

SEARCHING FOR “HAPPINESS”: JOSEPH SMITH’S ALLEGED AUTHORSHIP OF THE 1842 LETTER TO NANCY RIGDON

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“HAPPINESS IS THE OBJECT AND DESIGN of our existence, and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the

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commandments of God.” This teaching attributed to Joseph Smith is one of the most well known and oft quoted. Many members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints see this teaching of their founding prophet as a succinct and beautiful statement, not only giving the purpose of humankind’s creation, but also a simple explanation of how that happiness can be achieved. It has been quoted in firesides and talks, in Sunday school lessons, and in apologetic writings. Yet despite the nearly ubiquitous acceptance of this teaching, historical inquiry and examination of the source of this teaching and its provenance has generally been superficial and insufficient.

Many would be surprised to learn that the source of this iconic Joseph Smith teaching was perhaps one of Smith’s greatest adversaries, John C. Bennett. Once a member of the First Presidency and a highly praised leader and mayor of Nauvoo, Illinois, allegations of false teaching and sexual indiscretions led to Bennett’s resignation from his office and excommunication from the Church in mid 1842.¹ Following Bennett’s schism with the LDS Church in Nauvoo, he proceeded to expose what he claimed to be the secret inner workings of Mormonism. He published a variety of documents and statements in the Springfield, Illinois-based *Sangamo Journal* and in other papers designed to discredit Mormonism in general and Smith in particular. Bennett implicated Smith in the assassination attempt on former governor of Missouri Lilbourn Boggs and asserted that Smith was scurrilously demanding the property of his converts in Nauvoo for his own personal gain. Perhaps most damning, Bennett declared that Smith had seduced “hundreds of single and married females” by means of introducing a system of “spiritual wifery” that Bennett contended was all too physical in its design to gratify Joseph Smith’s libidinous “licentiousness.”²

Among the “hundreds of such cases” of which Bennett claimed to have knowledge was the experience of Nancy Rigdon, the nineteen-year-old daughter of Sidney Rigdon, counselor in the First Presidency of the church. Bennett avowed that Smith had told him of his desire to make Nancy Rigdon a “spiritual wife” and that he had offered Bennett a substantial cash reward if he could effect such a union for him. Bennett further alleged that after he adamantly refused to help

¹For a complete history of Bennett’s life and affiliation with Mormonism, see Andrew F. Smith, *The Sainly Scoundrel: The Life and Times of Dr. John Cook Bennett* (Champaign: Illinois University Press, 1997).

²“Astounding Mormon Disclosures,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 8, 1842.

Justice and propriety to take Bennett's word for the truth or fallacy of the curious thing. Joseph Smith is not the author."⁷

Despite these public and private denials of authorship, the alleged letter to Nancy Rigdon, often referred to as the "Happiness Letter," because of its theological declaration at the outset—"Happiness is the object and design of our existence"—somehow eventually made its way into the Manuscript History of the Church. The text of it was subsequently published, without any introduction or explanation, in the serialized form of the "History of Joseph Smith" in the *Deseret News* in 1855.⁸ Though no original manuscript of the letter is extant and Bennett connected the letter to serious allegations of impropriety against Joseph Smith, the publication of it in the official History of the Church was enough to grant it unquestioned authenticity to later members of the Church and historians. Bennett's allegation that the context of the letter was the sinister intentions of Joseph Smith have similarly granted it a level of authenticity with critics—those opposed to the Mormon assertion that Joseph Smith was a prophet and those who have accepted Bennett's claim that Smith was instead a sexual deviant driven by carnal lust rather than revelatory injunction. The text of the letter has since been quoted extensively both by members of the LDS faith as well as those who are opposed to Smith and his teachings. Each group attributes the contents of the letter to Joseph Smith, but for starkly contrasting reasons. Historians have also generally accepted the document as authentically Smith's because, though controversial in nature, the LDS church itself endorsed the document by publishing it in the official *History of the Church*, and it has been extensively quoted in sermons and curriculum materials as well.⁹

Despite its popularity, however, it presents special problems of provenance and authenticity to historians. These problems compound the difficulty with which the document can be contextually understood. In effect, historians cannot demonstrate with certainty that Joseph Smith wrote the letter, as they can with other Joseph

⁷"Bennett's Letters," *Wasp*, August 27, 1842.

⁸"History of Joseph Smith: August 1842," *Deseret News*, December 12, 1855.

⁹Originally published in 1909. Volume 5 of the *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* contains the "Happiness Letter" and has been republished in several subsequent editions. (Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 5:134.

understanding of this document and to outline the reasons to both doubt and to impute Smith's authorship of the document. The ultimate determination of authorship hinges on the reasons why it was first excluded and then later included in the Manuscript History of the Church. As those reasons can only be met with speculation, a measure of caution should be employed when assigning authorship. Rather than attributing it casually and definitively to Joseph Smith, historians and theologians, Mormons and non-Mormons alike, should be aware of the questioned provenance when using the document and draw measured rather than expansive conclusions. Simply put, if this were any other document, historians would greatly question the claims of authorship for the reasons that will follow.

BENNETT AND PROVENANCE

That some type of letter existed seems to almost be beyond doubt. Sidney Rigdon's published denial does not deny the existence of a letter, but rather that it was not "written by said Mr. Smith, nor in his hand writing, but by another person, and in another person's hand writing." How and when Bennett obtained the letter is not entirely clear, nor can his declaration of provenance be verified. Writing his second letter to the *Sangamo Journal* from Carthage, Illinois, on July 2, 1842, only days after the confrontation between the Rigdons and Smith occurred over the Bennett allegations, Bennett referenced the letter but said that he did not have it in his possession. He stated that he had "seen it, so has her father, and various other persons." In his third letter two days later, Bennett explained that he was "now going over to Missouri to have Joe taken to justice" and was then going to travel "to New York to publish a book, to be called 'The History of the Saints.'"¹¹ On July 7, he was still in Carthage, when he swore out an affidavit against Porter Rockwell,¹² but by July 15, Bennett had already arrived in St. Louis and published statements implicating Smith in the attempted murder of former governor Lilburn Boggs. He wrote his fifth denunciatory letter from Louisville on July 23 and did not write the sixth letter until August 3, while onboard a ship in Lake Erie on his way to New York City. It was in this final letter that Bennett, for the first time, reported the text of the "Happiness Letter." He explained, "I proceed to transcribe and forward you an

¹¹"Gen. Bennett's Third Letter," *Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1842.

¹²"Disclosures—The Attempted Murder of Boggs!" *Sangamo Journal*, July 22, 1842; "Gen. John C. Bennett," *Louisville Daily Journal*, July 27, 1842.

exists, or because no uncertainties surround its inclusion in either Bennett's book or the LDS *History of the Church*. Rather, it has come to be culturally accepted by all sides as a Joseph Smith document/teaching, and the debate that exists occupies the stage of context alone rather than one over authenticity. Simply put, if this letter had been given any other context than Joseph Smith's practice of polygamy it would not be so readily defended as authoritatively Smith's. For instance, were it an unsourced, ambiguously provenanced account of Smith raising someone from the dead or indulging in a week of heavy binge drinking that came through the hands of a known forger, there is little doubt that its authenticity would be subject to the harshest criticism or scrutiny from either Mormons or the religion's detractors, and historians would be forced to be much more careful in their unabashed use of it as a Joseph Smith document.

The examination of the problematic provenance and questionable context of this document should in no way lead to the definitive conclusion that the letter was not authored or dictated by Joseph Smith. As stated before, the history of Joseph Smith's practice of polygamy in Nauvoo provides a context in which both the proposal to Nancy may have occurred and the subsequent letter indeed may have been produced. And the letter does seem to resemble Joseph Smith's language more readily than Bennett's other forgeries, but this has not been proven in a quantitative, academic way. Nevertheless, all users of this document should be aware of its questioned provenance, the inscrutable circumstances surrounding its inclusion and placement in the *Manuscript History of the Church*, and how it came to be regarded as unquestionably Joseph Smith's. It is simply not responsible to assert that the "Happiness Letter" was definitively authored by Smith when no original letter exists nor do any contemporary Mormons attribute it to him. Historical inertia has caused the document to be regarded as definitively Joseph Smith's rather than careful evaluation. Responsible historians should, after weighing the evidence, treat the letter, its contents, and its purported context very carefully. They should draw very measured and qualified conclusions when using the document either as a representation of Joseph Smith's doctrinal teachings or as context for Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage in Nauvoo rather than relying on the presuppositions of an earlier age of writers, historians, apostates, or apologists.