewed Sarah, publishing her alleged comments in his book, *Mormon Portraits*.⁵¹ Her recollections, partially quoted and partially paraphrased by Wyl, are still of interest to researchers today, but many statements are inaccurate or exaggerated. For example, Sarah Pratt alleged: "Next door to my house was a house of bad reputation. One single woman lived there, not very attractive. She used to be visited by people from Carthage whenever they came to Nauvoo. Joseph used to come on horseback, ride up to the house and tie his horse to a tree, many of which

Smith," 788.

48. Sidney Rigdon, "Tour East," *Messenger and Advocate of the Church of Christ* 2, no. 2 (December 1845): 1.

49. *Ibid.*

50. "Delegate Cannon's Case," *Salt Lake Herald*, *Journal History*, January 22, 1875, in Richard E. Turley Jr., *Selected Collections from the Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Vol. 2, DVD #6.

51. Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 10.

stood before the house. Then he would enter the house of the woman from the back. I have seen him do this repeatedly.”⁵²

Sarah's report (as filtered through Wyl) is intriguing in several respects. First is Joseph Smith's odd mixture of shamelessness and openness. It seems contradictory that he would openly “ride up to the house [of bad reputation] and tie his horse to a tree,” since Joseph's horse was known to many Church members and leaving it in plain sight would have sent a message to all passersby that he was inside the house. Equally puzzlingly is Sarah's statement that he would walk around the house to enter by the back door. Either he should have concealed his horse *and* his entrance or neither. Further, Joseph took well-documented pains to maintain extreme secrecy in dealing with his genuine plural wives.

That the Prophet would need to ride his horse to the house is also puzzling. Sarah's house was not far distant from Joseph Smith's.⁵³ At that time, traveling by horseback required the rider to take the horse from the stable and saddle it before riding. Unless he was planning to run several errands, such an action would have been an opportunity for Emma, one of the children, a boarder, or a passing member to inquire where he was going, thus requiring him to invent an errand. If his only errand was to visit the woman of unsavory reputation, such elaborate preparations seem counterintuitive.

It is also surprising that Sarah Pratt was the only witness to Joseph's behavior, at least part of which (the ride) was undeniably public and even though he allegedly did this “repeatedly.” Almost any Church member might have seen such unconcealed activities and mentioned it, even innocently, given the intense interest in Joseph's whereabouts and behavior. If the woman's unsavory reputation was known, then such a mention would have started a rumor that would not have been easy to stifle. Believers would have been disillusioned at Joseph's double standard and enemies would have undoubtedly exploited the reports in many ways.

Wyl also quotes Sarah Pratt saying: “Elizabeth Ann Whitney, the second ‘lady,’ [of the Relief Society], had been seduced by Joseph.”⁵⁴ Sarah Pratt is the only person to make such an allegation. No other historical accounts,

52. *Ibid.*, 60.

53. Records show that Orson Pratt owned several properties in Nauvoo (Nauvoo block 135, lot 4, Kimball survey, block 13, lot 4, Wells survey block 8, lot 1 and block 9, lot 2; available at <http://earlylds.com/index.html>, accessed July 30, 2009). Sarah roomed with other families as well in the 1840–41 period. I have not identified the precise house “next door” to Sarah's house. However, it could be argued that, in light of Nauvoo's small geographic size (the lower section was less than a mile square and the upper section was perhaps a third that size) a horse might not have been required to traverse the entire width or length.

54. Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 90.

anti-Mormon or otherwise, repeat this allegation, nor has my research found any sexual or polygamous connection between the Prophet and Elizabeth. That Pratt would have been privy to such information is less likely; she was never admitted as a member of the Nauvoo Relief Society, probably due to concerns about her character.⁵⁵ As discussed in Chapter 18, Elizabeth Ann Whitney and her husband, Bishop Newel K. Whitney, accepted the principle of plural marriage in the summer of 1842 when both experienced a vision confirming the correctness of plural marriage: "We were seemingly wrapt in a heavenly vision, a halo of light encircled us, and we were convinced in our own minds that God heard and approved our prayers and intercedings before Him. Our hearts were comforted."⁵⁶ They consented to the sealing of their daughter, Sarah Ann, to Joseph Smith; and three days later, Elizabeth and Newel were sealed for time and eternity by the Prophet.

In addition, Elizabeth Whitney appears to have retained her belief in Joseph Smith as a Prophet throughout her life. In 1879, she recounted: "He [Joseph Smith] prophesied to me that I should have another daughter [besides Sarah Ann], who would be a strength and support to me to soothe my declining years."⁵⁷ This prophecy was probably dictated near the date of Sarah Ann's sealing to the Prophet on July 27, 1842. "In January, 1844," Elizabeth Ann notes, "my youngest daughter was born. She was the first child born heir to the Holy Priesthood, and in the New and Everlasting Covenant in this dispensation."⁵⁸

Wyl recorded another quotation reportedly from Sarah Pratt:

"I have told you that the prophet Joseph used to frequent houses of ill-fame. Mrs. White,⁵⁹ a very pretty and attractive woman, once confessed to me that she made a business of it to be hospitable to the captains of the Mississippi steamboats. She told me that Joseph had made her acquaintance very soon after his arrival in Nauvoo, and that he had visited her dozens of times."⁶⁰

55. Maurine C. Ward, "'This Institution Is a Good One': The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, 17 March 1842 to 16 March 1844," 172.

56. Elizabeth Ann Whitney, "A Leaf from an Autobiography," *Woman's Exponent* 7 (December 15, 1878): 105; see also Carol Cornwall Madsen, ed., *In Their Own Words: Women and the Story of Nauvoo*, 201–2.

57. Elizabeth Ann Whitney, "A Leaf from an Autobiography," *Woman's Exponent*, 7, no. 18 (February 15, 1879): 191.

58. *Ibid.*

59. This may be a reference to Emeline White who, John C. Bennett said, received a letter from "Old White Hat," apparently a reference to Joseph Smith. See Bennett, "Gen. Bennett's 4th Letter," *Sangamo Journal*, July 22, 1842, and his *The History of the Saints: Or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*, 235.

60. Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 60.

This is a second account from Sarah Pratt, albeit, secondhand, accusing Joseph Smith of frequenting a house of ill repute. Her informant, "Mrs. White," made no secret to Sarah that she was the proprietor of a house of prostitution. Wyl lists White's father as Davison Hibard, a general in the Nauvoo Legion, which is incorrect.⁶¹ Like Sarah Pratt's other accusations, plausibility problems accompany the allegation that Joseph Smith frequented a house of prostitution "repeatedly" or "dozens of times" without anyone else, anti-Mormon or Latter-day Saint, ever noticing and making the charge. Regardless, from the 1820s forward, Joseph Smith was being watched by critics eager to discredit him. Church members were likewise scrutinizing his behavior, seeking inspiration in his words and deed but also, for the same reason, supersensitive to possible hypocrisy or transgression. Joseph Smith rarely, if ever, traveled alone. It seems unlikely that he might have engaged even once in the conduct asserted by Wyl/Pratt without drawing attention to himself. Although it is true that he frequently moved about Nauvoo, including occasionally visiting plural wives, accompanied by one of his clerks or by his diarist, William Clayton, these men accepted those relationships as genuine, though secret, marriages, not as visits to a prostitute.

On March 31, 1886, Sarah Pratt had signed a statement affirming: "This certifies that I was well acquainted with the Mormon Leaders and Church in general, and know that the principle [sic] statements in John Bennetts Book on Mormonism are true."⁶² This statement would either validate the truthfulness of *The History of the Saints* or diminish Sarah's credibility as a reliable witness. Living in Salt Lake City as she did, she could not have expected her statement to be widely regarded as truthful, nor was it. Church leaders denounced Wyl's book, although they did not single out Sarah beyond her excommunication. Of the six children she and Orson had together, only one remained active in the Church, an obvious indication that her disillusionment was passed on as skepticism to the next generation.⁶³

Summary

John C. Bennett's ability to generate confusion and strife was illustrated in his interactions with Sarah Pratt. Bennett said Joseph sought Sarah as a spiritual wife, while Sarah accused the Prophet of making an indecent proposal or even a seduction attempt. In response, Joseph and several other witnesses accused Bennett and Sarah of adultery during Orson's absence on a mission.

61. *Ibid.*, 285, 301. See Hamilton Gardner, "The Nauvoo Legion, 1840–1845—A Unique Military Organization," 181–97.

62. Sarah Pratt, Statement, March 31, 1886.

63. Van Wagoner, "Sarah M. Pratt," 90 note 5.

After a surprisingly long period of quiescence, Orson reacted with emotional turmoil, rejecting Joseph Smith's description of the events, which led to the Pratts' excommunications. Within a few months, however, Orson and Sarah were rebaptized. Orson became a staunch defender of the principle of plural marriage and of Joseph Smith's prophetic role. Years later, Sarah left the Church for the second and last time.