Title
The new and everlasting order of marriage: the introduction and implementation of Mormon polygamy: 1830-1856

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8p56036q

Author
Smith, Merina

Publication Date
2011

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
The New and Everlasting Order of Marriage:  
The Introduction and Implementation of Mormon Polygamy: 1830-1856

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

by

Merina Smith

Committee in charge:

Professor Rebecca Plant, Chair
Professor Claudia Bushman
Professor John Evans
Professor Mark Hanna
Professor Christine Hunefeldt
Professor Rachel Klein

2011
The Dissertation of Merina Smith is approved, and is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

Chair

University of San Diego
2011
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page……………………………………………………………………… iii  
Table of Contents………………………………………………………………….. iv  
Vita………………………………………………………………………………… v  
Abstract……………………………………………………………………………. vi  
Introduction ................................................................. 1  
Chapter One: ........................................................................ 28  
  Mormon Millenarian Expectations: 1830-1841  
  The Restoration of All Things and the Resacralization of Marriage  
Chapter Two: ........................................................................ 84  
  Nauvoo Secrets and the Rise of a Mormon Salvation Narrative, 1841-42  
Chapter Three: ................................................................. 148  
  Scandal and Resistance, 1842  
Chapter Four: ................................................................. 191  
  Integration, 1843  
Chapter Five: ................................................................. 249  
  A Perfect Storm, 1844  
Chapter Six: ................................................................. 273  
  Polygamy and the Succession Crisis, 1844-46  
Chapter Seven: ................................................................. 316  
  Living Openly in Polygamy: 1846 and Beyond  
  Customs and Mores Develop  
Epilogue ................................................................. 381  
Works Cited ................................................................. 394
VITA

1990-1996 Bachelor of Arts, University of Colorado, Boulder

2003-2010 Teacher’s Assistant, Research Assistant and Grader

University of California, San Diego

2007 Master of Arts, University of California, San Diego

2011 Doctor of Philosophy, University of California, San Diego

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: United States History

Latin American History
Christine Hunefeldt

Early Modern Europe
John Marino
When Joseph Smith quietly introduced polygamy to a few chosen followers in Nauvoo, Illinois in April 1841, the innovation was not welcomed by most adherents to Mormonism. How, then, did polygamy become the favored form of marriage in 19th century Mormon culture? The answer is that it happened through a complicated and contingent process that took many years. Early adherents expected the advent of the millennium, perhaps in their lifetime, and were thus primed to accept unusual doctrine, but their acceptance of polygamy nevertheless depended on the development of a supporting theological narrative that they found convincing.
Since polygamy was introduced slowly and secretly through key members of the community, people were able to gradually become accustomed to the concept before they were formally asked to accept it. Polygamy, in turn, influenced the development of a family-centered theology of salvation and exaltation within Mormonism. It also caused considerable strife and dissension in the church and ultimately led to the 1844 arrest and murder of Joseph Smith. After his death, it played a significant role in the succession crisis that followed and in the decision to move to the American west where Mormons could establish their own society and marry as they chose.

During the journey west and in early Utah, social norms and mores developed in a trial-and-error manner as individuals attempted to implement the new marriage patterns. Brigham Young and the hardy Mormons who trekked west with him eventually succeeded in institutionalizing polygamy, both in the theological narrative and in practice, to the degree that it became an important force in Mormon self-understanding and in community organization and cohesion. Though many Mormons still resisted it, in an official sense, Mormons succeeded in institutionalizing polygamy so well that, just as they had resisted polygamy at the outset, many Mormons resisted giving it up after the church officially repudiated the practice in 1890.

Sources include diaries, memoirs letters, pamphlets, minutes of meetings, sermons, newspaper accounts and a contemporary history of Mormonism compiled as events occurred.
Introduction

Brigham Young, famously the most married man of the 19th century, was not enthused about entering polygamy when the principle was first introduced to him by Joseph Smith in 1841. He later remembered,

Some of my brethren know what my feelings were at the time Joseph revealed the doctrine; I was not desirous of shrinking from any duty, nor of failing in the least to do as I was commanded, but it was the first time in my life that I had desired the grave, and I could hardly get over it for a long time and when I saw a funeral, I felt to envy the corpse its situation, and to regret that I was not in the coffin…and I have had to examine myself from that day to this, and watch my faith, and carefully mediate lest I should be found desiring the grave more than I ought to.¹

Most people Smith approached about plural marriage between 1841 and 1844 shared Young’s initial reaction to polygamy. Young remembered one council “where Joseph undertook to teach the brethren and sisters” and Smith’s counselor in the first presidency of the church, William Law, declared, “If an angel from heaven was to reveal to me that a man should have more than one wife, and if it were in my power I would kill him.” As Young noted, “That was pretty hard, but Joseph had to submit for it. The brethren were not prepared to receive the doctrine.”²

Women were predictably even more reluctant to embrace polygamy than men. Rachel Emma Woolley Simmons was a young child in Nauvoo when Joseph Smith introduced polygamy to her parents, Edwin and Mary Woolley. She recalled that afterwards, “We saw very little of Mother…There would be days together that she would

¹ Journal of Discourses, 3:266.
² Brigham Young, “A Few Words of Doctrine,” 8 October, 1861, Young papers, LDS Archives.
not leave her room. Often I have gone there and found her crying as though her heart would break.” Mary’s crying did no good, however, because soon Edwin married two other women. Before she died in 1859, he had married six wives. Vilate Kimball expressed similar alarm in an 1843 letter to her husband, Heber, after her friend, Mary Ann Pratt, had “ben to me for council.” Smith had taught Parley Pratt, Mary Ann’s husband, “some principles and told him his privilege, and even appointed [a wife] for him, I dare not tell you who it is, you would be astonished.” Kimball went on to relate “Sister Pratt has ben rageing against these things, she told me her self that the devel had been in her until within a few days past, she said the Lord had shown her it was all right….” Mary Ann Frost Pratt nevertheless divorced Parley several years and several wives later.

Lawrence Foster has observed, “In almost all recorded cases, initial presentation of the belief in plural marriage to either men or women produced shock, horror, disbelief, or general emotional confusion.” Faithful Mormons experienced intense “inner turmoil,” and gossip and rumor rocked Nauvoo. When Joseph Smith attempted on more than one occasion to test the waters in order to introduce polygamy publicly, the community uproar within the church quickly generated a retraction. In light of the intense opposition against it and the great turmoil it caused in people’s lives, how did polygamy become the favored form of marriage among Mormons for most of what remained of the 19th

---

3 Memoir of Rachel Emma Woolley Simmons, from the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers publications.
4 Vilate Kimball to Heber C. Kimball, 24 June 1843, Winslow Whitney Smith collection, LDS Archives.
5 George D. Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy: But We Called It Celestial Marriage. Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 2008, p. 613, note 288. Smith notes that the Mary Ann Frost divorced Parley in 1853, but further adds that she was married and sealed to Joseph Smith before his death, though married to Pratt for time, and sealed again to Joseph Smith after his death, with Parley acting as proxy. Todd Compton, however, does not include Mary Ann Frost Pratt in his list of women married polygamously to Joseph Smith.
century? The obvious answer to this question is that the Mormon people believed polygamy was right, that it was ordained of God. Eventually this was true, but given the initial adverse reaction, how did Mormons come to believe polygamy was right? What were Joseph Smith’s motivations for introducing polygamy, and what was the process by which people were persuaded to shift their understanding of marriage to not only accommodate polygamy, but to regard it, at least officially, as the ideal form of marriage?

There are no simple answers. The shift from monogamy to polygamy (and eventually back again) was part of a complex process that essentially had three parts, the first of which began even before Joseph Smith was born. In the wake of the American Revolution, democratic and millenarian forms of religion developed which primed people to expect the surprising and unusual in religious life. The period was also one of great social upheaval as older forms of social organization disintegrated in favor of a new, industrializing society where people were not as tied to parents and the household economy as they had been in the past. The anxiety and social fragmentation resulting from these changes merged with religious impulses to cause people to become more open to new ways of conceiving social and familial relations.

Gordon Wood has identified the antebellum period as a uniquely fertile time for the rise of an innovative religion like

---

7 Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Yale University Press, 1989. Hatch has examined Mormons and other millenarian sects of the early republic and argued that the rising tide of democracy gave ordinary people great faith in their own spiritual impulses and those of the spiritually gifted among them. In the wake of the improbably won revolution, and in light of common millenarian beliefs of the period, anything seemed possible.

8 Paul E. Johnson has argued in *A Shopkeepers Millennium*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1978, that religion and revivals eased the growing pangs of rapid industrialization in Rochester, New York. In less settled places, however, more creative forms became possible as Lawrence Foster has shown in *Religion and Sexuality*. 
Mormonism. Lawrence Foster has shown that during this period religious enthusiasm and perceived threats to the family combined to produce movements that aimed to calm anxieties by promising more satisfying forms of both religion and family.10

In such a climate, Mormon converts were primed to accept unusual doctrine like polygamy, but-- and this is the second component--only if it were part of a coherent religious narrative. Foster has argued that through their literal approach to the Bible, and in the Mormon case, through their belief in Joseph Smith as a prophet who spoke for God, these groups were able to “jettison the whole religious and social order that had developed over more than a thousand years” and became “free to innovate radically in belief and practice.”11 In this way they managed to remake both religious and family forms to create a new religious story that was both innovative and traditional.12 Polygamy consequently developed within Mormonism as part of a millenarian salvation and exaltation narrative that integrated new family forms and also fit with scripture and quintessentially American thinking about progress and possibility for mankind. In order for polygamy to be accepted, in other words, it had to be woven into a narrative that people already embraced. Mormons added some new twists, however. They worked to create a utopian family and kinship centered Kingdom of God on earth that they could deliver into the hands of Jesus Christ at the end of the millennium.

---

9 Gordon Wood, “The Rise of an American Original: Mormonism,” Jon Butler and Harry Stout, Religion in American History: A Reader, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, pp. 179-197. Wood’s concurs with Hatch in arguing that with newly-won democracy and the decline of old hierarchies, people began to think more seriously about the bonds that held people together. The result was that religious communities and beliefs, especially those chosen for oneself, became very important. Millenarian forms of religion were especially successful in an age when the world seemed to be progressing rapidly toward the end time.
10 Foster, Religion and Sexuality
11 Ibid., p. 17.
12 Ibid.
The third and more practical aspect of the introduction of polygamy involved the manner in which polygamous marriages and the integration of new marriage forms into Mormon society occurred. Because of the deep resistance to polygamy from Mormons and non-Mormons alike, this process happened secretly, even as the theological narrative that provided support for the doctrine was still being formed. In spite of secret practice, however, polygamy quickly became a potent force in Mormon society, culture and theology. The aim of this study is to trace the interplay between the public development of the Mormon theological narrative and the secret introduction and gradual acceptance of polygamy by taking a close look at the development of polygamy, especially in the years between 1841 and 1852.

**Family and Democratic Millenarian Religion**

Gordon Wood, among others, has argued that in the wake of the American Revolution, religion developed in strikingly democratic ways. Though religious observance seemed lax in the 1790s, this was merely an interim period during which people were in the process of rejecting hierarchies and established forms of religion in favor of lively and democratic varieties of worship that moved beyond Jonathan Edwards’ first Great Awakening. The Revolution had taught people that they could think for themselves in religion as well as politics, and the result was forms of Christianity “more popular, more evangelical, more ecstatic, more personal, more secular, and more optimistic. [The era] combined the past and the present, communalism and individualism, folkways and enlightenment in odd and confusing ways.”\(^{13}\) The religious enthusiasm often took the form of camp meetings and revivals led by preachers and

---

spiritual leaders who had not been educated to the ministry, but rather arose from the people on the basis of their spiritual gifts.

Millenarian beliefs were an essential ingredient of enthusiastic religion in this period. In contrast to entrenched Calvinist views, which placed all control in the inscrutable hands of God, evangelists like Charles Grandison Finney preached that Christians could bring on the millennium in three months if they dedicated their lives to the task.\textsuperscript{14} The fresh idea that humankind could control the progression of religious history was powerful and consistent with the democratic optimism that flowed from an improbably won revolution. It not only gave religious folk a sense of immediacy and urgency, but also a heady sense of power and a fervent desire to understand exactly what they must do to expedite the millennium. Millennial expectation was a powerful part of the pervasive sense that amazing works were afoot and anything could happen.\textsuperscript{15}

Uncertainty and upheaval, combined with expectation and hope, characterized family relations of the period as well. The household economy, which had depended on the integrated labor of all family members, faded as new forms of economic differentiation and employment arose. Men, and young people as well, who had helped sustain the family economy of the past were now working away—sometimes far away—from the home. New forms of labor and new lifestyles led to increasing individuality, but also fewer family and community ties and greater anxiety. At the same time, the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century was a period of social experimentation with family and community

\textsuperscript{14} As quoted in Johnson, \textit{A Shopkeepers Millennium}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{15} Hatch, \textit{The Democratization of American Christianity}. Hatch does not make this argument with regard to polygamy in particular so much as the rise of Mormonism itself. I argue that the sense of possibility was a necessary pre-condition for the acceptance of polygamy, to be followed by a coherent justification that was part of a convincing religious story.
organization, as the numerous perfectionist experiments of the period demonstrate.\textsuperscript{16} Foster has argued that one response to the anxiety surrounding all this change was “the attempt to control potentially anarchic social and sexual tendencies by attributing enormous, even cosmic importance to ‘the home.’”\textsuperscript{17} In some quarters this led to an elevation of the wife and mother role as the person who inculcated values in the young, but in other quarters it led to a search for new family and social forms that would combine religion, community and family under one satisfying, God-commanded rubric.\textsuperscript{18}

The cacophony of religious and social voices and new ways of working, living and organizing society created a crisis of authority. Since people increasingly rejected the educated clergy in favor of ordinary people with spiritual gifts, it is not surprising that many claimed to possess such gifts and authority. In the process they quarreled with one another, creating confusion for would-be converts. The Mormon foundation story derives from this confusion. Joseph Smith wrote about the effect of rampant pluralism during his teen-age years. “There was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country…great multitudes united themselves to the

\textsuperscript{16} Ronald G. Walters, \textit{American Reformers, 1815-1860}, Hill and Wang, New York, 1978, 1997. Walters has shown how the combination of social changes, economic progress, political upheaval, increased mobility by rail and religious revival led to numerous and vibrant reform movements that aimed to perfect society.

\textsuperscript{17} Foster, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{18} A trio of books sheds light on this subject. Ruth H. Bloch (\textit{Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650-1800}, University of California, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2003) has shown how women’s roles were defined in the Colonial and Revolutionary periods when there was a shift in the way Americans understood the relationship of women to the larger moral and social order. Mary Ryan (\textit{Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865}, Cambridge University Press, 1981) has explored the change in middle-class family values arising from social movements and revivals of the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century. She has paid particular attention to the association movement. Jan Lewis (\textit{The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson’s Virginia}, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1983) has explored the increased value placed on love and emotional sensibilities in late 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} century Virginia. Taken together these works illustrate the volatile nature of religion, community and family in this period and show how profound cultural changes were effected.
different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people, some crying, “Lo, here!” and others, “Lo, there!” Joseph’s “mind at times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult were so great and incessant.” The disagreement troubled him and he asked himself, “What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?” For Joseph Smith, the confusion in the religious world was surely all the more troubling because he had experienced great upheaval in his family life as well. His family had moved frequently and worked doggedly in search of elusive economic prosperity that never came. It is therefore understandable that he would eventually propose a major reorganization of religious and family life.

**The Mormon Theological Narrative**

Joseph Smith’s questions were the beginning of a quest, shared by many people, to establish religious authority in the form of a theological narrative that could explain the past and guide the future. Mormonism provided the beginnings of authoritative narrative with the Book of Mormon, a new scripture for the American continent, and a young prophet who claimed to see and speak for God. The new sect soon gained converts who were attracted to the tenet that they could, through their actions, accelerate the process of religious history and advance the millennium. Smith also embraced all of religious history, from the Old Testament and the New, and claimed that he had restored the Gospel of Jesus Christ on earth. By their actions, adherents believed they could accelerate the process of religious history and advance the millennium. They sought to do nothing less than establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

---

In spite of these lofty ambitions, Mormonism had an undeveloped theology and institutional structure. In many ways, it was a blank slate on which a theological narrative could be written. The narrative would be written through a trial and error process that borrowed from religious history while incorporating some truly innovative doctrines. As instructed by the Book of Mormon, the Church was to develop gradually, “line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, there a little.”

In essence, Mormon theology, hierarchy and institutional forms developed as problems arose and were resolved through scriptural study, discussion, compromise, prayer, and--since Mormons believed Joseph Smith was a prophet who spoke to God—revelation.

More than one scholar has observed the story based nature of Mormon theology and belief. According to sociologists like Christian Smith, people make sense of the world through stories, new and traditional. Mormonism began with a story for the American continent and its Indian inhabitants, codified in The Book of Mormon, but also skillfully used the entire Judeo-Christian narrative to attract and retain members and develop a unique, family-centered theological thrust. Jan Shipps has argued that Mormons elided the part of Christian history that occurred between the deaths of the original Christian apostles and themselves, viewing this whole period as a “dark age” when truth had left the earth. They thus made themselves the direct inheritors of truth and

---

20 The Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 28:30
21 Christian Smith, Moral Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2003. Smith argues that “the most adequate approach to theorizing human culture must be a normative one that conceives of humans as moral, believing animals and human social life as consisting of moral orders that constitute direct social action.” (p. 7) In other words, humans are moral agents who seek to live within moral orders. These moral orders usually take the form of narratives within which people seek to live.
the Judeo-Christian mantle—hence the name, Latter Day Saints. As such, they developed a special affinity for not only early Christians, whom they saw as their direct predecessors, but for the patriarchal Old Testament heritage and its tribal, family-centered social organization.

The stories of the Old Testament patriarchs and their families were very important in Joseph Smith’s restructure of family. His first questions about the practice of polygamy came when studying these stories. In addition, he used the story of Elijah and the admonition found in Malachi, the last two verses of the Old Testament, as a guide in forming his doctrine about family and family connection. The passage reads: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.” The passage combines millenarian and family rhetoric in a way that could justify changes to family patterns in pursuit of the goal of turning the hearts of the parents and children to one another, in making them dependent on one another in the eternal scheme. Eventually Joseph Smith would put family at the center of the ultimate salvation and exaltation of both the individual and mankind.

The *Book of Mormon* brought these religious threads together by giving the American Indians Hebrew roots, by putting their story in a familial context, by identifying the American continent as the Promised Land and by placing the Garden of Eden in the boundaries of the United States. In short, the *Book of Mormon* brought

---

22 Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1987. Shipps has argued that Mormonism is to Christianity as Christianity originally was to Judaism, a new religious tradition growing from the old.

23 Malachi :4:5-6
America to both the beginning and the anticipated end of the Judeo-Christian religious story. In this way it reinterpreted an already written story to produce a powerful theological narrative that spoke to democratic religious tendencies, family anxiety, and American pride in their new country. This combination attracted many adherents.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{Control of Marriage and Secret Practice}

In practical terms, it was possible to integrate polygamy into Mormon marriage culture for three reasons: first, because Mormons were able to assert control over domestic relations by resacralizing marriage in the 1830s and assuming for themselves the power to say which marriages were valid; second, because as Mormon theology developed, family and polygamy became connected to salvation; and third, because Joseph Smith implemented polygamy into Mormon society through secret practice.

Secret introduction allowed a polygamous infrastructure to develop simultaneously with the supporting theological narrative in a way that paved the way for Mormons to accept and embrace the new practice. In the process of developing their narrative, Smith and his closest leaders introduced to a series of rituals and ordinances. These ordinances, like the Biblical ordinance of baptism, were imparted in physical ways, by the laying on of hands for example, and were meant to confer power from God to the recipient. The desire to receive ordinances in a magnificent temple they were

\textsuperscript{24} The Book of Mormon tells the story of a Hebrew family that escaped the Babylonian conquest to come to America by the hand of God. The family consisted of righteous and unrighteous brothers, whose descendants, the American Indians, became tribes, called Nephites and Lamanites after the original brothers. The tribes warred with one another until the Lamanites prevailed. The Book of Mormon suggests that descendants of the Lamanites could recapture their former glory and gain salvation by accepting Christ and Mormonism. Missionaries were regularly to American Indians in hopes of converting them to Mormonism with varying degrees of success. When Mormons went to Utah, they combined missionary work, military conquest and the bread diplomacy when interacting with the native population. Ultimately, the result was much as it had been in the rest of the United States; the Indians were confined to reservations or assimilated.
constructing increased their desire for new religious and family forms, helped to justify them, and tied people more firmly to Mormonism. In essence, polygamy overwhelmed monogamy in a stealth assault, but one that influenced the developing eschatological narrative and at the same time created a thick community structure.

Polygamy was not extensively practiced when Joseph Smith died at the hands of assassins in 1844, but it played an important role in the succession crisis that followed, and hence became more firmly embedded in Mormon self-understanding. During the first few years of the migration period, 1846-1848, spreading polygamy was not a top priority. Nevertheless, since Mormons were at last able to practice openly; they managed to work through some of the inevitable problems polygamy engendered before announcing it to the world in 1852. The following pages will explore the progress of the interrelated and mutually reinforcing changes and the social turmoil that ensued and will show how polygamy developed symbiotically with Mormon theology.

**Overview of Mormon Polygamy**

In the broadest terms, the history of 19th century Mormon polygamy had five phases. The first phase, between church organization in 1830 and the first documented plural marriage in 1841, involved developing the beginnings of an underlying narrative that eventually supported polygamy. When Joseph Smith and others studied the Bible in the process of working out the structure and theology of their new church, they discussed the polygamous practices of the ancient patriarchs, and Joseph Smith is known to have suggested the possibility that polygamy might be used for social engineering purposes
involving American Indians as early as 1831.\textsuperscript{25} Polygamy is mentioned negatively in the 
*Book of Mormon* numerous times, though the suggestion also appears that God might use 
polygamy to “raise up seed.”\textsuperscript{26} There is some evidence that Joseph Smith moved beyond 
talk and experimented with polygamy briefly in Kirtland, Ohio, sometime between 1831 and 1836—and that some high-level leaders left the church in protest over this—but a 
statement quickly appeared in the *Book of Commandments* (a collection of Joseph 
Smith’s revelations) affirming church adherence to monogamous marriage.\textsuperscript{27} Nevertheless, during this early time theology about family and connection in the afterlife 
was slowly developing with other institutional structures, like Priesthood quorums, that 
would eventually allow polygamy to be introduced to a loyal inner circle of high-level 
leaders.

Phase two began in 1841, when Joseph Smith began to secretly introduce 
polygamy to young women he hoped to marry. He encountered shock and surprise from 
both men and women, who had assumed that polygamy was only one of the myriad 
religious practices that Mormons considered and either rejected or relegated to far in the 
future in the process of developing their theology and church structure in the early years. 
Even though practice was secret, rumors sent shock waves through Nauvoo and began to 
exert a powerful influence on community and religious life. In 1842, polygamy began to 
grow more rapidly as Smith began to secretly bring other men into the practice as well. 
As the number of people participating in polygamy grew, Joseph Smith introduced family

\textsuperscript{26} *Book of Mormon*, Jacob 2:30. 
\textsuperscript{27} The article was approved for publication in the 1835 edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants* on 17 
August, 1835 in Kirtland, Ohio. See Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith: A 
Historical and Biographical Commentary of the Doctrine and Covenants*, Deseret Book, Salt Lake City, 
1985, p. 296. Also see *HC* 2:247.
ordinances that tied people to one another and the church and created a theological structure that undergirded polygamy. In addition, a revelation was received by Joseph Smith in 1843 that put polygamy in the context of Mormon priesthood, which was given to all worthy males. The revelation depicted a remarkable salvation and exaltation story for those who were willing to enter polygamy, further embedding it in Mormon self-understanding. By mid-June, 1844, however, fewer than 200 people in Nauvoo, a city of over 10,000 residents, had entered polygamy.28

The third phase of polygamy began in June of 1844, when Joseph Smith was murdered by a mob in a jail in Carthage, Illinois, where he was under arrest for destroying an anti-polygamy press. At this juncture polygamy was still secret and powerful forces within the church hoped to eradicate it. A group of high-level leaders of the church, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, which was headed by Brigham Young, were nevertheless by this time firmly entrenched in polygamous family relationships and the ordinances and theology that supported them. Young and the Twelve were able to use the authority derived from ordinances they had received from Joseph Smith to take control of the church. Whether or not all members accepted polygamy privately, gradually communal support for polygamy among Mormons became assumed as members came to associate polygamy with the ordinances and salvation promises they so desired. The Twelve promoted polygamy because they had come to believe that through practicing polygamy they could create their Kingdom of God on earth and hasten the millennium.

28 Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, pp. 311-313.
In 1852 church leaders officially admitted to polygamy and thus commenced the fourth phase of polygamy and a long defense of their position to the rest of the nation and the world as the practice expanded.\textsuperscript{29} Not surprisingly, polygamy was susceptible during this time to political, economic and religious trends in Utah and the nation at large. The U.S. Congress passed repeated legislation during this period aimed at curtailing polygamy.\textsuperscript{30} The numbers of people who practiced plural marriage during these years rose and fell in reaction to a complex combination of factors.

A church-wide demographic study to determine percentages of members involved in polygamy during the separate decades of the Utah polygamy period, a huge undertaking, has not been completed. Community studies have been done, however, which show that there was a wide variety of participation from community to community within Utah, depending on the intensity toward religion in the particular community. Kathryn Daynes’ in-depth study of one community, Manti, has yielded results that compare with other studies and appear to be fairly typical. Her study includes men, women and children residing in polygamous households for each decade from 1850-1890, and reveals a kind of lopsided bell curve. Rates in 1850 were around 25%, 43% in 1860, 36% in 1870, and 25% in 1880.\textsuperscript{31} Though Daynes and other scholars have shown

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{29} Van Wagoner, \textit{Mormon Polygamy: A History}, pp. 82-88.
\end{thebibliography}
that polygamous marriages tended to spike when Washington passed new legislation intended to curtail it, ultimately the federal crusade succeeded. Such efforts were greatly aided by a Manifesto issued in 1890 by church president Wilford Woodruff that purported to forbid new plural marriages.

During the fifth phase of polygamy, the post-Manifesto phase, new plural marriages slowed but did not cease because many Mormons assumed the Manifesto was only for outside consumption. Some fled to Mexico or Canada to practice polygamy, but incidence gradually waned. Unfortunately the 1890 census was burned, but by 1900 the U.S. government anti-polygamy crusade had apparently succeeded because, according to Daynes, only 7% of Manti residents lived in plural families. In 1896 Utah gained the prize it had long sought--statehood--but only on the condition that the state would never legalize polygamy. Suspicion about Mormons and polygamy did not end, however. When Reed Smoot, a Mormon Apostle (high-level leader) was elected to the Senate in 1903, questions were aired about continued polygamy in Utah. Smoot was seated pending an investigation of polygamy. The Smoot hearings began in 1904 and lasted until 1907, a process that further eroded polygamy in Utah. To prove their good intentions, the Church issued a second Manifesto in 1904, and two apostles known to promote new plural marriage resigned from the Twelve. Shortly thereafter, the church began to excommunicate those who entered into new plural marriages. Smoot went on to serve 26 years in the Senate.

---

just how difficult is the process of arriving at accurate numbers for people involved in polygamy at any given time. To cite only one difficulty; in the 1880’s polygamous marriages went underground to avoid federal prosecution and consequently marriage records for that period are very sparse.

32 For an in-depth study of this phase, see Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1992.
The following study will concentrate primarily on the second, secret phase of Nauvoo polygamy. The sources I have used are extremely varied. Contemporary sources include diaries, letters, minutes from meetings and newspaper accounts. The number of participants in Nauvoo polygamy, especially before Joseph Smith’s death, was very limited however, and secret practice assured that people at the time rarely wrote explicitly about their experiences. In addition, many materials were burned. Even retrospective accounts are not numerous, because so few people were involved in the practice. The relative paucity of sources compared to what is available regarding the Utah period means that it is necessary to draw conclusions about the Nauvoo period based on reading between the lines, analyzing the significance of the timing of events, and paying attention to the meaning and timing of theological developments.

One valuable yet problematic source is the seven volume *History of the Church*. From the beginning, Mormons were a record-keeping people; with their sense of religious mission they believed they should keep records as did the peoples of the Bible. Joseph Smith himself was the instigator of the *History of the Church*, and was responsible for some of its early sections. Literate and historically minded people were assigned to record events as they happened, though sometimes the process of living overwhelmed the process of recording events for history. In addition, Willard Richards, church historian and a principle actor in the Nauvoo period, died in 1854, before he could turn his cryptic notes and memories into historical prose. Beyond this, historical and editorial methods have naturally changed over the years. The *History of the Church* is nevertheless an important source, sometimes the only one, for important aspects of
church history and is used by virtually all Mormon historians. Another valuable resource is a compilation of contemporary accounts of public sermons by Joseph Smith entitled *The Words of Joseph Smith*. Most of the work about Mormon polygamy covers either the Nauvoo period and the transition phase that followed as Mormons migrated west or the Utah period. Work covering the Utah period is much more extensive for obvious reasons—the sources are better, it is still possible to find new sources, the time period is longer, and the range of possible topics much more extensive. The Nauvoo period and the beginnings of polygamy are nevertheless crucial for understanding polygamy in Utah because it was in Nauvoo that the theology that undergirded later practice developed. I originally intended to write chiefly about the later period, but as I read the literature on Nauvoo, I was haunted by one question that I felt was not adequately addressed in any of the literature: why and by what process were people convinced to practice polygamy when most were at first firmly, even passionately, opposed to it? Many partial explanations can be found in the literature, but none answered this question to my satisfaction.

As I pondered the puzzle, it became clear to me that part of the problem was that none of the current studies offered a careful chronological treatment of Nauvoo polygamy that simultaneously took into account the trial-and-error way Mormon theology developed, the story based nature of Mormon theology and belief, and the problems of implementation and resistance. The more I studied the sources and the secondary

---

34 For a fine discussion of the problems with the Joseph Smith History of the Church, see Dean Jesse, “The Reliability of Joseph Smith’s History”, *Journal of Mormon History*, volume 3, 1976, 23-46.
35 Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1980. This book is particularly useful since no other accounts were kept of many of these sermons. In addition, since the editors combed primary sources for accounts of Joseph Smith’s words, they have included multiple hearers’ interpretations of Smith’s sermons.
literature, the more I became convinced that these elements were interrelated—that the
effort to implement polygamy and the resistance this engendered helped to shape the
religious narrative by which Mormons understood their place in this life and the world to
come. Evidence shows that Joseph Smith had determined before introducing polygamy
that family connection would be part of the salvation narrative, but the form it would take
was an interrelated and contingent process. In this study, I hope to illuminate that
process.

Secondary literature on Mormon polygamy leans heavily toward articles, though
there are a number of books on the subject. Most of the literature concentrates on the
Utah period, but two are exclusively about Nauvoo. The most recent and comprehensive
is George D. Smith’s *Nauvoo Polygamy...But We Called it Celestial Marriage.* Smith
traces the general history of Nauvoo polygamy in a way that is more topical than
chronological. The work is exhaustively researched and highlights Joseph Smith’s role in
introducing polygamy, which he believes contemporary mainstream Mormons have
elided. I greatly appreciate his contribution to the field, but believe that an approach that
pays stricter attention to chronology, contingency and the development of Mormon
theology is in order. Smith’s treatment also includes short biographies of the numerous
wives of Joseph Smith, which it shares in common with a much more extensive book-
length examination of their lives, Todd Compton’s *In Sacred Loneliness.*

---

36 George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy...but we called it celestial marriage,* Signature Books, Salt Lake
City, 2008. Smith’s work is really more information driven than argument driven and is an invaluable
resource.
City, 1997.
Compton’s extensive work documenting the lives of 33 women known to have married Joseph Smith in his lifetime is tremendously valuable from both a human and historical perspective. One chapter is dedicated to each woman, and consequently Compton’s treatment of themes like authority, belief, priesthood and the development of Mormon theology are covered mainly in the context of individual lives. In his introduction, however, he suggests arguments that I have tried to treat more fully when he writes, “Whatever the uncertainties of documenting [polygamy,] there is a clearly discernible outline of ideology in the historical record that explains the development and rationale for the practice.” I hope to make that ideological outline more discernable in the pages that follow. The Nauvoo period is also covered in an overview of polygamy by Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, a well-researched, useful and concise history. Its 250 pages are not enough, however, to cover the entire span of Mormon polygamy in depth.

Other book-length studies of polygamy concentrate mostly on the Utah period, though all devote at least some space to the origins of the practice. The oldest study is Kimball Young’s *Isn’t One Wife Enough?* His work concentrates topically on various aspects of family relationships and is based on interviews conducted in the 1930s. He

---

38 Three chapters cover more than one woman because they cover women who were related. Chapter 7 is about Patty Bartlett Sessions and her daughter Sylvia Porter Sessions, chapter 12 is about sisters Delcena Diadamia Johnson and Almera Woodward Johnson, and chapter 21 is about sisters Sarah and Maria Lawrence.

39 Ibid., p. 22. In his introduction, Compton has touched on such themes as the resacralization of marriage, priesthood hierarchy and plural marriage, the connection between polygamy and salvation and exaltation and the like. These themes come out in the individual stories as well.

40 Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History*, Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 1989. This was the first full history of polygamy published since Kimball Young’s 1954 *Isn’t One Wife Enough*. The work, based on archival research instead of interviews conducted years after the end of polygamy, has been very influential. It is short, readable and accessible to everyone. It was my first introduction to the history of polygamy. I read it in a women’s book group in the 1990’s, after which we went to lunch to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Manifesto.
consequently has covered the later years of polygamy and has not really addressed change over time.\textsuperscript{41} He has stated at the outset, however, that “the precise steps in [polygamy’s] emergence are almost impossible to trace,”\textsuperscript{42} an assertion that has not proven to be true. Similarly, Jessie Embry’s \textit{Mormon Polygamous Families} is based on interviews, conducted between 1976 and 1984, with the children of polygamous families. It, too, covers the waning days of polygamous practice in topical fashion and argues that polygamous marriages were very similar to monogamous marriages of the Victorian period.\textsuperscript{43}

Carmon Hardy has produced two valuable works on Mormon polygamy. \textit{Solemn Covenant} covers post-Manifesto polygamy and, along with looking at new marriages after the Manifesto, traces the painful transition for believers as the practice that had been regarded as the capstone of their religion was gradually repudiated. The first chapter, \textit{The Principle Commenced}, contains a short overview of Christian practice of polygamy in the centuries before it was practiced by Mormons and makes important observations about Nauvoo and the beginnings of polygamy.\textsuperscript{44} Hardy’s \textit{Doing the Works of Abraham} is a

\textsuperscript{41} Kimball Young, \textit{Isn’t One Wife Enough}, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1954. Meant to be a popular book, this work is unfootnoted, but transcripts of the interviews on which it is based can be found in various libraries, among them the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Young chose pseudonyms for all of his interviewees to avoid offending family members of his subjects.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 82.

\textsuperscript{43} Jessie L. Embrey, \textit{Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle}, University of Utah Press, 1987. Embrey interviewed children of polygamous couples married before the second Manifesto in 1904. Once new plural marriages had ceased, the United States government did not interfere with polygamous marriages that had already been contracted, and hence polygamous families persisted well into the 20th century. The church, however, became gradually more anti-polygamy as the 20th century progressed.

\textsuperscript{44} B. Carmon Hardy, \textit{Solemn Covenant}, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1992.
collection of primary readings about Mormon polygamy connected by insightful observations.\textsuperscript{45}

Kathryn Daynes’ \textit{More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910} actually concentrates on the later period and on one town, Manti, Utah, in particular. Daynes’ exhaustive statistical research on Manti covers the incidence of polygamy, inheritance patterns, divorce and change over time in one community. In other words, she has looked at the intersection between church, law and family in Manti, a community selected because it was more or less a microcosm of Utah in the 19th century. She has suggested that one important reason for the introduction of polygamy was to establish a loyalty test in the wake of devastating defections from the church in the 1830’s. In addition, she has argued that the uncertainty of the period fostered temple rituals, which were connected to polygamy. Beyond this, polygamy encouraged family dynasticism which, in combination with the sacrifice polygamy required, increased commitment to Mormonism and social cohesion.\textsuperscript{46} These are all valid points, but to my thinking do not really get to the heart of what motivated the saints to accept polygamy because it pays insufficient attention to the story-based nature of Mormon belief and practice. Mormons would only change their entrenched monogamous patterns when they had come to believe that it was a part of the larger religious and millenarian story.

The most useful work dealing with temple ordinances and polygamy is an unpublished Master’s Thesis by Andrew Ehat, completed at BYU in 1981. Ehat has


argued that temple ordinances and polygamy were the most important factors in determining new leadership for the church during the succession crisis after Joseph Smith’s death in 1844. In his faithful interpretation, Ehat has shown that the Quorum of the Twelve apostles, led by Brigham Young, was the only succession possibility because they were the only group of men who had received full priesthood keys at this juncture. He has presented his evidence with impressive detail. I use much of the same detail, but focus on the process of socialization, belief building and theological narrative.

In a similar vein, another unpublished Master’s Thesis, completed at Purdue in 1975 by Daniel Bachman, A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith, situates the roots of polygamy in the earlier periods of church history, and argues against simplistic sexual and psychological explanations for Joseph Smith’s introduction of polygamy. Bachman has also rejected the notion that Smith was trying to “fix” marriage and the family with his innovations. Rather, he has argued, Smith was recasting the family in an eternal perspective. I largely agree with his arguments and am grateful for his insights, but adopt a different focus by looking at how various social processes interacted with the need for a coherent theological narrative in moving toward a place where people could bring themselves to accept polygamy.

Bachman later published “New Light on an Old Hypothesis: The Ohio Origins of the Revelation on Plural Marriage,”47 a seminal article that builds on his Master’s Thesis and argues that the theological underpinnings of polygamy date back to the beginnings of Mormonism, particularly in Ohio, where Mormons began to re-sacralize marriage. I

---

hope to build on Bachman’s argument that the growth of polygamy and Mormon theology was a contingent process.

Lawrence Foster’s *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons and the Oneida Community* compares the three groups based on their religious belief, social organization and sexual experimentation, and examines their success in terms of what they themselves were trying to accomplish.\(^{48}\) He has situated them within the context of their time and then carefully analyzed the primary sources to determine why these groups reshaped male-female relations. He has concluded that “a key to the relative success of these three groups was their eventual development of an authoritative Church structure and a strong, internally coherent social system to overcome the religious and social disorder that their members had found so unacceptable.”\(^{49}\) Foster is particularly effective at assessing the “internal logic” in the three movements and the means by which they were able to harness the “creative tension” of what they perceived as troubled times to create new family forms.

In the Mormon case, Foster has described Joseph Smith as a “religious genius” who was able to combine the religious works and themes of the ancient past with contemporary themes in a creative synthesis. “Faced with the inevitable tendency toward fragmentation arising from both its environment and its ideology,” Mormons had to “develop powerful new institutional forms to interpret and regulate the permissible range of religious and social variation.”\(^{50}\) Foster has tried, in my view successfully, to get inside the minds and the social worlds of the groups and their leaders to understand why they

\(^{48}\) Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons and the Oneida Community*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1984

\(^{49}\) Ibid., p. 18.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., p. 17.
tried to change sexual relations between men and women, why their followers accepted these changes, and how they were (more or less) successfully implemented.

Since Foster covers three groups in one book, however, his treatment is necessarily brief for each. In the following pages I build on Foster’s work by first establishing the context for the rise of Mormonism and its reinterpretation of established values, then elaborate by looking at the Mormon effort to develop an “internally coherent system,” in Christian Smith’s terms--a moral order--by which they could live and understand the world. I will argue that Mormon willingness to accept polygamy hinged on the development of such a moral order, or story, but that the story, which was connected to nothing less than salvation and exaltation in the next life, developed symbiotically with polygamy. Foster has argued that a “variety of social, intellectual and political factors” made polygamy possible. I will attempt to trace the development of those factors while at the same time analyzing how they worked in individual lives.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One examines Mormon history up until 1841 to trace the resacralization of marriage among Mormons and the gradual development of a nascent underlying theology that could be interpreted to support polygamy. The experience of one family, the Fullmers, is used to show the religious attitudes and understandings of people who were drawn to Mormonism and who gradually accepted plural marriage.

Chapter Two examines the heady millenarian thinking that gave Joseph Smith and Mormons a sense of the possibilities for Nauvoo, Illinois, where they settled in 1839 and attempted to create a Kingdom of God on earth. Initially, favorable political conditions

---

51 Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 140.
and a generous charter made it possible for Smith to introduce both polygamy and Kingdom of God theology. This chapter examines the introduction of polygamy, the reluctance of women to participate, and the reasoning used by Joseph Smith to convince women to marry him. I argue that once introduced, polygamy helped shape the development of Mormon theology and institutions in a way that supported practice.

Chapters Three, Four and Five examine the social, political and theological developments of the years 1842, 1843 and 1844, respectively, in order to show how polygamy worked its way into the social fabric of Nauvoo and the Mormon theological narrative. I particularly examine how secret introduction, in spite of giving rise to rumor and gossip, in a sense worked to allow people to become accustomed to the idea of polygamy while the theology (which included ordinances and priesthood) that supported it was developing and being promoted publicly and privately. Well-documented case studies are used to support these arguments. In addition, I show how polygamy helped create problems that demanded solutions, which in turn advanced the narrative that supported it. Its connection with family, saving ordinances and the rising temple helped reconcile people to the necessity of the new form of marriage. These chapters also trace the rising dissent that ultimately was also an integral part of the forces that contributed to Joseph Smith’s assassination in June, 1844.

Chapter Six explores developments after Joseph Smith’s death. At this juncture, polygamous practice was still secret and there were possible successors to Smith from both the pro-polygamy and anti-polygamy factions. I will argue that polygamy, along with the ordinances and theological narrative supporting it, proved to be a deciding factor in selecting new leadership.
Chapter Seven follows the saints’ journey away from Nauvoo as they began their western migration in 1846-8. At this juncture Mormons began to live openly in polygamy and experienced the challenges of polygamous life. The challenges experienced by John D. Lee and his extensive plural family are examined in detail to show how the saints adjusted to polygamy when they did not have previous experience to guide them in solving inevitable problems. Similarly, the life of diarist Patty Sessions, who experienced polygamy with three different husbands and many sister-wives and daughters-in-law, shows how customs developed to help deal with the problems that polygamy engendered.

In 1854 Brigham Young said,

The whole subject of the marriage relationship is not within my reach or in any other man’s reach on this earth. It is without the beginning of days or the end of years; it is a hard matter to reach. We can feel some things with regard to it; it lays the foundation for worlds, for angels, and for Gods; for intelligent beings to be crowned with glory, immortality, and eternal lives. In fact, it is the thread which runs from the beginning to the end of the holy Gospel of the Son of God; it is from eternity to eternity.  

If Brigham Young, as the head of the church, could not fully grasp the meaning of marriage and polygamy twelve years after entering the practice, small wonder its introduction was a long, painful and treacherous road.

---

52 Journal of Discourses, 2:90
Chapter One:

*Mormon Millenarian Expectations: The Restoration of All Things and the Resacralization of Marriage, 1830-1841*

On October 10, 1883, Olive Amanda Smith Fullmer wrote a letter to her namesake, Olive Amanda Fullmer Bulkley, informing her that “We have this day consigned to Mother Earth the mortal remains of your father.” In a curiously impersonal letter that, with one exception, used only pronouns for her husband after the initial “your father,” Olive described to her daughter how her husband, John Solomon Fullmer, had suffered during his last hours on earth. She had been called next door when the first and favored wife, Mary Ann or Mamie, perceived that their mutual husband was in distress. Olive reported that, though suffering extremely, John had continued through much of the day to exhort his wives and offspring. “He had his senses and could talk and did till the last breath; gave directions, counseled, in fact preached the gospel to the last, but then went as quick as you could blow a candle.” She described the funeral, mentioning the speakers’ words of praise and their reassurances to the family that he had received all possible blessings, and in the due time of the Lord he would pass by the gods and receive his exaltation.

Olive ended the report by telling her daughter, “Poor old Mamie like to went crazy, but I felt not to mourn; but she is so lonely. John lives in with her.” 53 It is a sentence that conveys a world of meaning about Olive, John, Mamie and their

---

polygamous marriage. When Olive finally used her husband’s name, it was in connection with his first wife. Olive had apparently forgotten momentarily that John was dead, not surprising since he did not live at her house, because she used the present tense in saying “John lives in with her.” That Olive would inform her daughter of this indicates that the living arrangements had not caused the kind of resentment that would lead a mother to complain to her daughter, but rather had been accepted as a matter of course. If Olive had ever felt a sense of deep attachment to her husband of 36 years— and given the existence of their 10 children it seems likely that she had— it was muted by the time he died. There is in the letter an odd sense of familiarity combined with resignation, distance and emotional detachment, as though Olive were simply reporting the death of a neighbor and the deep grief of his wife of many years.

Olive’s detachment is better understood in light of a letter she received from John nine years earlier, in 1874, the first line of which captures Olive’s lesser wifely status and John’s attitude toward her. “I sent each of the other women a good long and affectionate letter... and feel that I should send you one also.” Duty had compelled him to correspond with her. He went on to remind her that, in keeping with their Mormon religious beliefs about the necessity of marriage and the eternal nature of the marital connection, they could not be “redeemed and exalted...in a separate condition,...an incontrovertible fact which it is well for us both to understand and realize.” In light of this, John recommended that they should “cultivate for each other that friendship and affection” appropriate to Saints and spouses, though their “interests, temporarily, appear to be distinct.” He admitted that he had been aggrieved in the past, but now wanted to “extend to you the hand of fellowship, and my affectionate regards as a husband.” He
remembered “with much satisfaction the few happy years of our early married life” and hoped that they could soon enjoy the “relations and endearments of life as in times past.” But should they fail in this by their own misconduct, “Wo! Unto the culpable party, with the displeasure of our Father in Heaven, which God forbid should be our lot.” Intriguingly, John counseled, “Perhaps it will be wisdom in you to retain this as a private and confidential letter, not that there is anything improper about it; but it may save some feelings which had better sleep in oblivion without a resurrection for all time to come.”

Perhaps he was worried about the consequences should his three wives compare their letters.

Olive must have complied with John’s desires to some degree since she lived next-door to him and Mary Ann at the time of his death, but the reserved relationship demonstrated by John’s letter apparently remained cool, judging by Olive’s reaction to his death. Their two letters nevertheless indicate a connection that was, in both their minds, related to nothing less than their joint personal redemption and exaltation. By marrying John polygamonously in 1846, Olive had, in Mormon thinking, opened the door to salvation for her husband, his first wife Mamie, and all of their collective offspring.

One has to wonder; why would Olive want to be tied to John in the eternities when she did not feel to mourn his death on earth? The desire is more easily understood when it is seen not just as a connection to John, but to her children, the other wives and their children, and indeed to all the righteous of the Mormon community. John’s admonition, beginning with “Wo!” was a stern reminder that she could lose her salvation by her own individual misconduct, but if she gained salvation, exaltation in the

---

54 Ibid., 421-2.
eternal worlds that followed would be a group undertaking, a family narrative.\textsuperscript{55} Without salvation, however, she would be like the medieval thane locked out of the mead hall, doomed to wander the eternities alone.

Olive and John were both firm believers in a Mormon theological narrative that explained the purpose of life, connected them to their family and other Mormon faithful in this life and the world to come, and gave them a model by which they could live. It was a lifeline to which they could cling in the confusing world of 19\textsuperscript{th} century populist religion and social upheaval.\textsuperscript{56} They sought religious authority and they found what they were seeking in Joseph Smith and Mormonism.\textsuperscript{57} But how did their firm belief in Mormonism lead them to polygamy, a form of marriage they both appear to have found less than satisfying? Like other Mormons, they were surely horrified when they first learned about polygamy because they had been steeped in monogamy from childhood.\textsuperscript{58} Somehow they came to believe that polygamy was right, but how did this happen?

The storied nature of Mormonism was particularly compelling to early converts who were seeking to make sense of Christian tradition and the amazing success of the

\textsuperscript{55} Jan Shipps, \textit{Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition}, University of Illinois Press, Champagne-Urbana, 1985, 148-49. Shipps has cogently observed that in Mormonism the “unit of salvation” is the individual, but the “unit of exaltation” is the family.

\textsuperscript{56} For a discussion of the Mormon flight from pluralism and confusion see Marvin S. Hill, \textit{Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism}, Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 1989 and Lawrence Foster, \textit{Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons and the Oneida Community}, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1984. Hill emphasizes Mormon retreat from the confusion of the many insistent religious voices of the period that offered different forms of salvation, while Foster argues that Mormons were retreating from the upheaval in community and family relations that resulted from burgeoning industrialization and newfound freedoms. Beyond this, they embraced millenarian beliefs that posited that the last days were upon them and the diseased old order was dying away to be replaced by true religion in preparation for the advent of Jesus Christ in the second coming.

\textsuperscript{57} For a fine discussion of the growth of authoritative hierarchy in Mormonism, see Michael Quinn, \textit{The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power}, Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 1994 By the time the Fullmers joined the church, the quorum structure of Mormonism that undergirded the hierarchical authority was well-established. The power relationships

\textsuperscript{58} Foster, \textit{Religion and Sexuality}, pp. 123, 146-47
American experiment. The narrative that Mormons found so compelling included the seeds of some innovative doctrine concerning marriage and family. This developing doctrine (along with revelation and some practical problems that emerged concerning marriage) led the church to resacralize and therefore control marriage patterns among members and assert its authority, in contradiction to the civil authority of the state and nation in which Mormons lived. By introducing polygamy secretly and at the same time openly introducing powerful ordinances that connected families and salvation, Joseph Smith was able to build an infrastructure that supported polygamy and paved the way for its acceptance after his death. In essence, Mormons became converted to a millenarian, narrative-based religious understanding that was extraordinarily effective because it encompassed the grand sweep of religious history while incorporating American experience into a family-centered theology of salvation. Polygamy was a central part of that narrative.

---

59 For an enlightening discussion of Mormon use of religious narrative to define themselves, see Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1987. Shipps argues that Mormonism made use of religious stories to define themselves, but in the end were a new religious tradition that arose out of the old in the same fashion that Christianity arose from Judaism.

60 Daniel Bachman “New Light on an Old Hypothesis: The Ohio Origins of the Revelation on Eternal Marriage” (*Journal of Mormon History*, volume 5, 1978, pp. 19-32) Bachman traces the roots of these innovative doctrines to the earliest days of the church, and argues that they originated and grew during the Ohio period.

61 For information on this process, see Bachman (ibid) or Richard Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy, A History*, Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 1989, especially the first chapter, pp 1-12.


The Nature and Scope of Mormon Belief

To understand why the Fullmers and other converts would accept polygamy, it is useful to look at the way Mormons believe. For the Fullmers, and for most people who became Mormons after the church was organized in 1830, accepting polygamy was part of a process that began with a wholehearted embrace of an exciting new religion that fit exceptionally well with the religious understanding of ordinary people in the wake of the American Revolution. Common people had begun shortly after the Revolution to shape religion for themselves in striking democratic ways. The Fullmers, and people like them, came to believe that amazing events and radical changes were possible and necessary in their time—the last days. In this social and religious milieu, Mormonism was particularly successful because it offered, as Marvin Hill has demonstrated, a refuge from the confusion of American religious pluralism through a compelling millenarian synthesis of traditional Christian and distinctively American history and theology.

The theology was particularly attractive to common people because it was articulated through canonic stories and interrelated action and policy. Richard Bushman has said that “Mormonism is less a set of doctrines than a collection of stories.” It is not surprising that this should be true for a religion that arose in a period of rapid democratization, when fast-growing denominations like Methodists and Baptists self-consciously rejected codified theology and trained ministers in favor of more populist forms of worship that were accessible and commonsensical. Nathan Oman has argued

---

64 See Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* for an especially lively treatment of this phenomenon, especially Chapter One, “Democracy and Christianity,” pp. 3-17.
that for Mormons, stories and scripture gave rise to practices and institutions that created a structure on which the church could build and which helped Mormons attract, socialize and retain members. In addition, these practices and institutions served as a substitute for codified theology.67

Mormons adopted many practices and institutions from scripture—baptism, priesthood, the Lord’s Supper and, eventually, polygamy—which were used to integrate Mormonism into members’ everyday lives. These same concepts informed Mormon understandings of salvation and exaltation and allowed people to determine what they needed to do to be saved and exalted. Beyond this, Oman has argued that Mormon belief in the authority of their leaders has allowed them to see their history as “the accretion of many decisions in concrete historical situations made by wise and inspired leaders. The result is a set of practices and institutions that they regard as imbued with the divine, even when the practices and institutions cannot be shown to be deduced in any unproblematic manner from sacred texts, theological first principles or dramatic moments of charismatic revelation.”68 In other words, besides being a collection of stories, Mormonism is also “a set of practices and institutions” that respond to the conditions arising from the march of history through the authority of leaders who members regard as inspired by God. Mormon beliefs about the trajectory of history and their place in the religious story could thus respond to what actually happened as opposed to what they thought would happen, and even prophesied would happen, without diminishing the faith of members.

---

68 Ibid.
Authority was central to Mormonism. The Mormon narrative was woven around the idea of religious truth and authority from God. Leaders were called of God; practices and institutions were according to God’s commands. In light of the importance Mormons place on authority and democracy, one might be inclined to ask, how can democratic religion and religious authority co-exist? The answer is that priesthood—power from God—was given to ordinary members in what they regarded as divinely inspired ways. Hence authority and democracy existed together in Mormonism from the earliest days.

Within this democratic and authoritarian structure, the process of sorting out how institutions and practices would interact with authority, narrative and belief to connect Mormons to the church and to each other was extraordinarily complicated. The various practices and institutions had to coordinate with scripture and belief to form a coherent story, what I call the Mormon theological narrative. The importance of this story to Mormons cannot be overemphasized. People needed to understand why they did what they did, and what it would mean for them both in earth life and in the life hereafter. Or rather, they needed to believe that the story made sense in the eternal scheme of things even if they themselves did not understand the narrative perfectly. At the same time, ordinary members participated in the process because priesthood was given to all worthy males and church hierarchy was drawn from lay membership—there was no ordained ministry.

---

69 See Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, particularly chapters 1 and 3, which discuss the process of moving from egalitarian to hierarchical structure (chapter 1), and the Mormon penchant for theocratic government (chapter 3.)
Forming such a structure and basis of authority, however, was a trial-and-error process that adherents nevertheless believed was infused with the divine.\textsuperscript{70} Mormonism’s particular combination of story-based theology and ongoing revelation made for a dynamic and nimble hierarchy, social organization and body of belief. Through continuing revelation from modern-day prophets, Mormon policies and institutions, like polygamy, could respond to changing circumstances and conditions in a way that would best serve the interests of the church and its membership. Since Mormons were not bound to a codified theology, practices and institutions could change to respond to what events had delivered and experience had taught them. What they learned and experienced in turn became part of the faith promoting narrative that sustained each generation.\textsuperscript{71} The migration west, for example, besides harkening back to the Children of Israel’s escape from Egypt, became a faith-promoting narrative of great power for the descendants of Mormon pioneers.\textsuperscript{72}

**Religious Narrative, Marriage and Family**

The storied nature of Mormonism was instantly appealing to John and Mary Ann Fullmer when they joined the church in 1839.\textsuperscript{73} Mormonism explained the sweep of religious history to them, gave them a tradition in which they could raise their two young daughters, and fulfilled an ambition John had long held to be a minister of the Gospel. Beyond this, John’s parents and three of his siblings had already become Mormons, so

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} For a fine treatment of the trek and its meaning, see Richard E. Bennett, *We’ll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus, 1846-1848*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1997, especially chapter two, “‘The Word and Will of the Lord’: Blueprint for Exodus,” pp. 67-94.
\textsuperscript{73} The Fullmers were a fairly prominent family in early Mormon history—David Fullmer was a member of the Nauvoo High Council, for example—but theirs is not a family name that any Mormon would recognize. In other words, they are relatively typical of early Mormons.
they were increasing family unity by adopting their new religion. Family and community ties were, in fact, central to Mormonism and to polygamy, and, by the time the Fullmers became Mormons, a remarkable shift had begun in Mormon understanding of marriage and family that was surely especially appealing to the young couple. Though Mormons were initially in line with general Protestant and American values concerning marriage and family, an understanding that regarded marriage as a civil institution, over time the church moved toward resacralizing marriage in a way that went beyond even the Catholic sacramental interpretation of marriage.74 Mormons also began to integrate family relationships into their theological understanding of salvation and the organization of the afterlife.75 One can imagine the comforting appeal of a doctrine that joined families together in eternity during a period of relatively high mortality among children and parents alike. Relating to this, a particular kind of Kingdom of God thinking developed that encompassed families and communal relations and was to apply to both earthly and heavenly life.76

The resacralization of marriage combined with a Mormon embrace of the entire span of religious history that placed special emphasis on the ancient patriarchs as models for creating an earthly and heavenly Kingdom of God, which makes sense in light of Mormon emphasis on family.77 The stories of the ancient patriarchs are, after all, essentially family and tribal stories. Likewise, the Book of Mormon is a family story. It

75 See Buerger, The Mysteries of Godliness, chapter 3 (pp. 35-68) “Joseph Smith’s Ritual,” which describes the development of the rituals and their integration with marriage and salvation.
76 For the most complete treatment of the Kingdom of God thinking in early Mormon history, see Klaus J. Hansen, Quest For Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1967. Hansen has argued that polygamy was embedded in the political Kingdom of God narrative.
was hard not to notice that Ancient Israel had grown and developed through strict control of marriage patterns. The Children of Israel were not to marry unbelievers and they practiced polygamy, which ensured that the most faithful and chosen produced numerous offspring. In a sense, then, Mormon embrace of all of religious history made polygamy a natural part of their theological narrative. 78

But even if polygamy could be part of the theological narrative, for early converts of the church it was not something they wanted or expected. After all, there were many practices mentioned in the Old Testament that were not adopted. And though it had popped up now and again in various sects, most of Christian history did not support polygamy. 79 Moreover, polygamy is not part of the New Testament story in any meaningful way. Consequently, the select people to whom Joseph Smith began to introduce polygamy in 1841 were initially surprised and repelled. Not only this, but the gossip and rumor that rocked the city almost tore the community apart and eventually contributed to the murders of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum. How then, did polygamy become the favored form of marriage among Mormons? The following pages will explore the complex process by which people who were initially intensely opposed to polygamy were brought to regard it as right. The rise of a theological narrative in Mormonism that privileged polygamy is perhaps best observed through case studies, which set individual practice of and private attitudes toward polygamy against the backdrop of social, economic and political developments in Mormon culture and the rest of the nation. To begin to understand the Mormon polygamous transition, it is therefore

useful to revisit the Fullmers and explore the connection between the heady religious times in which they lived and their eventual acceptance of polygamy.

**The Rise of Democratic Religion**

John and Mary Ann Fullmer’s path to Mormonism and polygamy was profoundly shaped by the political, economic and religious climate of their day, which in turn was profoundly shaped by the American Revolution. Nathan Hatch has argued that the American Revolution revamped old understandings about the meaning of authority, power, and social organization.\(^8^0\) Americans, especially ordinary Americans like the Fullmers, began to have new conceptions of what liberty and democracy meant in their lives. They began to understand that they could think for themselves about a whole range of issues, from governance to religion, and did not need to be guided by the authorities and traditions of the past. They came to believe that though ministers had assured them scripture could only be interpreted by educated men, in reality they could interpret scripture and understand the spiritual world on their own terms. Certainly young men like John had a new sense of possibility for their lives in this period.

John and his family had been caught up in the excitement of the religious movements of the day--so caught up that he hoped to become a Baptist minister. Baptists were part of the religious movements that grew exponentially at this time, including Methodism, the Black churches, the Christian movements and Mormonism, which offered ordinary humble folk an exhilarating sense of “individual potential and collective aspiration.”\(^8^1\) In keeping with their new understandings of the spiritual world, people like

\(^8^0\) I am deeply indebted for the insights of Nathan O. Hatch as presented in *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1989.

\(^8^1\) Ibid., p. 5. Hatch explores the development of all these groups in detail.
the Fullmers helped develop religion in a way that suited them by joining religions that delivered the kind of worship they favored. Instead of dry, theological sermons, they liked down-to-earth doctrine, exuberant preaching, lively camp meetings, rousing popular music and local leadership that rose from the people by virtue of their spiritual gifts.\textsuperscript{82} The word was spread through a religious press that printed millions of pamphlets and books that were distributed by itinerate preachers and missionaries.

At heart, argues Nathan Hatch, the religious arguments of the early republic were a “debate over religious authority.”\textsuperscript{83} To the dismay of ordained ministers in the traditional churches, common people came to reject tradition and embrace what was new and experimental, while searching for novel sources of authority. They adopted millenarian beliefs that posited Jesus Christ’s return and the end of religious history in their lifetime. In this spirit, they were ready to believe revolutionary dogma and embrace leaders that arose from among them, men who possessed extraordinary gifts of charisma, spirituality, organization, communication and imagination. Such leaders offered ordinary people “compelling visions of individual self-respect and collective self-confidence.”\textsuperscript{84} Compelling though these visions were, eventually all of these sects would have to come to terms with the necessity for religious authority vested in some sort of hierarchy.\textsuperscript{85} For Mormons, polygamy was bound up with this process.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 9.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., p. 22.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., p. 4.
The Fullmers were drawn to democratic understandings of religious authority which asserted that “common people were more sensitive than elites to the ways of the divine.” Little information survives about the Fullmers’ Pennsylvania years, but John’s sister, Desdemona, recounted in her memoirs that the family befriended a young neighbor boy, Putnam Wadsworth, who had dreams and visions. Like Joseph Smith, he claimed that “the Lord revealed to him that all the churches were wrong.” Putnam converted a band of followers to his views and took to the roads Apreaching a new doctrine to all the people he wished to see the same gospel preached that the apostles preached.

Putnam’s death was as dramatic as his life. In his travels he avoided waterways, because he claimed that God had revealed to him that if he crossed a large body of water he would soon die. When his brother lay dying on the other side of a river, he faced a dilemma, but chose to go to his brother and died shortly thereafter. Even this small amount of information about Wadsworth’s religious leanings indicates important aspects of his message and mission that fit with early 19th century millenarianism. Wadsworth advocated gospel primitivism and spread his messages through the ubiquitous itinerate preaching of the period. He put great faith in his dreams and visions, which were infused with folk superstition of waterways, and his demise seemed to confirm the truth of his visions. When they heard Joseph Smith’s story, the Fullmers were no doubt struck by the similarity to the message of Putnam Wadsworth. In fact, when the church introduced

86 Hatch, p. 22. Also see Mark Noll, America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2002, p. 231. Noll argues that though religious folk of the period regarded themselves as sinners in need of salvation, they were more likely than their ancestors to regard human will— their will and actions—as playing a part in events. In addition, though the Bible was still an important authority, their personal interpretation was the only reliable way to understand its precepts simply and directly.

87 Desdemona Fullmer autobiography, LDS archives. Also see Compton, In Sacred Loneliness, pp. 577-585.

88 Ibid.
proxy baptism for the dead in Nauvoo, John Fullmer was baptized for Wadsworth, whom he listed as a friend. That Putnam Wadsworth made his way into the family history of the Fullmers indicates that the religious populism and democratization of the day resonated strongly with them.

The Fullmers’ experience was remarkably similar to the religious experience of Joseph Smith’s family in upstate New York. Both were hard-luck families trying to place their children in the world as the household economy faded. The Smiths experienced a combination of religious excitement and social upheaval that led to numerous movements which attempted to institute new social structures, many aimed at perfecting mankind. Lawrence Foster, in his perceptive study of the Shakers, the Oneida colony and the Mormons, explains Joseph Smith’s thinking in terms of the Smith family’s troubled response to the social, financial and political upheaval of the day that Smith believed would be overcome by a glorious restoration of true religion and the Kingdom of God on earth. This restoration would involve the return of social practices from the Bible. “Every account of the genesis of young Joseph’s religious concerns stresses his profound dissatisfaction with the cacophony of religious claims which surrounded him, a cacophony which was part of the almost explosive growth, expansion, and development of the United States in the antebellum period.”

Whitney R. Cross has also argued that Americans expected “direct divine interposition in individual concerns” after the Revolution, and consequently put their own spin on Jacksonian optimism in a way that fits well with Mormon perfectionist leanings.

---

89 John Fullmer: The Man and His Writings, p. 119.
90 Foster, Religion and Sexuality, pp. 128-9.
Church folk believed “progress to be attainable by human effort and practically inevitable; but they derived from their Calvinist traditions an equally powerful suspicion that the natural tendency, unaided by willful diligence, was toward degeneracy.”

To Joseph Smith then, rampant religious claims were part of this degeneracy, but it was a degeneracy that could be halted and reversed through true religion; they could create a Kingdom of God on earth.

In keeping with the pattern of post-revolution millenarian sects, each new sect that arose claimed to be sole purveyors of truth. Mormons were no exception, and, in this respect, their position as a Johnny-come-lately of the group worked to their advantage. As their attachment to Putnam Wadsworth shows, the Fullmers were primed to be sympathetic to the kind of thinking that rejected the cacophony of religious claims in favor of a religious narrative that insisted upon one true church when they encountered Mormonism. It offered an antidote to the confusion and upheaval of the times with its claims to authority and guidance from heaven.

John Fullmer’s parents, Peter Fullmer and Susannah Zerfass Fullmer, had certainly experienced upheaval in their lives. They had grown up in Pennsylvania, but had not prospered at farming there and so left their long-time Pennsylvania roots in 1825 to move to the Ohio frontier when their seven children were already adults or approaching adulthood. It is likely that they hoped to settle their children on available land in their new community. Since colonial days this had been a common household

---

93 _John Fullmer: The Man and His Writings_, pp. 1-10, family biographical information.
pattern. Peter and Susannah had grown up in a society where large families took advantage of home-grown labor to produce what they needed to survive and a little extra to sell. By the time their children were grown, the parents hoped to be situated to give their children a start in life, usually by passing down the farm or acquiring more land for sons, and bequeathing cash or goods to daughters.

The Fullmer’s children came of age in the 1820’s, a time when large families were becoming an economic drain instead of a labor asset. The United States was not yet fully industrialized, but the process had begun, and production that had once relied on the labor of women and girls in the household economy, especially the making of cloth, had moved to the textile mills of Massachusetts. Other forms of production that had occupied farmers in the winter months were also moving to factories. The nation was growing and changing in hundreds of other ways in the frenetic Jacksonian years, and many young people left parental homes and farms to seek opportunity in the cities. The U.S. was becoming a nation less rooted in stable farm communities than in the past.94 When the Fullmers arrived in Ohio, far from family and friends, they seem to have been in search of religion and community, for they subsequently joined two millenarian sects in succession, first the Campbellites and then the Mormons. If they had hoped to keep their children near them by moving, however, they did not entirely succeed; in 1832, before the family had joined the Campbellites, their 25-year-old son John left home to move to Nashville, where he intended to study for the Baptist ministry.

94 For a fine discussion of these familial patterns, see Mary Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1981, especially the first chapter, “Family, Community and the Frontier Generation, 1790-1820, pp. 18-59.
Peter and Susannah had not been able to provide for John’s education, and he soon found that he could not afford to continue his pursuit of the ministry. To support himself, he took a job with a local newspaper, The Banner, while studying law on the side. Like Abe Lincoln, John was not formally educated, but he was intelligent, well-spoken, and an avid reader and autodidact. His self-improvement regimen was at least somewhat successful, because he became well enough respected as an up-and-coming citizen of Nashville to attract the notice of a local businessman. John wrote that the businessman asked if “I did not wish to do a better business than I was doing. I told him my wish was not confined to my means but that I was nevertheless controlled by them.”

The man offered to invest in a mercantile business to be run by John and a partner, and naturally John Fullmer jumped at the chance to advance his prospects. John’s business did not succeed as well as he hoped, a situation the conservative and whiggish John blamed on Jackson’s banking policies. John apparently felt no compunction to be loyal to Jackson just because he lived in the president’s hometown. He could be philosophical about his slow business, however, because he had succeeded in attracting the attentions of a young lady, Mary Ann Price, the daughter of a wealthy local businessman. Mary Ann’s father, John Price, did not favor the match and forbade the courtship.

For a time the young couple complied with her father’s wishes, but John wrote that eventually they “corresponded daily; and when we thought we were about to be discovered, we consummated the business to our liking, and to the utter astonishment and surprise of everybody. On the morning of the 24th of May, [1837] she put on her morning gown as usual, and instead of walking among the flowers in the garden as usual,

---

she skipped it across the street, through an alley, and met me at the place of appointment. At nine o’clock we were at the parson’s house and had the ceremony completed, and wrote a joint note to her mother (her father being at that time in Texas), informing her of what was done, and hopeful also that it was well done.” The local populace must have sympathized with the young lovers, because John wrote that “Our wedding gave more true joy than any I ever heard of, among the people.”

Though parental disapproved had forced John and Mary Ann to conduct their courtship and marriage in secret, they hastened to make the news public after the ceremony was completed and could not be undone. Revealing the importance of love and romance to young couples in this period, John wrote to his family, “I always thought I would be better pleased for having a little romance in my courtship,” He was nevertheless delighted to bask in the public approval of his marriage, which would be important for a young businessman like John Fullmer, whose success in business depended on his reputation. Certainly the loss of community support for their union would have blighted prospects for the success of both his marriage and his business.

Nancy Cott has called the public side of marriage its “least noticed aspect,” though legal requirements and traditions are clearly designed to assure that there is family and community support for newly married couples, to remind the couple that what they are doing is a legal bond that is important not just to them and their families, but to the state as well. Traditions like wearing special clothes, asking a father for his daughter’s hand and solemnizing the marriage in a church before a minister with friends and family

96 Ibid., p. 27.
97 Ibid., pp. 26-27.
as witnesses, also serve to assure that there is as much family and community support as possible for a newlyweds. The hope is that the couple cannot come away from this nuptial hoopla without being keenly aware of the expectations of their community and the public support for their marriage. Cott has noted that the ringing of wedding bells signals to all within earshot that a new union has been contracted and now demands public approval. In short, “The public sees itself and its own interest reflected in the couple’s action.”

Though no wedding bells rang for the young Fullmers, public approval was important, and the young couple was delighted when John’s family joined with the Nashville community in rejoicing over his marriage. He soon became alarmed, however, about a potential source of family discord, the recent conversion of his parents, brothers, David and Almon and his sister Desdemona to a new sect, Mormonism. In spite of scolding them for not writing (a circumstance he did not seem to have connected to his propensity for correcting their grammar when they did write) and teasing his sisters about being old maids, John was devoted to his family and feared their new religion would sever their family ties. He wrote to his parents about his brother David’s new convictions, “Now, my brother is denouncing all who differ with him on his new fangled doctrine...I stand a living witness to my self at least, that God can and will accept them who put their trust in him, and if they do hold a different doctrine. I am sorry that such notions should be likely in all probability to break up our whole family. You have no idea what pain it gives me. When I return, if ever I should return, where should I find

you?”

Again, John’s doubts indicate his basic conservatism. Just as he had rejected Jackson’s politics, he was uneasy with “new fangled doctrines” like Mormonism.

John’s concern about the unsettled state of his family and the possibility of losing track of them is interesting given that he was the one who had left home in search of greener pastures; but perhaps it is not surprising that a young man would expect some stability from his parents while he explored the world. David’s denunciation of those whose beliefs differed from his own once he had accepted Mormonism seems, however, to have been especially worrisome to John Fullmer. He certainly recognized right away the divisive power of his brother’s strong beliefs. He was further alarmed because his family had apparently told him that Joseph Smith encouraged adherents to move to “Zion”, or the center of the church, which was located at that time in Jackson County, Missouri. It must have seemed to John that his family had become dry leaves to be blown around by the winds of Mormonism.

John and Mary Ann were somewhat adrift in Tennessee as well. As already indicated, newer attitudes that were more fluid and less reliant on traditional religious, community and parental authority had worked to John and Mary Ann’s advantage when they had defied her parents by their elopement. In the eighteenth century, their community would have been unlikely to rejoice with them for pursuing love over parental advice. In the 19th century, though religious literature decried the waning of patriarchy, this kind of romantic defiance was applauded by their Nashville community, which seems to have adopted newly developing ideas that marriage should be based on

---

romantic love, not parental opinion. But their new freedoms also left them disconnected and adrift, in search of stability, community and meaning, especially since fickle economic times forced them to leave Nashville, where they had friends and family, for the uncertainties of a new community.

The young Fullmers found the cost of living and doing business in Nashville ruinously expensive, so in 1838 they left Nashville to move to New Castle, Tennessee, a small settlement where they could live with Mary Ann’s grandmother and run their business more cheaply. Times were hard, however, and John’s business there did not prosper. In addition, he resented the demands of Mary Ann’s kinfolk and disliked feeling beholden to them. His prospects did not seem very bright at this point. Even with the backing of a successful businessman, the economic vagaries of the 1830’s had defeated his ambitions. In spite of his slow start in the economic world, however, his family had taken off and now included two daughters. With the responsibilities of wife and daughters weighing heavily on him, capable, ambitious and religious John Fullmer was seeking to secure a place for his family on earth and in heaven. Probably for this reason, John began to express a softened attitude toward Mormonism in his correspondence with his brother David. He was intrigued with Mormon claims because they were consistent with the millenarian religious talk he heard in other quarters, but were even more grand and impressive.

David had told him that God continued to work miracles, and John responded that “I am not at all prepared to say that God will not, or cannot work miracles now as he

---

formerly did; I believe he can, whether he will or no…” In addition, he wondered about the claims that the last days were upon them, but was uncertain about the truth of the matter, “I know that many writers believe the millennium to be near at hand; and how God will work to bring it about, I do not pretend to know…If I had opportunity, I would forthwith go to see you…to see and hear for myself, for what you profess is no small thing.”

John was especially impressed that David had become a “minister of the gospel.” Since Mormons ordained all worthy males to the priesthood, his brother had achieved something that had eluded him, “Little did I think when I last saw you that in this short period you would officiate as an ordained minister of the gospel.” John had long wanted this for himself, because “I believe it is a field in which my mind would be more suitable and naturally engaged than in any other.” Since he had been unable to achieve his ambition, however, he was plagued with self-doubt. “I either lack the talents, the energy, or the inspiration, perhaps all.”

John apparently assumed that certain people possessed these qualities and were therefore pre-ordained of God to be ministers of the gospel. These assumptions were accordant with 19th century populist religious beliefs which posited that leaders would arise up by virtue of their spiritual and other gifts to lead their people in the true ways of religion. He wanted to be one of these chosen people, but assumed that if he really were chosen, God would have allowed him to succeed in his religious ambitions. Perhaps in Mormonism he could realize his dreams.

101 John Solomon Fullmer, the Man and His Writings, pp. 23-4. Emphasis original.
102 Hatch, p. 5.
John’s parents and siblings David, Desdemona and Almon, had so thoroughly thrown their lot in with Mormons by this time that they moved first to Kirtland, Ohio and then to Missouri to live with the saints in what was to be their Zion. It was almost certainly missionaries from Kirtland that had baptized them. In these places they felt the full brunt of anti-Mormon persecution, particularly in Missouri, and fled in 1839 with the rest of the saints to what appeared to be a haven—Commerce, Illinois, soon to be renamed Nauvoo. When David urged John to visit them there in the spring of that year, John saddled up his horse and complied--perhaps hoping to see if he could make some sense of their strange new religion. As it turned out, contrary to his initial adverse attitude, when he visited his family and studied their new religion, everything fell into place for the religious seeker, John Fullmer. Soon after he rode into the city, he met Joseph Smith, heard him preach and became convinced that he was all he claimed to be—a prophet of God who had restored the true gospel to earth. Soon Smith baptized John Fullmer into his young church. Shortly thereafter, John, Mary Ann and their daughters moved to Nauvoo to be near his family and part of the rapidly growing community of Latter-Day-Saints.

By joining the Mormons in 1839, John and Mary Ann Fullmer found much that they had desired. Independence within community, financial success, close proximity with family and religious authority had all been elusive for them in their short life together, but they were about to find all of these in rich supply in Nauvoo. Since Mormons have a lay priesthood, John soon became a minister of the gospel as he had hoped to be among the Baptists and his talents were quickly put to use. When they joined the church in 1839, however, the Fullmers would almost certainly have known nothing
about the possibility that polygamy would shortly be introduced. Though there had been occasional rumors of sexual irregularities among church leaders, they could have easily dismissed such rumors as part of the vicious hatred that Mormons attracted wherever they went.

Visitors to Nauvoo in this period have attested to the buzz of activity they encountered in the rapidly growing city, which quickly became one of the largest in the state; it was as large as Chicago by 1844. As they helped to build the city on the banks of the Mississippi River and a grand and beautiful temple to God on the hill overlooking the city, new converts felt a satisfying sense of meaning and purpose. Success and prosperity had been illusory for John and Mary Ann in Tennessee, but in Nauvoo, shortly after his baptism, John was publishing articles in the church newspaper, The *Times and Seasons*, and was made paymaster of the powerful Nauvoo legion. He was soon the treasurer for the city, and, with his knowledge of business, became the manager of Joseph Smith’s general store. Within a few years he became a member of the behind-the-scenes governing body of the church known as the Council of the Fifty, and his brother David became part of the Nauvoo High Council, a high level church governing body. The contemporary visitor will find a reminder of the family and their importance in early Nauvoo; the street where they once owned a farm is called Fulmer Street—spelled with one “l” thanks to the vagaries of 19th century spelling.

Like many other converts, the Fullmers found in Mormonism a refuge from the exuberant but confusing religious scene of their day. They embraced a theological

---

narrative that promised to fulfill the marvelous millenarian expectations of common people with its claims to continuing revelation and heavenly visitors to earth.\textsuperscript{104} They were also on the road to accepting polygamy because they had come to believe that they lived in the last days and should expect radical change and innovation. But in spite of being primed to accept radical changes to theology and social practice, monogamy was so ingrained in Americans that significant groundwork had to be laid before polygamy could be introduced. It had to be part of a religious story that made sense to people like the Fullmers, and that narrative included a return to covenant theology and patriarchy along with a resacralization of marriage under the auspices of the Mormon priesthood.

**The Process of Asserting Church Control Over Marriage**

Before the intricate dance between polygamy, priesthood and hierarchy could begin, however, Lawrence Foster has observed, “if the Mormon Church were to gain the independent control of its own destiny that it sought, it had to be able to control the marriage and divorce practices of its members.”\textsuperscript{105} The thriving movement that John and Mary Ann Fullmer joined had become so because Mormons had learned how to wield considerable social control in the effort to create their Kingdom of God on earth. In keeping with the democratic roots of Mormonism, the power structure was disseminated among the people through a lay priesthood. Initially, Joseph Smith was simply a prophet among prophets.\textsuperscript{106} David Whitmer, an early member, later wrote that “Brother Joseph gave many true prophecies when he was humble before God: but this is no more than


\textsuperscript{105} Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, p.136.

many of the other brethren did.” An attempt by a man named Hiram Page to receive prophecy for the fledgling church in the summer of 1830, however, demonstrated that chaos could reign if too many prophets were at work. This precipitated a revelation received by Joseph Smith that designated himself as the receptor for church revelations. Mormon revelation usually happened in this way; a problem would arise, Joseph Smith would pray about it and then receive a revelation that incorporated a solution into the theological narrative. This instance was the beginning of differentiation in hierarchy and priesthood that would develop over the next 15 years.

As the church grew, hierarchy and a chain of authority would be important so that conflict could be avoided or resolved; it certainly played a role in the resacralization of marriage.

Mormon doctrine concerning family developed in a similar way. The Book of Commandments, later the Doctrine and Covenants, presented some early general guidelines that connected priesthood and family. The Doctrine and Covenants, a Mormon scripture based on church history and Joseph Smith’s revelations, Section 2: 1-3 reads: Behold I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall plant in the hearts of the

---

107 David Whitmer, “An Address to All Believers in Christ”, 1887 pamphlet, available online.
108 D.and C. 28:2
109 Daniel Bachman argues in “New Light on an Old Hypothesis: The Ohio Origins of the Revelation on Eternal Marriage” (Journal of Mormon History, volume 5, 1978, pp. 19-32) that the revelation on polygamy, received in 1843 in Nauvoo, Illinois, was an amalgam of insights and revelations received as answers to Joseph Smith’s questions that arose in the process of scripture study and interpretation in the Ohio and Illinois periods. Some of his questions also came simply from life experience. The point is that a long process preceded the revelation.
children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming.” In other words, the Priesthood would be instrumental in uniting families in some unspecified way that was nevertheless very important judging by the consequences. The words echo passages found in Malachi and are repeated three times in the *Doctrine and Covenants* itself.\(^{112}\) The passages included in Mormon scripture date from 1823, 1830, and 1836, which shows that connecting family and Priesthood was an important recurring theme for Mormons. The 1836 section corresponds to the time period in which marriage began to be resacralized and tied to the ancient patriarchs.

Another important early reference to marriage originally appeared in the *Book of Commandments*, is now part of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, and concerns the conversion of a Shaker man, Leman Copley, who joined the church but wished to retain some of his Shaker beliefs. The revelation is dated March, 1831, and reiterates various Mormon doctrines for Copley’s benefit, declaring with regard to marriage (which Shakers eschewed in favor of celibacy) “that whoso forbiddeth to marry is not ordained of God, for marriage is ordained of God unto man. Wherefore it is lawful that he should have one wife, and they twain shall be one flesh, and all this that the earth might answer the end of its creation.”\(^{113}\) Though this particular reference does not connect marriage to priesthood and even specifies one wife, it does connect marriage and God’s requirements for man, a step in the direction of resacralization.

---

\(^{112}\) Found in Malachi 4, 5-6 and *Doctrine and Covenants* 27:9 and 110:13-16.

\(^{113}\) *Doctrine and Covenants*, 49:16-17. This is also found in the 1833 *Book of Commandments*, chapter 11, p. 117.
The time span covered by these revelations shows that the Church’s usurpation of the public oversight of marriage was gradual and that Church concern with family matters and the power to solemnize marriages did not begin with polygamy. Instead, given the tight communal structure of Mormon society and the perceived necessity of moving to Zion, problems frequently arose when one spouse joined the church and the other remained a skeptic, or when a church member had been abandoned by a spouse and was hence in marital limbo. For this reason, control over marriage and divorce was very important from the earliest days of Mormonism.

It was just such a case of marital limbo that furthered the process. The case involved the marriage of a young couple, Newell Knight and Lydia Goldthwaite, who met in Kirtland, Ohio, and wanted to be married there by Joseph Smith in 1836. Lydia had been abandoned by her husband, Calvin Bailey, from whom she was not yet legally divorced and whose whereabouts were unknown--hence her doubts about a marriage to Newell Knight. Joseph Smith assured her that God approved of the union. He performed the marriage ceremony for Newell and Lydia, and described it in his diary (sometimes written by a scribe) as “original with me.” A “considerable company” had come to watch the marriage, and “I requested them to arise and join hands. I then remarked that marriage was an institution of heaven instituted in the Garden of Eden. That it was necessary that it should be Solemnized by the authority of the

---

115 In 1883, Lydia’s story was published in a Mormon magazine for young people, The Juvenile Instructor. Brigham Young’s daughter, Susa Young Gates, wrote the story, and it was during interviews conducted in order to produce the story that Lydia expressed her doubts about marrying Knight. LDS archives.
everlasting priesthood.” During the ceremony, Smith pronounced them husband and wife in the name of God and gave them the “blessings of Adam and Eve.”

Newell and Lydia’s unorthodox marriage ceremony is interesting in many respects. Smith’s pride in mentioning that the ceremony was original with him indicates that he saw himself as introducing a new approach to not only the marriage ceremony, but to the institution itself. Far from regarding marriage as a civil institution as his Puritan ancestors had done, he connected it to tradition and to heavenly sanction by joining the couple in the name of God and pronouncing on them “the blessings that the Lord confered upon Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.” By saying that “it was necessary that [marriage] should be solemnized by the everlasting priesthood,” Smith assumed for himself and the church sole authority for sacralizing marriages, since Mormons believed that through Joseph Smith the everlasting priesthood had been restored and was to be found only in the Mormon Church. It seems likely that Smith included this information in part as a comfort to Lydia in response to her doubts about her marital limbo, but also to set a precedent for marriages to come.

Even more indicative of Mormon belief that priesthood power and authority trumped U.S. law was Joseph Smith’s statement about the bigamous marriage which he was not licensed to perform.

I have done it by the authority of the holy Priesthood and the Gentile law has no power to call me to an account for it. It is my religious privileged[sic], and the congress of the United States has no power to make a law that would abridge the rights of my religion: I have done as

---


I was commanded, and I know the Kingdom of God will prevail, and that the Saints will triumph over all their adversaries.\textsuperscript{118}

Michael Quinn has called the thinking behind this statement a doctrine of “theocratic ethics.”\textsuperscript{119} Though Mormons believed that the constitution was inspired by God, more mundane legal practices and local laws were another matter. Joseph Smith’s claim to authority over “Gentile law” is really quite striking and significant. Priesthood and revelation were the higher law and demanded obedience from Mormons. Once members had incorporated this thinking into their religious narrative, introducing polygamy would be a much easier task. The issue of allegiance to the United States, the constitution and the nation’s legal system would later prove to be thorny for Mormons, with polygamy and Kingdom of God thinking at the center of the controversy.

Later marriage ceremonies performed by Smith were described in his journal as being pronounced according to the “rules and regulations of the church.” Soon, moving beyond the blessings given to Adam and Eve, Smith began to include “the blessings of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”\textsuperscript{120} when solemnizing marriages, thus presaging the Old Testament thinking about marriage that eventually worked itself into the saints’ justification for instituting polygamy. The important point, however, is that for church members, the authority to not only perform marriages but to solemnize and sanctify them was taken from the state and vested in the church. Once members understood that this

\textsuperscript{118} As quoted in: Michael Quinn, \textit{The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power}, Signature Books, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1994, p. 88. From a sketch of the life of Newell Knight found in the LDS archives.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{120} Scott Faulring, \textit{The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith}, Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 1989, p. 104. This happened in a double marriage involving John Webb and Catharine Wilcox and Thomas Carrier and Elizabeth Baker.
authority rested in the church (and hence in their thinking with God) then the church was in a position to institute radical changes in marriage forms.

The development of church control over marriage was entirely in keeping with the storied nature of Mormonism and the way church institutions and practices developed. A problem arose—spouses who were left in marital limbo without much hope of divorce—and through revelation, authority and use of the traditional Judeo-Christian story, the theological narrative was shaped to solve the problem in a way that tied people more firmly to the church and increased control over members. Joseph Smith’s invoking the names of Adam, Eve, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was a way of both evoking authority and story on behalf of the church. These Old Testament figures were all well known for being God’s chosen whose (multiple) marriage partners were given them by God.121

One could also posit that Mormons were trying to some degree to make sense of a public marriage policy that was somewhat chaotic in the United States. Marriage was (and still is) under the purview of the states, and each state had its own laws which sometimes conflicted with one another. Hendrik Hartog has argued that separation, either by agreement or through abandonment, was a way of dealing with marital discord in a culture where divorce was extremely difficult to obtain and carried serious stigma. Some would travel to other states where divorce was more readily granted to dissolve their unions, but others would simply move away, begin a new marriage without benefit of

121 Bachman, in “New Light on an Old Hypothesis: The Ohio Origins of the Revelation on Eternal Marriage” (Journal of Mormon History, volume 5, 1978, pp. 19-32) argues that the revelation on polygamy had its roots in the Ohio period, when Mormon theology and doctrine were more connected to Old Testament practices and theology than New.
divorce and hope not to encounter anyone from the past. Mormons were not alone, in other words, in trying to deal with people caught in marital limbo. By tying marriage to church authority, Mormons were in a sense trying to flee marital pluralism as they had fled religious pluralism. They were trying to establish a workable marriage system within their culture that was undergirded by authority.

Early efforts to control marriage led to trouble with surrounding communities, however. Daniel Bachman has observed that the rise of authoritarian tendencies in the church led some priesthood holders to believe that they did not have to follow the law with regard to performing marriages. Such behavior led to an indictment for Sidney Rigdon in 1835 for performing a marriage without a license and later to the arrest of Joseph Smith Senior for the same infraction. Bachman has written that the men deliberately violated “a restrictive interpretation of the Ohio marriage statute which refused to recognize the Mormon priesthood. The priesthood viewed this interpretation as unconstitutional and an imposition on their divine authority.”

In March of 1836, Mormons tried to comply with Ohio law by having clerical licenses printed for their Elders. Smith wrote in his diary that he “went to the printing office and prepared a number of Elders license to Send by Elder Palmer to the court [in] Medina county in order to obtain licenses to marry as the court in this county will not greant [grant] to us this privilege.” The licenses were issued by the church to indicate the bearer’s level of Mormon priesthood and to certify that the person was a church

member in good standing, important for traveling missionaries in a face to face society, and in this case intended to give the men religious standing in order to legally perform marriages.

The reluctance of the local civil authorities in Kirtland to grant Mormon elders the right to perform marriages might be called the opening salvos in a war over who would control both public and private aspects of marriage. By resacralizing marriage and taking to themselves the power to say which marriages were legitimate, Mormons had already gone far in controlling marriage within their own community. But the act of performing marriages that had no standing in the state of Ohio was a breach that cut them adrift to move further and further away from the norms of American society as they created a particular narrative that separated them from the rest of American culture. It was this quality, detected by John Fullmer in his brother’s letters, which so alarmed him until he and Mary Ann joined the church and entered that world themselves.

**Political Ideology and Monogamy**

By brooking the norms of the rest of the nation, Mormons were setting themselves up for a confrontation with their fellow citizens in the future. In their millenarian zeal, they surely hoped that God would prepare a way for them to marry as they chose; they surely did not anticipate the strength of public opinion and state and federal oversight of marriage. Nancy Cott has observed that public oversight of marriage is multifaceted; most obviously it is a matter of law, but ideology, identity, tradition and custom, all of which involve every level of government and community, play a role in ensuring that marriage serves the purposes communities and individuals believe it should serve. Mormons sought to control as many facets of marriage as they could in making it an
institution that upheld their community of belief; on the largest level, they reinterpreted
the ideology of marriage. Though marriage is controlled by the individual states in the
U.S., the nation as a whole nevertheless had a powerful ideology of its own concerning
marriage, one originally articulated by the founders, who regarded monogamy as central
to the form of government they worked so hard to fashion.

Cott has argued that monogamy was as firmly embedded in personal and national
identity for most Americans as polygamy came to be for Mormons. This identity had a
long pedigree in Christian and American History.

Revolutionary-era discussions of appropriate marriage partners and the
usefulness of marriage in the republican social order assumed that
household conduct was linked to political government. Underlying these
discussions were the writings of Montesquieu, whose work initiated what
became a formulaic Enlightenment association of polygamy with
despotism. The harem stood for tyrannical rule, political corruption,
coercion, elevation of the passions over reason, selfishness, hypocrisy—
all the evils that virtuous republicans and enlightened thinkers wanted to
avoid. Monogamy, in contrast, stood for a government of consent,
moderation, and political liberty....A commitment to monogamous
marriage on a Christian model lodged deep in American political theory,
as vivid as a belief in popular sovereignty or in voluntary consent of the
governed or the necessity of a government of laws.125

For the founders then, monogamy was the basis of democratic government, though for
most Americans such ideology would have been more implicit than explicit.

Far from being immune to this ideology, it was deeply ingrained in early Mormon
converts, though most would have been unlikely to connect monogamy to democracy and
patriotism per se. Rather, for most of them, as they became involved with Mormon
culture and belief, their understanding of the Biblical religious story became intertwined
with an already religious understanding of the American story that the Book of Mormon

125 Cott, Public Vows, p. 22.
and Mormonism completed and gave forward motion. Polygamy then fit itself into the larger religious story and embedded itself in Mormon self-identity and community structure. Polygamy could be introduced into Mormon culture in this way because of its fluid theology that was based on a combination of religious narrative, current authority and practical institutions.\textsuperscript{126} Though polygamy was eventually preached as the highest form of “celestial marriage” within the culture, the monogamous ideal that was so central to the founders’ understanding of democratic society proved stubbornly resilient. Nevertheless, it was undeniable that polygamy was an important part of the Judeo-Christian heritage through the ancient patriarchs, and these were a central part of the Mormon narrative.\textsuperscript{127}

**Abrahamic Covenant and Patriarchy: Theological Foundations for Polygamy**

Though it arose during the Second Great Awakening, Mormonism proved to be a kind of revival of its own that combined a conservative return to the Abrahamic covenant so beloved of the Puritans and its logical outgrowth, patriarchy, with some innovative religious and social practices that reflected more recent American millenarianism.\textsuperscript{128} Though early Mormon patriarchy was tempered by Joseph Smith’s institution of a women’s organization, the Relief Society, patriarchy and authority were still important tenets of Mormonism. Many if not most converts to Mormonism had, like the Smith and Fullmer families, experienced profound religious confusion along with social upheaval. Marvin Hill has argued in *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* that Mormonism offered an antidote to the uncertainty of American pluralism.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., pp. 38.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 46.
for many converts, but at the same time led to animosity towards Mormons wherever they settled, because their certainty and political unity seemed threatening to the established pluralistic order. He has also argued that the Book of Mormon favored the kind of government Mormons attempted to establish wherever they settled, one ruled by prophet-statesmen, who relied on revelation to direct a move toward a kind of utopian communitarianism united under a compelling religious story.\textsuperscript{129} It is not too surprising that polygamy would develop under such conditions, nor that the prophet-statesman would have the power and influence to introduce a new social system. Mormonism also brought together many threads that answered troubling questions and completed the amazing story of American success in the Revolution. It not only explained the origins of the American Indians, but brought the American continent into the traditional Christian religious picture. In short, Joseph Smith’s genius was in bringing together many strands from Christian and American history and philosophy into a theological narrative that made sense to people like John Fullmer.\textsuperscript{130}

The Book of Mormon was a central part of Mormonism, and had tremendous appeal to Americans, whose understanding of their country combined many religious threads. Though the Fullmers were not descended of New England Puritans, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young and many other early members were. They inherited a strong sense of the Abrahamic covenant so beloved of their ancestors, a sense of religious mission not only for themselves, but for the land in which they lived.\textsuperscript{131} God had

\textsuperscript{129} Hill, pp. 99-126
\textsuperscript{130} Shipps, \textit{Mormonism}, p. 46, 62.
\textsuperscript{131} Val D. Rust. \textit{Radical Origins: Early Mormon Converts and Their Colonial Ancestors}, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2004. Rust argues that the ancestors of Mormons not only descended from Puritans, but from the more religiously radical elements of Puritan society.
promised to Abraham that the land would be given to him and that his offspring, who would prosper and grow as a chosen people, eventually numbering as the sands of the seashore. The Book of Mormon fit hand in glove with this thinking because it gave religious credentials to America as the promised land given by God to his chosen people, but in addition included American Indians as key players in that narrative. How to fit native peoples into the national story, especially the national religious story, had always been a thorny problem. The narrative of the Book of Mormon succeeded in bringing Native Americans into the national and religious picture by tying them to Old Testament peoples.  

The *Book of Mormon* story starts in Jerusalem, near the time of the Babylonian captivity, and relates the journey of a Hebrew family led by God away from Jerusalem and guided to America where they expanded as a people and fought among themselves in patterns reminiscent of the Old Testament tribes. It is, in short, like the stories of the Old Testament Patriarchs, a family story.  

Family stories and family connection, the process of turning the hearts of the children to the fathers that Malachi prophesied would happen, undergirded both the Old Testament and *The Book of Mormon*. Polygamy would eventually become an integral part of this kind of tribal family ideology. The remnant of the original *Book of Mormon* family was named after two sons of the family that left Jerusalem, Nephites and Lamanites, and are, in Mormon thinking, the American Indians. The Old Testament connection is important here because this means that American...

---

133 Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, p. 13. Bushman points out that for Joseph Smith’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith, who dictated a biography of her son, religion was connected to family. It is not surprising that her son would make such connections as well.
Indians would be descendants of Abraham and hence part of God’s chosen people. In the Book of Mormon, Jesus Christ actually appears to the Indians just after his crucifixion. Mormons believed that when Jesus spoke of his “other sheep that are not of this fold,” he meant the Nephites and Lamanites, or American Indians.

The presence of Jesus Christ in ancient America in the Book of Mormon narrative puts the book squarely in the New Testament tradition as well. In spite of the Old Testament connection, Book of Mormon themes are “profoundly Christian” according to Richard Bushman, which gave the book resonance to patriotic Christians of Joseph Smith’s day, who were likely trying on some level to connect their sense of the mission of the American nation with their Christian views and millenarian leanings. In addition, as the fourth president of the church, Wilford Woodruff put it, “We have only an outline of our duties written; we are to be guided by the living oracles.” In Mormonism, then, the stories of the scriptural canon and Mormon history combine with the guidance of current leaders to create a kind of living theology that was not only a compelling narrative, but one that nimbly responded to the circumstances that arose and created the institutions that were necessary to deal with problems and build community. Stories, and faith in leaders they believed were called of God thus became the primary builders of belief among members, and Mormonism had a mechanism for growth and change that was not overly hampered by a stagnant theology. The downside would be an

\[\text{\begin{itemize}
\item Ibid.
\item Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, pp. 104-5. Beyond its Christian message, however, Bushman points out that the Book of Mormon was a protest against the corruption in American culture in Joseph Smith’s day. Americans were too worldly and trusted too much in their own wisdom. “The Book of Mormon proposes a new purpose for America; becoming a realm of righteousness rather than an empire of liberty.” The book advocates for the poor, the restoration of the Indian tribes (under God’s law) and in general calls for godly government from inspired, prophetic leaders.
\item Wilford Woodruff, April 8, 1862, Journal of Discourses, 26 volumes, (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1855-86) 9:324
\end{itemize}}\]
ephemeral and shifting intellectual tradition. The introduction and eventual repudiation of polygamy was nevertheless made possible by this fluid narrative approach to theology.

Mormonism made religious sense to early converts like John and Mary Ann Fullmer in part because it was able to connect their own contemporary religious story and the ancient American story with primitive Christian history and its vibrant spiritualism.

John’s first article for the *Times and Seasons*, a Nauvoo newspaper, was published in 1840 and was originally a letter written to his friend and minister in Nashville explaining why he had joined the Mormons. The long and closely reasoned letter made the case that miracles and gifts of the spirit, such as healing, speaking in tongues, prophesying and the like, should be a part of the true church of Christ as they were in the early church. Not only this, but the true church should be a close-knit and smoothly functioning community, like the body of Christ spoken of by the apostle Paul in I Corinthians. John wrote to Reverend Howells

I must be permitted to draw a short comparison between the early Christian churches and those which did for a long time, and do at present prevail. The former represent a complete and perfect body; full of life and vigor; wanting in no member; and all performing their respective functions with power and healthy action. The latter represent a body with some of the most important members amputated; and, in consequence of the loss of blood, (which is the life thereof,) occasioned thereby, become so debilitated and helpless that even life itself is but seldom perceptible.¹³⁷

To John, Mormonism was dynamic and alive—a perception that is not surprising given its unique blend of canonic stories, ongoing revelation and active spiritualism. In his mind, it corresponded to the healthy and perfectly functioning body of the primitive

¹³⁷ *John Solomon Fullmer, The Man and His Writings*, p. 43.
church, while other confessions were incomplete and pale imitations of the true church of Christ.

The Book of Mormon and Mormonism, then, provided to believers a grand synthesis that connected a wealth of religious stories from *The Book of Mormon* and the Old and New Testaments with Puritan ideals of a promised land. Believers saw themselves as heirs to the Abrahamic covenant which promised the land to God’s chosen people, who would prosper both economically and demographically. More important than the earthly promises, however, were the promises of endless glory in the hereafter, a glory tied to demographic increase in this life, which in turn depended on emulating the marital patterns of the ancient patriarchs. Mormons would be asked to “do the work of Abraham,” which meant practicing polygamy. Since Mormons believed in ongoing revelation, however, it was possible for them to fit polygamy into their own religious story and eventually edit it out again.138

**Polygamy, The Book of Mormon and “Special Circumstances”**

Oddly enough, the *Book of Mormon* condemns plural marriage, although a short passage added to one of the five separate condemnations found in the book leaves open the possibility of limited practice. The condemnation reads, “For there shall not any Man among you have save it be one wife: and concubines he shall have none.” 139 The hint at special circumstances follows shortly thereafter and reads, “For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken

---

138 Shipps, p. 62.
139 *The Book of Mormon* published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Salt Lake City Utah, 1981. The parts quoted are found in the 1830 edition with only minor grammatical changes. Jacob 2:27-28, 30.
unto these things.” Interestingly, two subsequent verses express concern for women and their troubles in polygamy.

For behold, I the Lord, have seen the sorrow, and heard the mourning of the daughters of my people in the land of Jerusalem, yea, and in all the lands of my people, because of the wickedness and abominations of their husbands. And I will not suffer, saith the Lord of Hosts, that the cries of the fair daughters of this people, which I have led out of the land of Jerusalem, shall come up unto me against the men of my people, saith the Lord of hosts.”

The earliest known suggestion about what special circumstances might allow Mormons to take more than one wife came when Joseph Smith received a revelation on July 17, 1831 near Jackson County, Missouri, which he related to seven elders of the church then present. “For it is my will, that in time, ye should take unto you wives of the Lamanites and Nephites that their posterity may become white delightsome and just, for even now their females are more virtuous than the gentiles.” When William W. Phelps, who reported the incident long afterwards, asked Joseph Smith how they could take such wives since they were already married men, Joseph Smith replied that they would do it in the same way as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did, by marrying more than one wife. That same year, Smith revised the Old Testament and wondered during his study why the ancient patriarchs practiced polygamy. Orson Pratt later claimed that Smith told Lyman Johnson, the man with whom Smith was living during the revision

140 Ibid., Jacob 2:31-32.
141 William Wines Phelps to Brigham Young, 12 August, 1861, Revelations Collection, LDS Archives. The text of Phelps’ letter is also found in Carmon Hardy’s Doing the Works of Abraham, The Arthur H. Clark Company, Norman Oklahoma, 2007, pp. 36-7. Phelps wrote about this revelation in 1861, long after it had happened. His assertion is corroborated by words published in 1831 from a man, Ezra Booth, who left the church and gave his account to the Ohio Star by way of criticizing Mormons. Ohio Star, 8 December, 1831. Booth reported “it has been made known by revelation” that the elders could form “a matrimonial alliance with the natives.”
process, that “plural marriage was a correct principle... [but] the time had not yet come to teach and practice it.”

Efforts to mix with Native Americans through plural marriage were never very successful, but William W. Phelps’ claims about an early revelation concerning polygamy do indicate that Joseph Smith’s thinking about polygamy may have started when he was contemplating two thorny problems: how to bring together two sets of chosen people, Native Americans and Mormons, and how to explain the marriage and sexual practices of the ancient patriarchs in light of later Christian condemnation of polygamy. In other words, he seems to have initially approached polygamy both as part of the existing Judeo-Christian narrative and as a practical question. Why did it exist in the past, should it be practiced in the restored gospel and if so, what purposes would it serve? That Joseph Smith contemplated social reasons for polygamy related to the Book of Mormon and his overall theology seems at odds with simplistic sexual and psychological explanations for its introduction.

Salvaging Patriarchy

Mormon embrace of the Old Testament set them apart from other millenarian sects of the day, like Campbellites, the sect that the Fullmer family joined before becoming Mormons. Such sects were mainly concerned with returning to the primitive gospel of early Christians and the New Testament. While they did not reject the Old Testament as scripture, they lacked Joseph Smith’s sweeping religious vision. Joseph Smith’s comprehensive approach, one that was very compelling to men like John

Fulmer, included a “restoration of all things” from the Old Testament and New, a book of scripture for the American continent and continuing revelation that was being collected in a modern scripture, the *Doctrine and Covenants*. Richard Bushman has written that, “Joseph Smith nearly obliterated the line between the New and Old Testaments… Joseph’s attention to the Old Testament text was an aspect of his interest in the entire span of sacred history and his desire to encompass the whole of it within the restored gospel.” In his vision of the Gospel Kingdom, the ancient world of the Old Testament prophets, the Gospel of the New Testament, and the modern restored Gospel “were to freely intermingle.” Certainly the Abrahamic covenant, with its emphasis on numerous offspring and eternal honor and glory through those offspring, was put to good use and played a powerful role in the introduction of polygamy.

One of the chief elements Mormons salvaged from the Puritan thinking about the Old Testament was an overt reliance on patriarchy as a channel for authority. Polygamy was part of this embrace of Old Testament style patriarchy. It is not surprising that Joseph Smith adopted patriarchal patterns. Mary Ryan has identified the revival cycle that swept through upstate New York between 1813 and 1838 as highly feminized. Revivals were often sponsored by prosperous women freed by their wealth from household cares, who started missionary societies to benefit the rural areas of New York.

---

143 Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 4. In essence, argues Quinn, Smith’s “restoration of all things” was so cosmic that it encompassed all of time and space.
145 Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 80. Quinn argues that through the Mormon patriarchal hierarchy, Mormon leaders not only “forged a counter culture and a radical vision of their own role as the vanguard of Jesus’ return” but also, through members’ obedience to the hierarchy, “altered—and usually disrupted—the social landscape wherever it established its headquarters.”
Their husbands had succeeded in business in Oneida and other flourishing cities that grew up around the canals.

Ryan has shown how talk of patriarchy and the Abrahamic covenant was common in the early revival period but faded as the century wore on, engendering other changes in society. “The most obvious alteration of the New England Way was the splintering of the Christian community into an assortment of religious sects whose members were recruited not on the basis of inheritance but of voluntary association.” The “patriarchal household” became a thing of the past as feminized churches rejected hard line Calvinist notions of salvation in favor of “a more decidedly privatized and feminized form of religious and social reproduction [that] was beginning to take shape around the relationship between evangelical mothers and converted children.”146 Ann Douglas has argued that this feminization of American religion led to displacement of the stern Calvinist doctrine of the past with newer ideas about universal salvation that in turn engendered a cloying sentimentalism in religious discourse.147 Beyond sentimentalism, this retreat from Calvinism and its strong sense of sin produced confusion. If everyone need only confess Christ and be saved, what was the meaning of men’s actions, good and bad? Universal salvation had its appeal, but in light of Judeo-Christian scripture did not entirely make sense. In many ways, Joseph Smith’s history can be read as a kind of reaction to the fading of covenant theology and patriarchy.

147 Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture, Knopf, New York, 1977. Douglas has supported her argument by exploring the development of literature and other cultural markers of the day, comparing them with the literary works of intellectuals of the period, like Herman Melville, who rejected sentimentalism.
It is also not surprising that young males might feel out of place in feminized churches that gradually rejected patriarchy and authority in favor of egalitarian, populist and feminized forms of religion. Joseph Smith’s own parents followed the typical pattern; his mother was inclined to attend revivals and get caught up in religious fervor, but his father held himself more aloof.\textsuperscript{148} By contrast, Joseph Smith claimed that he had been visited by God, Jesus Christ, angels and ancient apostles, that the ancient priesthood had been restored to him through a visit by Peter, James and John, and that he had been given and translated gold plates that contained a record of ancient America. Here indeed was authority and patriarchy.

**Family-Centered Theology Expands**

In the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith also recounted visits from other heavenly messengers who reinforced the family theme. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery claimed to have received a vision and a revelation in the Kirtland Temple on April 3, 1836, during which they saw Jesus Christ, who told them that he accepted the temple, which was the “beginning of blessings” because “the hearts of thousands and tens of thousands” would rejoice in the endowment there. Then Moses appeared bringing the keys of gathering, then Elias, who reiterated the Abrahamic covenant, and lastly, Elijah appeared to inform them that it was time for the hearts of the fathers to be turned to the children and the hearts of the children to be turned to the fathers. This could be accomplished because “the keys of this dispensation are committed into your hands.”\textsuperscript{149} In other words, salvation, exaltation and authority were connected to this process of

\textsuperscript{149} *Doctrine and Covenants*, 110:1-16.
connecting and reconnecting families. By eventually marrying many wives, Joseph Smith was building his kingdom on earth and in heaven, as did the ancient patriarchs; hence polygamy was also known as “patriarchal marriage.” He was following a path that fit with the ancient Judeo-Christian religious narrative.

**Attempts to Introduce Polygamy in Kirtland**

An historical religious narrative that allowed polygamy was one thing, however, and introducing it to a group of people who were steeped in monogamy was quite another. There is some evidence that Joseph Smith tried to live in polygamy in the few years after his 1831 discussions with William Phelps and Lyman Johnson. Todd Compton argues that Smith entered a plural marriage with Fanny Alger, a young woman who lived in his household, as early as 1833, in Kirtland, Ohio.\(^{150}\) As it would later in Nauvoo in the early 1840’s, the suspicion of sexual irregularities caused dissension in Smith’s family and the church, which sought to quell potentially damaging rumors by adopting an “Article on Marriage” in a conference held on August 17, 1835. The article was later included in the *Doctrine and Covenants*. It stated in part, “Inasmuch as this church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy, we declare that we believe that one man should have one wife, and one woman but one husband, except in time of death, when either is at liberty to marry again.”\(^{151}\)

Since Joseph Smith had informed Lyman Johnson in 1831 that the time had not come to teach and practice polygamy, it is hard to know what to make of his possible

---

\(^{150}\) Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, pp. 25-42. Compton devotes a chapter to Alger as a Smith wife. Lawrence Foster disagrees with Compton, however, and has argued in his review of In Sacred Loneliness, found in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, (Spring 2000, v. 33:1, pp. 206-208) that there is no proof of a marriage between Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger, only a sexual liaison.

marriage to Fanny only two years later. Perhaps he was testing the waters. If so, they were cold and choppy. Joseph Smith’s wife, Emma, apparently found out about the alliance and turned Fanny out of the house.\textsuperscript{152} There is no evidence that he attempted another polygamous marriage until 1841. Fanny left Kirtland in September, 1836 with her parents, and later that same year married non-Mormon Solomon Custer in Indiana, where she lived out her life. The Smith-Alger liaison was confirmed later in Utah by Fanny’s cousin, Mosiah Hancock.\textsuperscript{153} The fallout over Fanny Alger was intense, however. It caused a rift between Joseph Smith and his counselor in the first presidency of the church, Oliver Cowdery.\textsuperscript{154}

When the rift occurred, Mormon society was divided between a group in Kirtland, Ohio and a group in Far West, Missouri, where Mormons intended to build their Zion. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had tried to start a bank in Kirtland, but the bank failed. Afterwards, first Cowdery and then Smith went to Missouri, and there Cowdery hinted in the presence of others that Smith was an adulterer. Cowdery wrote to his brother that he had discussed with Smith “a dirty, nasty, filthy affair of his and Fanny Alger’s was talked over in which I strictly declared that I had never deviated from the truth in the matter, and as I supposed was admitted by himself.”\textsuperscript{155} Smith denied the accusation and the two parted permanently when Cowdery was excommunicated on April

\textsuperscript{152} Compton, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{153} Mosiah Hancock confirmed a polygamous marriage in the \textit{Deseret Evening News} on 21 February, 1884. It is further confirmed in the diary of his father, Levi Hancock, Fanny’s uncle. Some scholars disagree about a marriage to Fanny Alger, however. George D. Smith does not believe that such a marriage occurred. He argues that the liaison was an affair.
\textsuperscript{154} Van Wagoner, \textit{Mormon Polygamy: A History}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{155} Oliver Cowdery to Warren Cowdery, 21 January, 1838. Original in Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Microfilm in Utah State Historical Society at Salt Lake City.
Other high level leaders followed. The loss of these previously firmly committed leaders was a terrible blow to Joseph Smith and the church.

Charges of polygamy and other sexual irregularities dogged the church during the waning days of Kirtland and into Missouri and Illinois. Daniel Bachman has argued, referring to Mormon experiments with communal property, “In the minds of gentiles and anti-Mormons, it was an easy leap from a community of property to a community of wives. In Nauvoo it would be equally easy to leap from marriage for eternity, or plural marriage to spiritual wifery. In more than one instance Mormon difficulties in Nauvoo had antecedents in New York, Ohio, and Missouri.”

The leap was not only easy for anti-Mormons, however. In order for people to accept polygamy, they had to make some leaps of their own. And the process of destabilizing marriage practices had some unintended consequences in that some people took advantage of rumor and uncertainty to seduce women and wreak sexual havoc, a subject to be explored below. Joseph Smith did not give up on polygamy after the defections in 1837-8, but he had likely learned that in order to introduce something so controversial, it was necessary to lay some groundwork; social and political stability would be important, as would church control of marriage. In the course of the 1830’s, conditions began to develop that would give Mormons a degree of social stability, but monogamy was so deeply ingrained that many would still strongly resist polygamy. For

---

156 HC 3:17-18.

157 Kathryn Daynes has argued that Joseph Smith’s introduction of polygamy in the 1840’s in Nauvoo was undertaken in part as a way of testing the loyalty of church leadership as a result of the problems of the 1830’s. The severe strains these defections put on the church led to the new ideology of marriage and family. See Kathryn Daynes, “Mormon Polygamy: Belief and Practice in Nauvoo,” Kingdom on the Mississippi Revisited, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1996, pp. 130-146.

158 Daniel Bachman, A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith, Unpublished Master’s Thesis, Purdue University, 1975, p. 90.
people to accept polygamy, it would have to be tied to the most powerful aspects of
Mormonism—priesthood authority, salvation and exaltation

* * *

John Fullmer’s daughter, Olive Amanda Fullmer Bulkley reported in her
reminiscences about her family that the polygamous marriage of John’s sister,
Desdemona Fullmer, to Joseph Smith coincided with John’s introduction to polygamy.
“In 1842, father’s sister, Desdemona Fullmer was sealed to Joseph and Joseph taught my
father the principle of plural marriage.” The year was actually 1843. John did not
record any conversations with his friend about his sister, but his reaction might have been
similar to the stunned response of another brother, Benjamin Franklin Johnson, whom
Smith approached about marrying his sister Almera, also in 1843. Johnson’s response
shows that the suggestion sorely tried his belief in Joseph Smith’s prophetic mission.
Johnson told Smith, “You know whether it is right. I do not. I want to do just as you tell
me and I will try. But if I [ever] should Know that you do this to Dishonor and debauch
my Sister I will kill you as Shure as the Lord lives.” Joseph Smith’s approach to
Benjamin Johnson and David and John Fullmer about marrying their sisters was part of a
consistent pattern, since approaching male relatives about marrying their kinfolk is a
practice common in polygamous cultures. Todd Compton has identified this as a way of
strengthening relationships between men, which in turn would serve to strengthen
community and patriarchy.

160 Benjamin Franklin Johnson to George Francis Gibbs, 1903, Benjamin Franklin Johnson Papers, 1852-
1911, LDS archives. Also found in Hardy, Doing the Works of Abraham, pp. 43-46.
John’s own initiation into polygamy occurred in 1846, nearly nine years after his happy elopement with Mary Ann. In 1844, after the birth of their fourth daughter in Nauvoo, John Fullmer hired a woman, Olive Amanda Smith, to help Mary Ann in the household. Family tradition holds that after Olive had worked for the Fullmers for about nine months, Mary Ann asked Olive if she would consent to become her husband’s second wife.\textsuperscript{162} Several months later, John asked Olive to marry him polygamously, and Olive, an unmarried mother of one child, agreed.\textsuperscript{163} Why would young Mary Ann Fullmer recruit another wife for the man she continued to love passionately until her dying day? Since polygamy was then secretly practiced in Mormon culture, and monogamy remained the publicly favored form of marriage, there would have been no public pressure on Mary Ann to participate.

An interesting aside to Olive’s story shows another common response to polygamy in Nauvoo. Olive Bulkley reported in her memoir that her mother received a proposal of marriage from John’s brother, Almon, before Mary Ann approached her about marrying John. Olive agreed to marry Almon, but when she learned that his wife, Sarah Ann Follett, was opposed to the marriage, she changed her mind.\textsuperscript{164} Almon and Sarah Ann went West with the saints, and there he entered polygamy with Rachel

\begin{footnotes}
\item[162] These details are taken from a sketch compiled by John Fullmer’s great granddaughter, Iona J. Belka, and is reprinted in \textit{John Solomon Fullmer: The Man and His Writings}, compiled by Fullmer’s great-grandson, Jerry D. Wells. The author of the present work is a great-great granddaughter of John Fullmer and Olive Amanda Smith.
\item[163] There is some questions about whether Olive Amanda Smith had been married to Chauncey’s (her firstborn son’s) father. See Ibid., p. 6, footnote 1.
\item[164] Ibid., 429.
\end{footnotes}
Neyman, but it was a short-lived marriage.\textsuperscript{165} He spent most of his life as a monogamist.\textsuperscript{166}

Mary Ann apparently had more faith in Joseph Smith’s prophetic mission than Almon’s wife, and believed that entering polygamy was necessary for the highest level of exaltation in heaven. Their entrance into polygamy came after Joseph Smith had instituted new ordinances into church practice that carried the promise of marvelous blessings in the hereafter. Mary Ann and John were anxious to gain the blessings of these new ordinances, and were sealed in the Nauvoo temple on January 15, 1846.\textsuperscript{167}

One week later, on January 21, John and Olive were sealed together. The “sealing” meant, in the prevailing belief system that all of them, their children and any children yet to come, were united as a family into the eternities. Through her willingness to enter polygamy, or celestial marriage, Mary Ann believed she could assure nothing less than salvation for her family. She also made John much more likely to rise in the church hierarchy. Both David and John held in their lives far more important church positions than their brother Almon.

Mary Ann naturally did not inform her family in Tennessee of John’s new marital status. No one knows if they ever learned the truth. What is known is that in 1853, after the 1852 church admission to practicing polygamy, Mary Ann’s sister Elizabeth wrote in alarm to John while he was on a mission in England to ask if Mormons had indeed embraced polygamy. In response, John Fullmer articulated theological and ideological underpinnings of polygamy that went beyond the Old Testament justification. Elizabeth’s

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 179.
\textsuperscript{167} Wells, \textit{JSF}, p. 438.
letter does not survive, but she must have wondered how John and Mary Ann, whom she knew to be good Christians, could accept polygamy. She knew that polygamy was not an important tenet of early Christianity and that the New Testament is largely silent on the issue. Why, then, she must have wondered, would Mormons make polygamy into such a major part of their belief system that they eventually called it the capstone of their religion? John explained the Christian connection to polygamy in his reply.

We are hard on adultery as a community; we consider that one of the greatest crimes known. But polygamy...is nowhere spoken against from Genesis to Revelations, neither by God, angels or men. But such have universally been the favorites of heaven, and their offspring more abundantly blessed than any other. The family of the Savior himself is from a polygamist...The very fact that the Savior chose to come from a woman who was connected with a long line of polygamists...proves that there is not the odium in reality attached to it that we modern folks have been taught to think there was. The reason is obvious, it is not rightly understood as it used to be. We understand it to be a charitable, fine and Godlike institution...Formerly it was considered a great honor and blessing to have many children, and to have none was a reproach to any woman. Our progenitors understood that their offspring would constitute their dominion and importance and I will also say their glory in the eternal world and would entitle to crowns as kings as well as priests through eternity. Again, it is expected in the Kingdom of God.168

John thus connected the New and Old Testaments in support of the practice of polygamy by arguing that neither record condemned the practice, but since Jesus Christ himself descended from polygamy, it was God’s way of propagating his people, but also a way of creating a Kingdom of God on earth. John then reverted back to the old Abrahamic covenant in saying that “offspring would constitute their dominion, importance, and glory in the eternal worlds.” He also wrote about Mary Ann in the letter to Elizabeth. His defense of polygamy begins in the letter with the words, “And now as to the subject of

168 Wells, JSF p. 337.
your inquiries, whether we really believe in the doctrine of polygamy? The answer I plainly tell you, we do, and that there are those in our church who really have more wives than one.\textsuperscript{169}

For John and other Mormons, polygamy had worked its way into an existing Judeo Christian narrative that then continued with Joseph Smith’s introduction of the \textit{Book of Mormon} and the restoration of the Gospel. For believing Mormons, then, polygamy served as another proof that they had embraced the true gospel. He never, however, in this letter admitted to Elizabeth that he had a second wife and children in Utah, nor that he was courting his third wife, Sarah Ann Stevenson, while on his mission.

John’s defense of Mormonism and polygamy in his letter to his sister-in-law was extensive; one can only imagine its handwritten length since, it now runs to nearly nine single-spaced typed pages--but he apparently still wanted his and Mary Ann’s non-Mormon kinsmen to believe that he was a monogamist. One can only speculate on the reasons for this. Perhaps he hoped to convince their families with his unassailable logic about the rightness of polygamy before compromising his credibility. Perhaps. But it is interesting to examine the language John used in telling Elizabeth that he was still devoted to Mary Ann and their children, language that embodies sentimental 19th century ideology surrounding families: he doted on Mary Ann; affection for her still warmed his breast; he bathed his pillow in tears as he prayed for the protection of her little ones.\textsuperscript{170} It appears, judging from his death scene and Mary Ann’s profound grief at his death that the words were quite heartfelt; apparently on some level John’s ideal of family was in step

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
with the Victorian family ideals of the rest of the nation. This language is in striking contrast to the matter-of-fact language John used in his 1874 letter to Olive when he warned her with a “Wo—unto the culpable party,” should they not reconcile their differences enough to regain their celestial blessings. His business-like relationship with Olive tells us, however, that the sentimental 19th century narrative about family was difficult if not impossible to maintain in all of one man’s multiple families. Polygamy was nevertheless an important part of the complex religious narrative that undergirded Mormon belief, and this would, in spite of frequent failure, go far in helping people overcome what obstacles they must to find ways to practice polygamy and hold families together.

Conclusion

The democratization of American religion that was a byproduct of the American Revolution led to a vibrant surge in millenarian religious sects in the early 19th century. Perhaps more than any other, Mormonism sought to incorporate all of religious history into a narrative that was both new and old; it included ongoing revelation and a scriptural canon for America while reinstating practices and narratives from the ancient past. Some argue that this happened in part as a reaction to the confusion of rampant religious pluralism and led to a highly communal religious movement that claimed to have patriarchal authority from God.

The introduction of polygamy proved to be an uphill battle, however, a process that will be further explored below. Not only had people been strongly socialized to favor monogamy, but they had also been raised with particular American principles that

\[171\] Ibid., pp. 421-2.
were tied from the founding period to monogamy—ideals like choice, companionship and self-fulfillment in the roles of wife and mother or husband and provider. These ideals were embedded in broader aspects of American culture and were not easily relinquished. In spite of this, however, numerous religious threads came together in Mormon theology during the 1830s that set the stage for the emergence of polygamy. Joseph Smith’s curiosity was awakened while studying about the ancient patriarchs. He told some of the elders in Missouri that they would intermix with the American Indians through polygamy. He set up priesthood hierarchy that at the same time democratized authority and allowed it to be wielded more effectively. He resacralized marriage and invested the church and the priesthood with authority to say which marriages were valid. It is possible that he attempted to introduce polygamy by marrying Fanny Alger. He began to stress the importance of “keys” and family connections into eternity by emphasizing the mission of Elijah, which was to turn the hearts of the children and fathers to one another. In all these ways Joseph Smith laid the groundwork for a reinterpretation of marriage and family that was connected to salvation and exaltation.

In Nauvoo in the 1840s, Joseph Smith would do all in his power to integrate this family-centered theology with the practice of polygamy. Theology and practice came to have a kind of contingent and symbiotic relationship in which the two grew together; resistance to practice spurred an already developing theology, which in turn provided stronger and stronger support for the practice of polygamy.

---

172 See Cott, *Public Vows*
173 See Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*
174 See Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness*
Chapter Two:

Nauvoo Secrets and the Rise of a Mormon Salvation Narrative, 1841-2

Joseph Smith slowly laid a theological foundation that supported polygamy during the 1830s by resacralizing marriage, connecting valid marriage to priesthood, beginning to connect family and salvation and by attempting to practice polygamy. In the 1840s he built on this foundation. Nauvoo polygamy was integrated into community life in three stages in the early 1840s, and perhaps affected the theological and social innovations in the church. During the first phase, beginning in April of 1841, polygamy was quietly introduced to the most faithful followers in a manner that initially, judging from reports of the arguments used to induce young women to enter, depended on their faith in Joseph Smith’s prophetic mission. Though some women accepted his proposals, his secret introduction of polygamy also resulted in outraged refusal from some women and sent shock waves of gossip through Nauvoo.

During the second phase, Smith introduced a tsunami of theological and other innovations in the spring of 1842 that helped integrate polygamy into the Mormon theological narrative.\(^{175}\) Since the nature and organization of priesthood authority and the process of gaining salvation and exaltation were still evolving concepts at this juncture, it seems likely that the introduction of polygamy helped shape these innovations.\(^{176}\) In the third phase, polygamy became intertwined with ordinances that people were anxious to

---

\(^{175}\) Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, chapter 25, pp. 436-458. Bushman identifies spring 1842 as a highly innovative time for Joseph Smith and the church, but does not make the connection with polygamy.

\(^{176}\) D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, see chapter 4, pp. 105-141. Quinn delineates the progress of priesthood and theological development and shows how polygamy was intertwined with these developments, though he does not really argue that it was a causal agent.
receive in the Nauvoo temple. Polygamy was not specifically linked to the endowment—an ordinance connected to salvation introduced by Joseph Smith—but Mormons had to receive the endowment and polygamy in succession in order to attain the highest form of salvation. In this phase, polygamy moved toward being publicly acknowledged, as more and more people formed polygamous families and joined the saints in moving away from settled areas to places where they could live in non-traditional marital relationships without interference. Interestingly, though it seems likely that secret polygamy influenced Mormon theological development in the 1840’s and laid a ground work for its public introduction, the theology that developed could also fit with monogamy and thus remain intact when Mormons abandoned polygamy in 1890.

Numerous scholars have tried to explain why Joseph Smith introduced polygamy, which is admittedly a difficult and perplexing question. The three most common explanations are that Joseph Smith suffered from a mental disorder of some sort, that he was driven by lust or, the faithful explanation, that he was commanded by God to marry extra wives. Many scholars lean in the direction of the less flattering explanations, and it is surely true that Joseph Smith was attracted to many women. Nevertheless, given the way polygamy was embedded in Mormon theology and culture, this explanation seems too simplistic. I hope to look at the introduction of polygamy in a way suggested by Lawrence Foster, “While it is true that early Mormonism, like almost all other

177 See the Revelation on plural marriage, *Doctrine and Covenants*, section 132.
178 See Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness*. This work generally shows how polygamy interacted with Temple rites and other theological innovations in being intertwined with them but not exactly dependent on them. See p. 100, where a letter from the 1856 First Presidency indicates that belief in polygamy was necessary in order to receive the endowment in Utah, implying that the demographic reality was that all men could not participate in polygamy. Consequently there was always some space between polygamy and Temple ordinances and other theological aspects of Mormonism.
millenarian movements including Christianity itself, was eclectic and highly syncretistic, the important point is that there is an internal logic in successful movements by which apparent contradictions are overcome or held in creative tension.”\textsuperscript{180} I would like to examine the process by which Mormons accepted polygamy through the lens of the evolving internal logic of Mormonism by which adherents lived and made their decisions about which family and marriage forms they would embrace.

**Settling Nauvoo and Setting the Stage for Polygamy**

In spite of evidence that Joseph Smith contemplated polygamy and even tried to introduce it in the 1830s, Mormon life was then too unstable and volatile to allow such an innovation. When the Mormons tried to establish their Zion in Kirtland, Ohio, and then Jackson County, Missouri, they met with stiff resistance from surrounding populations and were driven off again and again. The strong reaction to Mormon settlement was not entirely surprising. When Mormons moved into a region, they came as a group and voted as a bloc, thereby blunting the political force of existing populations.\textsuperscript{181} Consequently, though Mormons began soon after the church was organized to resacralize marriage and determine for themselves how and by whom marriages could be solemnized, the troubles and persecutions of Ohio and Missouri meant that the social milieu was never stable enough to undertake a drastic transformation of basic marriage patterns.\textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{180} Lawrence Foster, “Three Communities—Two Views” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, V. 14, number 4, winter 1981. pp. 204-211. In a later work, *Women, Family and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shaker, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, New York, 1991, Foster has suggested that Joseph Smith was manic-depressive, but only very tentatively.

\textsuperscript{181} Robert Bruce Flanders, *Kingdom on the Mississippi*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1965 p. 3. This is the earliest and still important work on the economic development of Nauvoo.

\textsuperscript{182} There is a multitude of literature that describes the difficulties of Mormons in Ohio and Missouri. Richard Bushman’s description in *Rough Stone Rolling*, chapters 18-20, pp. 322-372, is especially effective in showing the troubles Mormons experienced in trying to establish their “Zion,” or gathering place for the faithful.
After being driven from Missouri in the dead of the winter in 1839, Mormons relocated to Quincy, Illinois, where they were welcomed as newcomers to the state. Illinois was then in the depths of depression and the state legislature was anxious to attract settlers who would infuse new blood and capital into a poor economy. Since Mormons came to settle the area in large numbers, they secured for themselves a measure of political clout. Initially, at least, it seemed that at last God had given them a place where the sweeping religious story that defined them could finally unfold, where they could develop their Kingdom of God on earth. Though they spent only seven years in Illinois in the city they named Nauvoo—and these were turbulent years in many ways—during that time Mormons nevertheless finally achieved enough social stability to allow Joseph Smith to implement polygamy.

Mormons were energized by the positive conditions they found in Nauvoo and by their persistent habit of comparing themselves to the Children of Israel and other Biblical peoples. Attempts to lay the groundwork by promoting polygamy in Nauvoo through the printed word or from the pulpit, however, uniformly engendered a deeply negative reaction. Since these normal avenues to theological change and development concerning polygamy were closed, how could it become viable? How could polygamy

183 Ibid., The entirety of chapter one discusses the circumstances of the Mormons’ exile to Illinois.
184 Flanders, Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi, pp. 48-52 describes Joseph Smith’s promotion of Nauvoo as a gathering place and its growing political clout in the early 1840s.
185 Jan Shipps has argued in Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition, (University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1985) that early Mormons dismissed all religious history between themselves and the early Christians as irrelevant, thereby making Biblical stories more relevant and meaningful, since they were simply carrying on where the last of Jesus’ apostles left off. Further, they saw themselves as literally living out a renewed Israelite and Biblical past that made the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon “literal realities.”
be introduced and what would compel members to accept it as part of the theological narrative to the extent that they would enter the practice?

Two factors were especially important in creating optimal conditions for the introduction of polygamy in Nauvoo: the passage of a generous city charter by the fledgling Illinois State legislature and amazing success in the mission field. Though Mormons had incorporated persecution into their religious narrative, they were naturally even more eager to embrace success as evidence of the truth of their beliefs. Their initial success at building the kind of city they desired in Nauvoo gave them a sense that anything was possible, a way of thinking that fit with their millenarian leanings. They were assisted in obtaining their charter by a man who, at the time, seemed to be a godsend. John C. Bennett wrote to Joseph Smith in 1840 offering his sympathy for Mormon troubles and his services in establishing their new city. Bennett was a talented speaker and writer and an officer in the Illinois militia with contacts in the state legislature. He and Joseph together wrote the Nauvoo charter, a legal document that would be the basis of government for the new city.

Dr. John Cook Bennett is one of the more colorful characters of American history. Born in 1804, he was just a year older than Joseph Smith. His father died when Cook was a teenager, but he was fortunate enough to study medicine with his uncle, talented

\---

187 Flanders, Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi, pp. 92-101 (on the charter) and 57-91 on the gathering of British saints.
188 Andrew F. Smith, Saintly Scoundrel: The Life and Times of John Cook Bennett, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1997, p. 54.
189 Flanders, p. 93.
doctor and scientist, Samuel Hildreth. Bennett was an able pupil, but had no patience for the life of a country doctor. Instead he spent his life pursuing grandiose dreams. Before he joined the Mormons, he made numerous attempts to start colleges in Ohio and Virginia. His biographer suggests that he was in the process of attempting to start a medical college in Warsaw, Illinois when he encountered the Mormons. He might have succeeded in some of these ventures, but he had the unfortunate habit of advertising the faculty and board of his fledgling institutions before he had actually spoken with the people involved. When he managed to shepherd a college charter through the Indiana legislature, he conceived of the notion of funding the institution before it was actually organized by selling diplomas in what was to be the original diploma mill scheme in America. He was, in short, a talented but unprincipled opportunist. When he heard about the Mormons, Bennett saw an opportunity and, since he seemed like an eminent citizen, was enthusiastically welcomed by Joseph Smith. Later Bennett would turn on the Mormons and spread scandalous rumors about them, but initially he helped the community using his legislative contacts to negotiate passage of the Nauvoo charter.

Building a Kingdom of God on Earth

Mormons regarded the charter as the beginning of their kingdom, for it was expansive enough to allow Nauvoo to become almost a city state in the European

---

191 According to Bennett’s biographer, Hildreth was “an able physician and later became a renowned natural scientist, publishing a myriad of descriptive essays and articles in such diverse areas as medicine, meteorology, geology, paleontology, geography and zoology.” He also served in the Ohio state legislature. Andrew F. Smith, Saintly Scoundrel: The Life and Times of Dr. John Cook Bennett, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1997, p. 3.
192 Ibid., p. 54.
193 Ibid., The information on Bennett is mostly taken from this excellent biography. Even his biographer agrees that Bennett was a talented, but unscrupulous scalawag.
194 Flanders, Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi, p. 142.
Though not necessarily more generous than other charters granted by the Illinois legislature—it was nearly identical to the Springfield charter granted a year earlier in an effort to populate the state—Mormons were perhaps more inclined to make full use of those powers than other fledgling cities. Among other provisions, the charter allowed residents to pass any laws that did not conflict with the Illinois or U.S. constitutions, and gave the municipal courts power to protect Joseph Smith and other church members from their enemies, particularly from extradition to the state of Missouri for alleged crimes committed there. It also allowed for the creation of a military arm of the city, the Nauvoo legion.

195 Claudia Lauper Bushman and Richard Bushman, *Building the Kingdom: A History of Mormons in America*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1999, pp. 29. The Bushmans refer to Nauvoo as formed by the Nauvoo Charter as a “little kingdom” and point out the larger Kingdom of God was soon delivered through the rituals and ordinances that were introduced, many of which were related to polygamy.

196 D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 1994, pp. 105. Also, Flanders, Nauvoo, 96-101. Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History*, Michigan State University Press, 1967, Lansing, 1967, pp. 98-109. All of these works discuss the charter. Also see Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, p. 412. Bushman has argued that the Nauvoo charter was similar to the Chicago and Alton charters, and was thus in line with privileges granted to other cities.

197 Ibid

198 Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, p. 412. Bushman has argued that “none of the provisions of the charter were unprecedented or “anti-republican,” but that they nevertheless invested city officers with considerable authority to protect citizens from enemy incursions. Flanders, (Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi, pp. 92-100) has argued that the Illinois legislature was inundated with business when it passed the charter and so did not examine it very carefully. Beyond this, the legislators were new and not overly versed in the legal ramifications of the law in this area. Illinois was a fast-growing and economically challenged state at the time, and they were eager to attract groups like the Mormons who had a large population and would generate considerable economic activity. Flanders and Bushman agree that the charter was very similar to other charters passed in the period, but Flanders has shown that what made the charter unusual was that it formed a military arm of the city, the Nauvoo Legion. The Legion was independent from the Illinois militia system. One Legislator commented on the oddity of the military provision, but the charter passed anyway because legislators were not suspicious of Mormons at this juncture. In short, though the charter was not so unusual compared to other charters, Mormons were inclined to full use of it to create their Kingdom in a way that other communities were not, and the military provision gave it teeth.
Elated with the charter, Joseph Smith wrote in the *Times and Seasons*, the Nauvoo newspaper, that the charter was their “*magna charta,*” which would give the saints “great blessings of civil liberty” so that the church could grow and spread abroad. He asserted ebulliently, “it is spreading in a manner entirely unprecedented in the annals of time.”  

John C. Bennett was rewarded for his part in securing the Nauvoo charter by being elected mayor of the city, appointed as a special counselor to Joseph Smith in church government, and elevated to the position of General in the Nauvoo Legion.  

In Nauvoo, Mormons began to experiment with the practical forms that their Kingdom of God would take. At the largest level, Daniel’s interpretation of the dream of Nebuchadnezzar was believed to be a prophecy about the Gospel in the latter days—the stone cut out of the mountain without hands that would roll forth to fill the whole earth represented “a kingdom which shall never be destroyed… but shall break in pieces and consume all these pieces and… stand forever.”  

Kingdom thinking hearkened back to Old Testament themes and would combine with polygamy, salvation and exaltation narratives as the Mormon story evolved to include heavenly kingdom building and eternal progression and increase for the righteous, but it involved earthly kingdom building as well. The believed they would build a Kingdom of God on earth that they would present to Jesus Christ when he returned at the end of the millennium. They did not envision controlling the whole world, however, but rather believed their kingdom

---

199 *Times and Seasons*, January 15, 1841
200 Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, pp. 61-77. Here Smith describes the many honors heaped on Bennett in Nauvoo in 1841-2.
201 Daniel 2:44
would exist alongside other, less perfect forms of earthly government. Priesthood was at the center of Kingdom of God thinking.

Missionary work was also central to the growth of the kingdom. For Mormons, Daniel’s vision of the pieces of stones consuming other stones was a metaphor for the gospel message spreading to all the people of the world, after which the faithful would gather to Zion—Nauvoo. In order to spread the gospel message, a group of men had been called as part of a Quorum of Twelve Apostles responsible for missionary work. Beginning in 1840 they were sent on missions to England, where the church began growing by leaps and bounds among working class people. Soon those converts poured into Nauvoo, bringing with them manpower and modest amounts of cash that allowed the economy to grow. The city on the banks of the Mississippi mushroomed to nearly 7000 souls by summer of 1841.

---

202 Klaus J. Hansen, Quest For Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1967, p. 11.
203 Ibid., p. 7.
204 Mormon success in Britain began in 1837 and first flourished in industrial cities like Preston and Manchester. In 1840 most of the Quorum of the Twelve were dispatched to England as missionaries and were amazingly successful, especially in the Northwest, the Midlands and Wales, among working class people, many of whom had nonconformist leanings. The American missionaries were shocked at the hunger and poverty they found among the people. Their message of hope and prosperity to come resonated with the people partly for this reason, and partly for the same reason it appealed to Americans—it was a millenarian story that made sense to them. In June of 1840 immigration to Nauvoo (and later to Utah) began. By 1851, 11,000 saints had emigrated from Britain. At that point the Perpetual Emigration Fund was started, which allowed converts to borrow money in order to make the journey to America, which monies they then paid back to the fund so that other saints could emigrate. Ultimately 65,000 British saints made the journey. The number of saints in the British Isles reflected both growth and emigration. In 1840, the number stood just above 3500. By 1850, it had grown to over 30,000. By 1860, the number was down to just under 14,000. These lower numbers reflected both emigration and attrition, in part because of the church admission to practicing polygamy in 1852. Information taken from: V Ben Bloxham, James R. Moss, Larry C. Porter, Truth Will Prevail: The Rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the British Isles, 1837-1987, Intellectual Reserve, Inc., Printed in Germany, 1987. Though a church publication, the statistics are based careful branch, ward and immigration records kept by the church from the beginning of its presence in Britain.
205 Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy, A History, p. 17. Immigration from England had begun only the year before, but by the end of 1841, more than 800 British Saints had emigrated to Nauvoo, making them roughly 10% of the population. See Truth Will Prevail, 146-7.
The Kingdom of God and Family Salvation

Smith’s grand thinking about the growth of the gospel and the city of Nauvoo also included a longing for interconnected family relationships that would continue in the next life. His reasons for introducing polygamy were complicated, but Richard Bushman has observed that, though many people have tried to determine exactly how many wives Smith married, the obsession with numbers obscures a more important point:

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.” Like Abraham of old, Joseph yearned for familial plentitude. He did not lust for women so much as he lusted for kin.206

Of course, it is possible to desire women and kin. The longing for interconnected family nevertheless made sense for a people attempting to build the Kingdom of God on earth. This was the way God’s kingdoms had been built in the scriptural stories. Abraham and his wives, concubines and innumerable descendants expanded and thrived—in essence, they inherited the earth—yet retained their identity and belief. In ancient times, Joseph Smith believed, polygamy had been an integral part of the growth and interconnection of God’s chosen people.207

206 Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, p. 440. The internal quotation is from Doctrine and Covenants, 132:55
207 Virtually all Mormon scholars have observed that polygamy was part of Joseph Smith’s “restoration of all things” from the Old and New Testaments—in a selective way employed by other charismatic religious figures. Klaus J. Hansen has observed in Quest for Empire, p. 12, that such millenarian beliefs were also embraced by John of Leiden in Munster, leading to polygamous practice by a charismatic prophet figure.
The heady days after approval of the Nauvoo charter were followed by the death of Joseph Smith’s beloved father, Joseph Smith Senior, in 1840.\textsuperscript{208} It is quite possible this loss had two effects on Joseph Smith. It seems likely that it impressed on him the importance of eternal family connections, but it also perhaps removed one obstacle to polygamy, for most members of the Smith family were at first firmly opposed to it. Joseph’s brother, Don Carlos, is reported to have said, upon hearing rumors of polygamy in 1841, “Any man who will teach and practice the doctrine of spiritual wifery will go to hell; I don’t care if it is my brother Joseph.”\textsuperscript{209} Joseph’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith, did not die until 1856, but she never acknowledged polygamy. His brother Hyrum was so troubled by polygamy that he nearly joined a dissident group intent on curtailing it, though he eventually accepted and practiced plural marriage.\textsuperscript{210} It is possible Joseph was reluctant to introduce polygamy while his father was living; in any case, he married his first plural wife only 7 months after his father’s death.

**The Process of Change and the Obstacles to Polygamy**

Whether or not Joseph Smith could have publicly admitted to polygamy at any time during the Nauvoo period and kept the church intact is debatable. When polygamy was finally introduced publicly in Utah in 1852, it took a significant toll on missionary efforts, especially in England, the richest field of harvest for Mormon converts.\textsuperscript{211} Had it been introduced publicly in 1841, polygamy would not only have generated backlash from surrounding communities eager to believe the worst about Mormons, but also would

\begin{itemize}
  \item Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, p. 405.
  \item Ebenezer Robinson, *The Return*. Available online.
  \item Ibid., p. 86. Nearly 1800 English saints left the church when polygamy was publicly acknowledged, and of course, the number who might have joined but for polygamy is an interesting counter-factual.
\end{itemize}
have made it difficult to attract the many new converts who later made their way to Illinois and Utah to strengthen the church. Thus, the secret practice of polygamy deflected overt rejection by the rank and file while allowing for greater church growth for a number of years.

Remaking marriage proved to present challenges that other Mormon innovations had not, however. Heretofore the narrative that guided Mormon belief and practice had tended to develop as experience interacted with Mormonism’s combination of Christian, millenarian, American and Book of Mormon narratives. The process of resacralizing marriage is an example. A series of challenges and problems relating to marriage guided the process; as the Newell Knight and Lydia Goldthwaite case cited above illustrates. The two were allowed to marry in spite of Lydia’s unresolved first marriage. In response to such cases, Mormon leaders gradually adapted institutional and policy changes to create a new understanding of marriage in the church. Most changes thus happened contextually as a reaction to particular problems that arose. Revelation and prophecy relating to the problems were often part of the picture, which helped integrate changes into the theological narrative. In other words, though Mormons were highly communal and had great faith in Joseph Smith, change nevertheless happened in certain ways. People were primed to expect marvelous changes, perhaps even the millennium, in their lifetime, but they would not necessarily uncritically accept any revelation or prophecy.

212 Ibid., p. 7.  F
213 D. Michael Quinn, Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power, p. 80, has observed that Mormons were able to achieve what they did because they believed that “authoritarian government by godly men could be a stepping stone to a more perfect order.” Joseph Smith was able to go far in establishing this sort of authority among his adherents, but it was necessary that they retain their belief in him in order for him to retain his authority. If he pushed them too far in ways that they regarded as unreasonable, then they would cease to believe in him and his authority would count for nothing. This was the risk he took in trying to introduce polygamy. If people attributed its introduction to lust on his part, he risked losing them altogether.
Changes, especially seismic ones, needed to happen in certain ways and make sense to them, to fit into the larger context of their narrative, their understanding of how the religious and social world worked, or should work, in God’s plan.\(^{214}\)

The introduction of polygamy could not happen in this way, because at the outset it was hard to make a compelling case for its necessity; there was no pressing problem that polygamy would solve. Instead, its introduction was an instance in which change was imposed from above instead of developing as a reaction to a problem or need. In a sense, however, in the process of trying to introduce polygamy secretly, problems were created that demanded solutions that in turn allowed polygamy to take root and evolve in the established way. Joseph Smith nevertheless had apparently thought deeply about family and the connection to eternity in the months and years that preceded his introduction of polygamy.

Smith expounded on his vision of the developing family-centered theology to one of his followers in the winter of 1839-40. Parley P. Pratt, a member of the Twelve, was serving a mission in Philadelphia when Joseph Smith visited the city. Pratt reported that during the visit Smith “taught me many great and glorious principles concerning God and the heavenly order of eternity. It was at this time that I received from him the first idea of eternal family organization and the eternal union of the sexes…” Before this Pratt had regarded such tender emotions as “something from which the heart must be entirely...

\(^{214}\) By contrast, Jan Shipps has argued (*Mormonism, The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, pp. 61-2) that Mormons were really in a sense reliving or reenacting the stories of the ancient prophets, and that they emulated Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in kingdom building and, later, David and Solomon when living in polygamy in an established kingdom. Even if this is an accurate representation of the Mormon narrative, however, Mormons had to reach the point where they saw themselves in this particular narrative and they had to determine what they would and would not accept from the Biblical narrative, since obviously they would not accept ALL aspects of ancient Hebrew culture.
weaned, in order to be fitted for its heavenly state.” At this time he learned from Joseph Smith that all family relationships were enduring and that “the wife of my bosom might be secured to me for time and all eternity” because such connections and affections “emanated from the fountain of divine eternal love.” Further, Pratt came to understand that “the result of our endless union would be an offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, or the sands of the sea.” The effect of this knowledge was electric for Pratt, who wrote that love now had a new meaning for him, which led to “an intensity of elevated, exalted feeling” because he felt that “God was my heavenly Father indeed; that Jesus was my brother, and that the wife of my bosom was an immortal, eternal companion… In short, I could now love with the spirit and the understanding.” Nevertheless, writing in retrospect, Pratt realized that in all this teaching, Joseph Smith had “barely touched a single key; had merely lifted a corner of the veil and given me a single glance into eternity.”\(^\text{215}\)

Smith’s words to Pratt show that he was already linking family connection and marriage with salvation and exaltation a year before he began to introduce polygamy. That Joseph Smith “merely lifted the corner of the veil” in revealing the parameters of the new doctrine does not necessarily mean that he could not have provided a more in-depth explanation of what the doctrine entailed, but since Mormon doctrines generally developed line upon line, precept upon precept, it makes sense to assume that he did not reveal more because it was a developing doctrine. In other words, the specific ways family and salvation would be linked were yet to be determined. Subsequent events

indicate that this was the case. Though Smith had clearly contemplated polygamy at this point, it is unlikely that he mentioned it to Pratt at this juncture. If he had, Pratt would have said so, since his autobiography extends beyond the public announcement of polygamy in 1852. Instead, Pratt referred specifically to the singular wife of his bosom. In addition, in 1843, three years after the Philadelphia visit, Vilate Kimball wrote to her husband that the Pratts had just been introduced to polygamy and were surprised to learn of the doctrine.

The Introduction of Supporting Theology

Another important theological innovation relating to polygamy and family salvation introduced in 1840 was baptism for the dead. On 15 August of that year, Joseph Smith preached at the funeral of Seymour Brunson, who had served on the Nauvoo High Council, and used the opportunity to introduce the new ordinance. The doctrine was based on a passing reference by Paul in Corinthians 15:29, “Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then

---

216 The biography was compiled by Pratt’s son, also Parley, from various writings including pamphlets and other church publications as well as letters and diaries, and edited by John Taylor, one of Parley Sr.’s converts. It was first published in 1874 and reprinted in 1888. Currently it is in print and available on Kindle.


218 Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, The Words of Joseph Smith, Religious Studies Center, BYU, Provo, Utah, 1980, pp. 37, 49. This book is a compilation of first-hand reports of sermons preached by Joseph Smith. Unfortunately there are no known contemporary reports of the Seymour Brunson funeral sermon, though it was later included in the History of the Church (4:231.) A reminiscent account was filed with the Church Historians office by Simon Baker (1811-63.) “[Joseph Smith] read the greater part of the 15th chapter of Corinthians and remarked that the Gospel of Jesus Christ brought glad tidings of great joy, and then remarked that he saw a widow in that congregation that had a son who died without being baptized, and this widow in reading the sayings of Jesus ‘except a man be born of water and of the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven,’ and that not one jot nor tittle of the Savior’s words should pass away, but all should be fulfilled. He then said that this widow should have glad tidings in that thing….and that the plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God.” Also see M. Guy Bishop, “What Has Become of Our Fathers? Baptism For the Dead at Nauvoo”, Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, 23(Summer 1990) 85-97.
baptized for the dead?” The passage appears to be intended simply as support for the idea of resurrection, referring to a practice that people apparently accepted as a way of bringing salvation to loved ones who had died before they had received saving baptism. Joseph Smith intended the ordinance to be used in the same way. After introducing the idea at the Brunson funeral, he expounded on its importance frequently in the months that followed, informing the saints that the doctrine was for the “salvation of the dead” who could be baptized by proxy and “their names recorded in heaven.” Furthermore, “this doctrine was the burden of the scriptures. Those saints who neglect it, in behalf of their deceased relatives, do it at the peril of their own salvation.”

Calling baptism for the dead the “burden of the scriptures” emphasized its importance, but the statement that one’s own salvation would be in peril if the duty were neglected drove the point home. Baptism for the dead was the first ordinance specifically identified as a temple ordinance introduced in the Nauvoo period, and as such it was a step in the direction of connecting people in the kind of family salvation chain that Joseph Smith had expounded upon to Parley Pratt. It established that people had responsibilities toward the dead and tied the salvation of the living to fulfilling those responsibilities. Baptisms for the dead were performed in the Mississippi River at this point, but they were intended for the Temple. In January of 1841 Joseph Smith connected temples with baptism for the dead and other practices, “How shall your washings be acceptable unto me, except ye perform them in a house which you have built

219 I Corinthians 15:29
221 Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, pp. 421-25.
222 Ibid., 423.
to my name.”\footnote{D. and C. 124:37. Also see Buerger, The Mysteries of Godliness, p. 36.} This reiterated the importance of building a temple, a sacred space, where such ordinances could be performed. Baptism for the dead was the beginning of a series of ordinances that served to unite families, living and dead, and meant to “turn the hearts of the children to the fathers.” In preaching about baptism for the dead and the temple, Joseph Smith was building up an evolving theological narrative that would support family-centered salvation and polygamy.\footnote{Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, p. 421. Bushman writes, “The most striking of the Nauvoo doctrinal developments was the new emphasis on family. Binding families together, as if their existence too was in jeopardy if not sealed by God’s power, underlay both baptism for the dead and plural marriage.”} He could not preach openly about polygamy, but he could preach about the importance of ordinances that would eventually provide theological support for polygamy.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Polygamy Begins}
\end{center}

Shortly after introducing baptism for the dead and reiterating the importance of temples to the saints, Joseph Smith privately began teaching his most trusted adherents about polygamy. Joseph Bates Noble, who later testified about the introduction of polygamy in the Temple Lot Case of the 1890’s, said that Joseph first taught about polygamy in his home in the fall of 1840 to a few trusted members of the church.\footnote{The Temple Lot case was a suit brought by the RLDS church in the 1890s over possession of a parcel of land in Independence, Missouri, that Joseph Smith had originally designated as a temple site. The case was actually brought against a small offshoot of Mormonism called Hendrikites, but they were supported by the Utah church. As part of the proceedings, Mormons sought to prove that Joseph Smith had condoned and participated in polygamy, hence the testimony by Noble. Emily Partridge and others. See David L. Clark, Joseph Bates Noble: Polygamy and the Temple Lot Case, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 2009. The testimony from Noble at the trial on pages 77-79 corroborates Smith’s first plural marriage to Noble’s sister-in-law and affirms that they consummated the marriage that same day in Noble’s house. One of these members, Louisa Beaman was the sister of Noble’s wife Mary. Louisa became the first plural wife of Joseph Smith on April 5, 1841. There are different accounts of the first plural marriage. Some accounts place it in a grove near Main Street in Nauvoo with...} One of these members, Louisa Beaman was the sister of Noble’s wife Mary. Louisa became the first plural wife of Joseph Smith on April 5, 1841. There are different accounts of the first plural marriage. Some accounts place it in a grove near Main Street in Nauvoo with...
Louisa disguised as a man.\textsuperscript{226} Joseph Bates Noble, however, who performed the marriage, testified years later that it took place in his home in Nauvoo with his family present.\textsuperscript{227} Since Noble performed the marriage, it seems likely that his version is correct. Joseph Smith cautioned Noble, “In revealing this to you I have placed my life n your hands, therefore do not in an evil hour betray me to my enemies.”\textsuperscript{228}

There was special meaning to the date of the marriage, which was performed the day before the cornerstone of the Nauvoo temple was laid. That day, 6 April, 1841, was celebrated with elaborate ceremonies; dignitaries from surrounding towns were invited and the Nauvoo Legion was out in full array.\textsuperscript{229} Not coincidentally, this occurred on the eleventh anniversary of the organization of the church. Since April 6, 1841 was a full day, however, it seems likely that Smith purposely chose the day before to marry his first polygamous wife as an important symbolic gesture. Judging from what he had told Parley Pratt in Philadelphia, this marriage related in his mind to the work that would be performed in the temple. What that work would be was not fully determined, but it was gradually taking shape. Noble performed the marriage while Joseph Smith dictated the words that would solemnize the union.\textsuperscript{230}

Louisa did not leave information about the nature of Smith’s initial proposal, but another plural wife, Zina Huntington Jacobs, did. Her reaction to Joseph Smith’s proposal in the spring of 1841 illustrates some important aspects of the process of

\textsuperscript{226} Todd Compton, \textit{In Sacred Loneliness}, p. 59. Louisa’s brother-in-law, Erastus Snow, reported that the marriage took place in this way.
\textsuperscript{227} Clark, \textit{Joseph Bates Noble}, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{228} Joseph B. Noble, Affidavit, June 26, 1869. As quoted in Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, p. 438.
\textsuperscript{229} Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, pp. 423-5.
\textsuperscript{230} George D. Smith \textit{Nauvoo Polygamy}, Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 2008, pp. 56-59. Smith lists the various primary sources that document this marriage in the absence of a journal entry concerning it by Joseph Smith or Louisa Beaman.
introducing polygamy. She was the second of the three women who were married to Joseph Smith in 1841; the third was her sister, Prescendia Buell.\textsuperscript{231} The sisters illustrate the problems that Joseph Smith faced in attempting to introduce a radically different form of marriage to his followers when publicly acknowledged theological support was lacking. What arguments should he employ to convince them? The evidence is that his arguments generally concerned his own credentials or a direct command to him from God; they should marry him because it would bring salvation to them and their families and because what Smith sealed on earth would be sealed in heaven, or because God had commanded him marry the particular woman in question.\textsuperscript{232} That he approached only women who were deeply embedded in Mormon families and Mormonism, many of whom he had known from childhood and were related to male leaders, indicates that he was aware of the pitfalls of his proposals, and sought wives among those he knew trusted him implicitly.

Smith pursued Zina with remarkable tenacity, which indicates that he believed he was under divine obligation to marry particular women, but his arguments were not entirely convincing to her. Nineteen-year-old Zina Huntington was already engaged to marry Henry Jacobs when Joseph Smith approached her early in 1841. The situation put Zina in a terrible quandary, but she eventually decided to marry Henry. The young couple asked Joseph Smith to marry them and he agreed. When they met with friends

\textsuperscript{231} Compton, \textit{In Sacred Loneliness}, Chapters 4 and 5, pp. 71-144, cover the lives of the Huntington sisters. Also see: Martha Sonntag Bradley and Mary Brown Firmage, Four Zinas: A Story of Mothers and Daughters on the Mormon Frontier, ______ 2000. This book takes an in-depth look at Zina Huntington Jacobs, her mother, daughter and granddaughter, all named Zina. Zina Huntington Jacobs and her daughter Zina Young Card both participated in polygamy.

\textsuperscript{232} Where the proposals were recorded, these were the arguments used for the early plural marriages. In Zina’s case, however, these specifics were not recorded. Compton, \textit{In Sacred Loneliness}, pp. 79-83.
and family to exchange their vows on March 7, 1841, Smith did not appear. John C. Bennett stepped in to marry them, but when they encountered Joseph Smith later and asked why he did not come to the wedding, he responded “the Lord had made it known to him that she was to be his celestial wife.”

Family tradition holds that Henry was willing for her to accept the proposal, especially since he and Zina would continue to live together as husband and wife, but she remained doubtful. Later in the year, Smith sent word to her through her brother, Dimick Huntington, that an angel with a drawn sword had stood over him and told him that if he did not establish polygamy he would lose “his position and his life.” At this point, Zina succumbed and married him on October 27, 1841, 7 months after she had married Henry.

Much later, she wrote about her decision to enter polyandry:

> When I heard that God had revealed the law of celestial marriage that we would have the privilege of associating in family relationships in the worlds to come I searched the scripture and buy humble prayer to my Heavenly Father I obtained a testimony for myself that God had required that order to be established in this church. I made a greater sacrifice than to give my life for I never anticipated a gain to be looked upon as an honorable women by those I dearly loved but could I compromise conscience lay aside the sure testimony of the spirit of God for the Glory of this world after having been baptized by one having authority and covenancing to be obedient at the waters edge to live the life of a saint?

Since Zina wrote about her experience years after it happened, it is hard to know how much of later justifications for polygamy crept in. Her understanding that polygamy was necessary so that she could associate with family in the worlds to come no doubt

---

233 Zina Huntington Autobiography 1, Zina Card Brown collection, LDS Archives.
234 Ibid.
235 Ibid.
related to a promise Joseph Smith often made to prospective brides—that a woman’s relations would also be saved by her action in entering polygamy. Still, it is interesting that she called her sacrifice greater than if she had given her life, because she “never anticipated a gain to be looked upon as an honorable woman by those I dearly loved.” Since most of her family members were already church members, she appears to have at least doubted that polygamy could or would be implemented as the favored form of marriage among her family, friends and associates. This indicates that, even while Zina took the leap of faith and married Joseph, she had not yet incorporated polygamy into her own comprehensive salvation and exaltation narrative and did not expect her family to embrace it. Zina’s deep faith in Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling carried the day, but it seems likely that the early doubts Smith encountered when seeking wives pushed the process of developing the theological connection between polygamy and a larger family salvation narrative. Of course, it must also be acknowledged that Zina’s agency was greatly diminished by Smith’s persistence and her sense of duty to obey the man she regarded as a prophet.

Polyandry

Beyond the changes to the theological narrative that supported polygamy, another curious aspect of polygamy as instituted and practiced by Joseph Smith illustrates how polygamy worked to connect families and create future leadership for the church.

---

236 Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, pp. 80-81. Compton makes the interesting point that in Zina’s later writings she identified her marriage to Henry as “unhappy,” which she identified as their reason for parting and implied happened before she married Joseph Smith polyandrously. She lived with Jacobs through the remainder of Smith’s life, however, and married Brigham Young after Smith’s death. Even then she continued to live with Jacobs until Young claimed her as his wife on the trail west. Heart-broken Henry sent letters to Zina, but they were not reunited. Henry became a poultry farmer in California and remarried, but his letters indicate he always pined after Zina. When he was old and broken in health, his and Zina’s son, Zebulon, brought him to Utah where he lived in a room in Zina’s house and was nursed through his final illness by a hired woman until his death in 1886. (Compton, pp. 106-7.)
Joseph’s marriages to at least 11, perhaps as many as 14, already married women. Nine of his first eleven polygamous marriages were polyandrous marriages.\(^{237}\) His pursuit of married women is hard to fathom because it was unnecessary from a purely pragmatic perspective; polygamy could have been introduced without involving polyandry. Of course, sexual attraction is an obvious possibility, but this does not entirely square with the fact that several of the women were post-menopausal.

The potential for conflict in marrying or approaching married women is also obvious. Though some men stood in as proxy for Joseph Smith when their wives were sealed to him in the Nauvoo Temple after his death, others, like member of the Twelve Orson Hyde, took grave offense when he learned that Joseph Smith had married his wife Marinda while he was on a mission.\(^{238}\) Why, then, take the risk of marrying already married women? It is known that sometimes Smith approached men about marrying their wives as a kind of test, but the fact that he actually married some men’s wives shows that his proposals were not always only a test.\(^{239}\) Since virtually all of the married women continued to live with their legal husbands, it is unlikely that the main motive was sexual. There is evidence that at least some of these polyandrous relationships included sexual relations, but even so, these women, many of them mothers, would have been far less

---

\(^{237}\) Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, p. 15. Lawrence Foster, in his review of Compton’s book (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Volume 33, number 1 (Spring, 2000) pp. 206-208) has taken issue with Compton’s characterization of these marriages as “polyandrous.” He calls such marriages “patriarchal levirate polygamy,” which he regards as more in keeping with the character of the marriages in light of the demand placed upon the wives for total loyalty.

\(^{238}\) Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, p. 20.

\(^{239}\) Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy, A History*, Chapter 4, pp. 41-49. Van Wagoner has traced the history of the term “Spiritual Wives” in American and discusses the alternate meanings of marriage advanced by men like Swedenborg that might have been used to justify the practice. In essence, as the term implies, it was an understanding that spiritual connection between a man and a woman was more important than social or legal understandings of marriage. Some suggested that such spiritual ties were formed in heaven and were sanctioned by God in this life, earthly marriages notwithstanding.
sexually available than unencumbered single women. Since many converts were pouring into Nauvoo, there were plenty of single women available, which means there was no demographic reason to approach married women.\(^{240}\)

Todd Compton has thoroughly examined the evidence and concluded that though polyandry in Nauvoo is puzzling, it was indeed connected to an ideology that “explains the development and rationale for Smith’s practice of polyandry.”\(^{241}\) In other words, marrying married women in a way served to highlight aspects of polygamy that made it integral to the theological narrative. First, it underscored church control of which marriages were considered valid. Since Joseph Smith had moved to resacralize marriage and bring it within control of the church, marriages solemnized outside of priesthood authority were considered invalid, or at least not wholly valid. If the marriages of these women were invalid, then, there was no polyandry. Since the women continued to live with their husbands, however, it seems that they must have at the very least separated the idea of earthly union from the eternal union. When the Nauvoo temple was completed, marriages were sealed in the temple, and at this point, many of these women were sealed to Joseph Smith for eternity and to their original husband for time.\(^{242}\) Sealing meant that a bond was created that would exist into the eternities. Patriarchy, priesthood and sealing power had changed the status of these marriages in a way that allowed Joseph Smith to marry these women in some sense. By marrying already married women, Joseph Smith emphasized this power.

---

\(^{240}\) Flanders, *Nauvoo, Kingdom on the Mississippi*, pp. 57-91. A table on page 58 shows the numbers of converts and immigrants to Nauvoo in 1840-1846. The combined totals between 1840-43 amounted to nearly 3000 British immigrants to Nauvoo during those years.

\(^{241}\) Ibid., p. 22.

\(^{242}\) Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 323-354.
Beyond sealing power, at this stage, polygamous marriage rights were evolving to be correlated with a man’s level of priesthood, which in turn was connected to salvation and glory in the hereafter. Brigham Young’s later policy, which he took from practice in Nauvoo, was that if a woman chose to leave her husband to marry another man, no divorce was necessary if the new husband held a higher priesthood. 243 In other words, marriage rights were strongly tied to authority, or being God’s chosen, which in turn was tied to heavenly reward and blessing. The practice of men of higher priesthood “adopting” men of lower priesthood as their “children” for the purpose of connection and greater heavenly favor was also instituted in Nauvoo. Since marriage and adoption were both used to create kinship networks, it is quite possible that in some instances polygamy and adoption were interconnected. 244 In other words, some polyandrous marriages might have been akin to a form of adoption and not included sexuality. It is known, however, that some of Joseph Smith’s polyandrous marriages included sexual relation. For example, before she died, Sylvia Sessions Lyons told her daughter, Josephine Lyons Fischer, that she was the daughter of Joseph Smith. It is almost certain, however, that some of the marriages were in name only, especially marriages to older women like Sylvia’s mother, midwife Patty Bartlett Sessions. 245

243 Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy: A History, pp. 45, 49, footnote 4. Compton, p. 17. Here Compton quotes an 1861 speech by Brigham Young, “If a woman can find a man holding the keys of the priesthood with higher power and authority than her husband, and he is disposed to take her he can do so...without a bill of divorcement.”
244 Quinn, Mormon Hierarchy, p. 655. Adoption was formally instituted by Brigham Young early in 1846, however, after the Nauvoo Temple was completed. It is quite possible that Young took this step because Joseph Smith had practiced something akin to it informally.
245 Kathryn Daynes has argued that since Windsor Lyon, Sylvia Sessions’ husband, was excommunicated from the church during the time that Josephine would have been conceived, it is possible that Sylvia denied her husband sexual access while he was out of the church and could therefore be certain that Josephine was the daughter of Joseph Smith. She has studied the birth intervals for the children in the Lyons family and they are consistent with this interpretation. Daynes, More Wives Than One, p. 30.
The selection of women that Joseph Smith married also emphasized certain aspects of the theological narrative, spirituality, kinship connection and leadership. Many, if not all of the women were extraordinarily spiritual. Joseph Smith was in a position to know this because virtually all the women he married were either women he had known well since the early days of the church—women he had met as children and watched grow to young womanhood—or women he had worked with in building the church, like older wives Patty Sessions and Elizabeth Durfee. Many were also related to men in church leadership. Most were intimately integrated into unofficial women’s circles in Nauvoo and were part of Relief Society, a women’s organization begun in 1842. While it is true that some of the marriages were to young women who worked in the Smith household, and hence likely motivated by convenience, even then most young women were, like Desdemona Fullmer, related to male church leaders.246

The women were of all ages, the oldest, Rhoda Richards, sister to Willard Richards, was 58, the youngest, Helen Mar Kimball, daughter of Heber C. Kimball, was only 14 years of age, but none were newly converted or new to the city; they already had strong connections to Mormonism and Joseph Smith in multiple ways. Some had interesting past connections. Lucinda Morgan Harris was the remarried widow of William Morgan, the man murdered in New York State for threatening to reveal Masonic secrets in 1826.247 This connection is especially curious in light of later Mormon embrace of Freemasonry. One was a levirate marriage to the widow of Joseph Smith’s brother

246 For a particularly enlightening discussion of the wives of Joseph Smith, see Compton, In Sacred Loneliness. The Prologue in particular summarizes the general characteristics of the women who married Joseph Smith polygamously, pp. 1-23.

247 Ibid., See Chapter 2, pp. 43-54. Lucinda Pendleton Morgan Harris is a possible wife. Documentation is uncertain and comes from hostile sources to some degree.
Don Carlos, Agnes Coolbrith Smith.\textsuperscript{248} Many were dynastic marriages that connected sisters, daughters or wives of high level leaders with Smith.

For his part, Joseph Smith appears to have believed that he must marry certain women and that nothing would stop him from doing so except their direct refusal, as his courtship of Zina Huntington Jacobs shows. Eventually it would become clear that some of the women he selected were well suited to help create a certain kind of female hierarchy— one of spiritually inclined women with well-connected male relations.\textsuperscript{249}

These marriage choices assured strong church leadership in the future among both women and men, and kinship interconnection between male and female leaders. The same young people who provided the initial core of polygamous men and women in the church would serve as its leaders for the next 50 years. Zina Huntington Jacobs Young, for example, served as church wide president of the reconstituted Relief Society in Utah until 1901.\textsuperscript{250} In essence, then, the wives of Joseph Smith appear to have been selected to form and strengthen community without regard to their marital status. Support for polygamy among this elite group of people, even if it was secret and polyandrous, would go far to help integrate the practice into the rest of the culture.

**Polygamy and Salvation**

Joseph Smith’s proposal to another young woman sheds further light on the process of integrating polygamy and the evolving salvation narrative. Mary Elizabeth

\textsuperscript{248} Ibid., Chapter 6, pp. 145-170.
\textsuperscript{249} Two of the women who had married Smith became church wide presidents of the Relief Society in Utah, Eliza R. Snow and Zina Huntington Jacobs. Eliza R. Snow was the sister of Lorenzo Snow, later president of the church. Many others, like Desdemona Fullmer and Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, were from prominent families.
Rawlins Lightner married Joseph Smith early in 1842, shortly after Zina and Prescendia Huntington had become his plural wives.\(^{251}\) Mary, already married to non-Mormon Adam Lightner, met Joseph Smith in Kirtland in 1831 when she was 14 years old. She was deeply spiritual and known for her ability to interpret when others spoke in tongues. Though her husband was a non-member, they moved to Missouri and then to Illinois with the bulk of the saints. In February 1842, Joseph Smith approached Mary, then the mother of two children, about marrying him polyandrously. He told her that he had been reluctant at first, but explained “The angel came to me three times between the years of ’34 and ’42 and said I was to obey that principle or he would lay [destroy] me.” Mary was of course surprised, but she agreed to think it over because, as she later explained “I had been dreaming for a number of years that I was his [Joseph’s] wife. I thought I was a great sinner. I prayed to God to take it from me.” Mary’s dreams indicate that she had perhaps long been attracted to Smith. Smith told her that “I was his before I came here and he said all the Devils in hell should never get me from him.” In addition, “I was created for him before the foundations of the earth was laid.”\(^{252}\)

Still reluctant to take such a step, Mary asked Smith why the angel had not appeared to her, and if he had considered the possibility that the personage might be a devil instead of an angel. She informed him that she was not willing to marry him polyandrously until she had her own witness. He told her to pray earnestly and admonished her to speak of the matter to no one but Brigham Young. By way of inducement, he told her, “I know that I shall be saved in the Kingdom of God. I have the

\(^{251}\) Compton, Chapter 8, pp. 205-227. Also see Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner’s autobiography, “Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner,” *The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 17 (July 1926):193-205, 250.

\(^{252}\) Ibid.
oath of God upon it and God cannot lie. All that he gives me I shall take with me for I have that authority and that power conferred upon me.”

If she married him, then, her salvation would be assured. Mary was greatly troubled by the proposal, but eventually dreamed that an angel visited her, and, though she was eight months pregnant with her husband Adam’s third child, married Joseph Smith polyandrously in February, 1842. Adam Lightner was away from Nauvoo at the time and probably knew nothing about the marriage. She later related that in continuing to live with Adam, “I did just as Joseph told me to do, as he knew what troubles I would have to contend with.”

Joseph Smith’s approach to Mary is interesting in many respects. Notably, at this point, the salvation he promised was narrowly tied to him and not to any theology that gave polygamy a place in the larger Mormon salvation and exaltation narrative. If the salvation promises were tied simply to his favor with God, then very few women could benefit, since Joseph Smith could not marry all women. Under this thinking, how could polygamy become a cultural norm? How could it be justified? Other men might convince women with the same reasoning—your salvation will be assured because God approves of me—but presumably men with no prophetic claims would face even more resistance than Joseph Smith encountered in trying to convince women to enter polygamy. Moreover, even if men could convince young women to do something so radical, the entire church community would eventually have to accept the efficacy of

253 Autobiography of Mary Elizabeth Rawlins Lightner, *The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, 17 (July, 1926):193-205 Lightner was the longest-lived of Joseph Smith’s plural wives and wrote and spoke publicly about her experiences into the 20th century, in fact, especially in the 20th century, when Smith’s wives were gradually dying away and people realized that many of their stories had been lost. She made the journey to Utah in the 1850s, and, even though she had married Brigham Young for time after Smith’s death, continued to live with Adam Lightner. Unlike many of Smith’s polygamous wives, she lived obscurely away from the center of the church, and was never part of the high-level female leadership in the church.

254 Ibid.
polygamy. Justification tied to the personal righteousness of any man, even a prophet, would seem flimsy at best. In order to gain general acceptance, polygamy would need to be situated in the family salvation narrative and the larger institutional context of the church.

It is hard to know how much of the narrative had been determined at this point. Joseph Smith’s remarks to Parley Pratt show that the process had begun, but if the theology had evolved to the point that it would by the time the revelation on plural marriage was written in July, 1843, why did Smith not use the arguments delineated there to convince young women to enter polygamy? Did he tie salvation within polygamy to his own favor with God because he knew the women trusted him and his prophetic mission, and thus regarded it as the best way to convince them? Or were the broader arguments still developing? It seems likely that the latter was the case.255

Joseph Smith employed one argument that did fit with existing theology when he told Mary that she was somehow assigned or promised to him before she was born—the idea that some people were preordained to marry one another before they came to earth.256 A still developing Mormon narrative posited that men’s spirits were not so much created by God as coexistent with him—in other words they had always existed in

255 Both Bushman and Quinn have shown how Mormon theology and hierarchy were developing at this juncture. See Rough Stone Rolling, Chapters 24-5, pp. 417-458 and Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power, Chapter 4, pp. 106-141.
256 This argument accords with a point made by Richard Van Wagoner in Mormon Polygamy: A History, p. 42, that Swedenborg and others had suggested that perhaps some men and women were mated in heaven, though not on this earth, and that such “spiritual” unions should be consummated on earth even if the couples had not managed to find one another before marrying other people. Some of this thinking appears to have influenced Joseph Smith in the doctrine concerning the pre-existence and in the arguments he made to convince young women to marry him.
some form.\textsuperscript{257} According to this narrative, God had organized a pre-earth life where a heavenly war was fought, during which already-existing spirits chose to follow either Satan or Jesus Christ. Those who had chosen to follow Jesus were righteous spirits who were then allowed to come to earth to test their righteousness. The doctrine of pre-ordination seems to have helped convince Mary to accept Smith’s proposal, but it was not a doctrine that depended on polygamy or that necessarily integrated it into existing salvation and exaltation narratives.

In sum, Smith’s arguments to convince Mary to enter polygamy, while they promised good things for her and her family, were not part of a larger narrative, nor was the threat that an angel with a drawn sword would destroy Joseph Smith if he did not enter polygamy. In the end, Mary’s faith in Joseph Smith’s prophetic mission, her reliance on confirming dreams, her long-held conviction that she would one day be Joseph’s wife and perhaps desire for Joseph Smith were the points that won her over. Her initially negative reaction, however, highlights the difficulties of trying to justify polygamy narrowly, without tying it into a larger theological narrative. Other arguments would be necessary to convince the general population of saints to accept polygamy.

**Bringing Other Men Into Polygamy**

Joseph Smith’s efforts to bring other men into the practice, which he would have to do if polygamy were to become the favored form of marriage, proved difficult as well. Most were highly reluctant, and failed attempts show that other men were even more likely than Joseph Smith to evince a negative reaction when approaching potential

wives. An initial problem for Smith was that his most trusted associates, men like Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball, were off on missions to England during the first half of 1841, when polygamy was initiated. It is possible that Joseph consequently tried to introduce polygamy to other associates, like John C. Bennett, who were who much less tried and tested in the faith. So far as is known, other men did not enter polygamy until at least nine months after Joseph Smith, early in 1842, when Heber C. Kimball married Sarah Noon, by which time Joseph Smith had 13 other wives.

It is easy to imagine that men would be doubtful about entering polygamy in light of deeply ingrained understandings about the meaning of marriage that virtually all Mormons held. Married men would naturally be squeamish about breaking their marriage vows even though they believed fervently in Joseph Smith and Mormonism. Then there was the daunting prospect of trying to convince young women that, though already married, they wanted to secretly “marry” and have children with numerous “wives.” In spite of this novel desire, the young women were to believe the men were not garden variety lechers, but honorable men making a request ordained of God. Convincing their wives was another unpleasant prospect. Even Joseph Smith was never able to fully manage this miracle! Often Smith joined with men in convincing or attempting to convince women that the request was legitimate--but it nevertheless took time for the idea to take hold.

---

259 Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, p. 57. According to William Law, during the period when polygamy was introduced, Bennett “was more in the secret confidence of Joseph than perhaps any other man in the city.”
261 “Miss Brotherton’s Statement,” St. Louis, July 13, 1842, in the *Sangamo Journal*, July 22, 1842. Miss Brotherton recounted an experience, explored more fully below, where Joseph Smith joined with Brigham
Heber C. Kimball exemplifies the problem. He was deeply attached to his wife, Vilate, and suffered great agonies in entering polygamy. Their daughter, Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, later reported that when Heber first learned about polygamy, his thought was to spare Vilate’s feelings by marrying two elderly single women who were her friends. He was instead told three times by Joseph Smith to marry Sarah Noon, a young woman with two daughters who had left a drunken husband in England and traveled to Nauvoo on the same ship with Heber when he returned from his mission in 1841. Joseph cautioned Heber not to tell anyone about his polygamous marriage, even his wife. According to his daughter, Heber finally agreed and married Sarah, but he agonized over the situation, because he did not want to hurt and alienate his beloved wife. He prayed that Vilate would discern the source of his distress on her own so that he could keep his vow of silence and still be honest with his wife. He became so distressed that he could hardly sleep. Vilate begged him to tell her what was wrong but he would not break his vow. Helen recounted that Vilate finally retired to her room and bowed before the Lord and poured out her soul in prayer to Him….While pleading as one would plead for life, the vision of her mind was opened, and, as darkness flees before the morning sun, so did her sorrow…Before her was illustrated the order of celestial marriage, in all its beauty and glory, together with the great exaltation and honor it would confer upon her in that immortal and celestial sphere, if she would accept it and stand in her place by her husband’s side. She also saw the woman he had taken to wife, and contemplated with joy the vast and boundless love and union which this order would bring about as well as the increase of her husband’s

Young and Heber C. Kimball to try unsuccessfully to convince her to marry Brigham Young polygamously.

262 Perhaps Sarah Noon was more amenable to the idea than many young women would be because she had two young children to raise and, since she had been abandoned by her husband in England, would have difficulty obtaining a legal divorce.
kingdoms, and the power and glory extending throughout the eternities, worlds without end. 263

According to Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, Vilate went to her husband and told him, “Heber, what you kept from me the Lord has shown me.” Heber was overjoyed that he would no longer have to keep his second marriage secret from his wife and that she had accepted polygamy. He was to marry many more women, and Helen reported that “though her trials were often heavy and grievous to bear, she knew that father was also being tried, and her integrity was unflinching to the end.” 264

The Kimball’s story, as told by their daughter Helen, and included in the biography of Heber C. Kimball, written by Helen’s son, Orson F. Whitney, illustrates the kind of institutional and family narrative that grew up around polygamy. Receiving a spiritual witness about polygamy became an important part of that narrative. The reality was naturally far more complicated. Several months after supposedly becoming reconciled to polygamy, Vilate wrote to Heber, who was serving a mission in southern Illinois.

Our good friend S [Sarah, the plural wife] is as ever, and we are one. You said I must tell you all my feelings; but if I were to tell you that I sometimes felt tempted and tried and feel as though my burden was greater than I could bear, it would only be a source of sorrow to you, and the Lord knows that I do not wish to add one sorrow to your heart, for be assured, my dear Heber, that I do not love you any less for what has transpired, neither do I believe that you do me; there for, I will keep my bad feelings to myself. 265

264 Ibid.
265 Vilate Kimball to Heber Kimball, 16 October, 1842, LDS archives.
Heber immediately responded, assuring Vilate that he understood her bad feelings and that she had not “been out of my mind one score of minutes at a time since I left you.” He had dreamt of her every night, but always found her distant, which made him “sick at heart” to the degree that “I have no appetite to eat.” He was so distressed that he believed he would “sink beneath it” and went to the woods “Evry chance I have and pore out my soul before God that he would deliver me and bless you my dear love for I love you most dear I assure you” He was so troubled that he thought his heart would burst, and frequently found himself “in tears weeping like a child, about you and the situation that I am in.” Nevertheless, he could do nothing but “go ahead,” but he hoped that she would not let it cast her down “for I know how to pity you, my dear. I can say I never suffered more in all the days of my life than since these things came to pass” because “I essteam you most pressious of all things below the sun… no one in the world can make me as happy as you can.”

The Kimball’s letters do not exactly belie their daughter’s report about the process by which they accepted polygamy, but they do show that for this exceptionally close couple, a single spiritual manifestation was not enough to reconcile them to polygamy. Instead, the process was long and painful as they struggled to retain the love and intimacy of their monogamous marriage, while attempting to fit other women into the picture.

In light of their obvious reluctance to compromise their exclusive relationship, the willingness of both Kimballs to accede to Joseph Smith’s demand that they enter polygamy is hard to understand, especially since Heber C. Kimball was known as one of the more practical and plain spoken of Smith’s followers. Even more strangely, Helen

---

266 Heber C. Kimball to Vilate Kimball, 25 October, 1842, LDS archives.
Mar Kimball also related that in the process of introducing polygamy to Kimball, Joseph
Smith demanded Vilate as a wife for himself. Kimball “fasted and wept and prayed” for
three days, but then “led his darling wife to the Prophet’s house and presented her to
Joseph,” who told the Kimballs that it was only a test of loyalty, he did not intend to
marry Vilate.267 If this story is true, Vilate’s ability to surmise that her husband had
married Sarah Noon is not surprising. The Kimballs were more willing to bow to the
authority of Joseph Smith with regard to polygamy than many, perhaps most, in Nauvoo,
and for this reason they were part of the inner circle that was trusted with information and
increasing amounts of power in the church.268

In spite of the genuine anguish that the Kimballs experienced in adjusting to
polygamy, Heber Kimball was luckier than Brigham Young in his first attempt to enter
polygamy with Martha Brotherton, a young single woman. Martha’s story illustrates the
dangers and difficulties men could encounter when trying to convince an unencumbered
woman to enter polygamy when there was no social structure in place to support it and no
compelling narrative to connect polygamy to church doctrine. Until people became
accustomed to the idea and the theological narrative developed to include polygamy,
there was little in such a proposal to make polygamy seem reasonable and acceptable to a
sensible single young woman.

268 Heber C. Kimball was mission president in Britain in the initial highly successful stage of proslytitization
there (1837-8). He was an original member of the Quorum of the Twelve and was among the first 9 men
who received the endowment. He was the first known man apart from Joseph Smith to take a plural wife.
He and his first wife, Vilate, were members of the Quorum of the Anointed and received their second
anointing 20 January, 1844. For helpful information on Kimball and numerous important early Mormons,
see Quinn, Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power, pp. 556-559 (about Kimball,) pp. 533-613, complete.
Martha and her family were converts from Britain who had recently arrived in Illinois and lived outside Nauvoo. She had a married sister who lived in Nauvoo, whom she visited sometime in late 1841 or early 1842. While there, Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball invited her to go to Joseph Smith’s store with them to meet the prophet for the first time. At the store, the three men took her into an upper room and then left her alone with Young, who locked the door and attempted to convince her that she should marry him as his second wife because “brother Joseph has had a revelation from God that it is lawful and right for a man to have two wives; for, as it was in the days of Abraham, so it shall be in these last days, and whoever is the first that is willing to take up the cross will receive the greatest blessings; and if you will accept me, I will take you straight to the celestial kingdom.”

Martha wrote that she was shocked and repelled at this curious offer, but worried about what would happen if she made a negative response, so she protested that she was only 18 years of age and would not want to marry without her parents’ permission. Young brushed this argument aside, saying that she would be of age when her parents discovered the marriage. Martha then protested that she would like to think and pray about the proposal. Joseph Smith came in to help convince her, and told her that he had the keys of the kingdom so that what he bound on earth would be bound in heaven, and that this would be the greatest blessing ever bestowed on her. Martha continued to protest that she must think over the proposition, and after promising not to divulge the conversation, she was allowed to leave. She later published the story in a book-length

---

269 Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, 264-270.
270 From Elizabeth Brotherton’s letter about the incident, published in John C. Bennett’s History of the Saints, Leland and Whiting, Boston, 1842, pp. 237-38. Available online
exposé and in the newspaper, though Joseph Smith and Brigham Young both denied it.\textsuperscript{271} In light of the unorthodox nature of the proposal, she apparently did not feel compelled to adhere to her promise not to reveal what had happened.

As with any story published in an exposé, there is a question of veracity. Martha’s story rings true, however, because it fits with the details of other stories of proposals known to be true and because there were no previous exposés from which she could have drawn the details. Her story illustrates the difficulty of trying to convince women to marry polygamously with arguments about heavenly reward based on the righteousness and heavenly favor of the man requesting the marriage. Young’s promises implied salvation based on willingness to accept the doctrine and his own favor with God, but it was unrelated to any reality that Martha understood. She had only met Joseph Smith that day and so was unlikely to be swayed by her attachment to him. For her part, Martha had little in her experience with Mormonism to induce her to accept the new doctrine. Even Joseph Smith’s assertion of sealing power was not yet supported by a developed theological narrative or a polygamous social system that Martha would have understood in this way. Sealing was a familiar idea to Mormons, and indeed to all Christians in light of Jesus’ transfer of power to Peter, but heretofore it had been used in a group context, as when, for example, a congregation might be “sealed” up to God by a preacher or minister in prayer.\textsuperscript{272} The story also illustrates the unfortunate manipulation that was employed in

\textsuperscript{271} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{272} Buerger, The Mysteries of Godliness, pp. 1-8. Bueger points out that when Mormons separated priesthood into higher and lower levels, the higher, or Melchizedek, priesthood came to be regarded as having the power to seal on earth what would be sealed in heaven, even to having the power to seal the saints to eternal life. In the New Testament, Peter is given a charge and told that what he bound on earth would be bound in heaven, though the term “seal” was not specifically used. (See Matthew 16:19-20.) The word “seal” is used in John 6:27, but only in regard to God having sealed Jesus to his work. Paul, however,
trying to convince young women to do something that went against their values and beliefs. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that Martha and her parents were deeply offended and soon left Nauvoo, though an unmarried sister stayed and later married into polygamy with Parley P. Pratt.\textsuperscript{273}

Though Joseph had success with many women, he also experienced rejection from other young women that spring. Especially troubling for him was a rejection from Nancy Rigdon, the daughter of Sidney Rigdon, counselor in the church presidency, which caused a temporary breach between the two men.\textsuperscript{274} The risks and the problems associated with the secret practice of polygamy were becoming painfully obvious in the spring of 1842, as gossip began to circulate around the city, and, perhaps because they were prepared for his advances, Joseph Smith experienced other unsuccessful proposals. His proposal to another married woman, Sarah Kimball perhaps illustrates the progress of Smith’s thinking about polygamy.

Early in the year 1842, Joseph Smith taught me the principle of marriage for eternity, and the doctrine of plural marriage. He said that in teaching this he realized that he jeopardized his life; but God had revealed it to him many years before as a privilege with blessings, now God had revealed it again and instructed him to teach it with commandment, as the Church could travel [progress] no further without the introduction of this principle. I asked him to teach it to some one else. He looked at me reprovingly, and said “Will you tell me who to teach it to? God required me to teach it to you, and leave you with the responsibility of believing

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[273]{Smith, \textit{Nauvoo Polygamy}, p. 208.}
\end{footnotes}
or disbelieving.” He said, “I will not cease to pray for you, and if you will seek unto God in prayer you will not be led into temptation.”

Though unsuccessful, the proposal did not alter Sarah’s faith. It is interesting to speculate about why Joseph Smith would accept refusal from Sarah when he was so persistent in pursuing other young women who also initially refused him or questioned his addresses, like Zina Huntington and Mary Rawlins Lightner. It seems likely that the vehemence and firmness of Sarah’s refusal saved her further advances. Moreover, Sarah was the wife of a prosperous Nauvoo merchant, Hiram Kimball, which no doubt gave her a greater sense of her own power. Other young women were perhaps less well-positioned to confidently refuse. It is interesting to note that a new argument emerged in Joseph Smith’s proposal to Sarah, which occurred after the proposals to Zina Huntington Jacobs and Mary Rollins Lightner. Smith did not refer to the angel with the drawn sword, at least Sarah did not report this, but instead told her that the church could not progress any further unless he introduced polygamy. Given Mormon commitment to Abrahamic covenant, patriarchy, priesthood and the restoration of all things, this made a kind of sense. Polygamy could, in fact, integrate these concepts into the Mormon narrative. This in turn could make polygamy more compelling to those invited to enter because it would be supported by a theological narrative not solely connected to the righteousness of the man proposing polygamous marriage.

---

275 Sarah Kimball memoir, *Women’s Exponent*, 1 September, 1883. The Women’s Exponent was a monthly magazine published by Utah women between 1872 and 1914. History and personal stories were often included, especially by women who had lived through the Nauvoo period.

276 Ibid.
Polygamy and Institutional Innovations, Spring, 1842

The exact relationship between the secret introduction of polygamy and the theological innovations that followed is impossible to document and no doubt complex. It seems likely, however, that polygamy worked as a kind of leaven to the loaf in Mormonism by hastening the development of a theological narrative and related practices that incorporated polygamy with other doctrines and practices that, in 1842, gave the church renewed energy and forward motion. In other words, secret introduction, the initial phase of polygamy, led to the second phase, during which it became integrated into the theological narrative of adherents. At this juncture, many aspects of Mormon theology that had already been introduced but were undeveloped became more fully articulated in short order. It makes sense that dismayed refusals and the resulting gossip and the possibility of exposure would expedite changes that were already in the works that would strengthen the theological underpinnings of both Mormonism and polygamy.

Given the secrecy that surrounded polygamy, however, it is impossible to trace the impetus for these changes from the personal writings of Joseph Smith or other leaders. Rather, evidence must be taken from circumstances. In light of this, it is perhaps best to look thematically at the state of Mormon theology at this juncture in order to understand the remarkable changes that happened in the spring of 1842, after polygamy had been introduced, but before it had become a central part of the theological narrative.

Priesthood

Priesthood had existed from almost the beginning of Mormonism, but the offices within it, the duties assigned to each office, and the hierarchical place of the various offices took years to establish. At bottom was the question of authority and how it could be disseminated and effectively wielded. The Mormon lay ministry spread priesthood power democratically through the church population, but hierarchy within the priesthood was nevertheless important for the orderly workings of the church. When the church was organized in 1830, and during the first few years that followed, Mormon priesthood was remarkably egalitarian. At a conference in June, 1831, a new level of priesthood was introduced and those present experienced a kind of Pentecost. This was codified in an 1835 revelation that formally established the two levels of priesthood-- the Aaronic (lower) and Melchizedek (higher) with various offices assigned to each level. The revelation, given in response to questions from proselytizing elders about their duties and responsibilities, articulated the duties of the various priesthood offices.

By the time Mormons settled in Nauvoo, the various priesthood offices were separated into quorums, each of which constituted a type of brotherhood for the men who held like offices. The two most important quorums were the Nauvoo High Council and the Quorum of the Twelve, each of which had jurisdictional assignments.

---

278 D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 1994, p. 7. This is the most comprehensive work on the formation of Mormon priesthood available. Information in this section and elsewhere comes from this source.
280 *D. and C.*, Section 75 and heading.
281 Prince, *Power From on High*, pp. 25-26. Prince argues that by 1835 the centralization of authority was complete and even that the Twelve was already next in power to Joseph Smith. Quinn (*The Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 61) argues that the Twelve “was only one of several quorums which “stood next to” the First Presidency” between 1835-42.
Council was over the center of Zion, or the Nauvoo area, and the Twelve was over everywhere else, reflecting Mormon proselytizing ambitions. As a charismatic leader, Joseph Smith controlled and directed the quorums, but there were instances when a more established hierarchy among the quorums would have better facilitated church governance.

Hierarchical ranking was related, for example, to the question of who would succeed Smith should something happen to him. He himself understood this, and from time to time designated possible successors, but these changed as those in favor rose and fell. No priesthood quorum was specifically designated to select a successor. Without a firmly defined priesthood chain of authority, succession and many other issues would be thorny problems.\(^\text{282}\) A well-established priesthood hierarchy would solve many problems or prevent them from arising. The timing and nature of changes to priesthood hierarchy among the quorums after 1842 indicate that polygamy was an important factor in the hierarchical delineation of the quorums, beginning in 1842.\(^\text{283}\)

\textit{Salvation and Exaltation}

Mormon salvation and exaltation theology was also still forming when Mormons settled in Nauvoo. Joseph Smith had changed the Christian understanding of salvation with a revelation received in 1832 and included in the Mormon \textit{Book of Commandments}, later the \textit{Doctrine and Covenants}, canonized scripture to Mormons. The revelation was a

\(^{282}\) Quinn, \textit{Mormon Hierarchy}, p. 143.
\(^{283}\) Ibid., pp. 63-66. Quinn argues that the Twelve did not spearhead the move to Illinois and, in fact, was somewhat in disrepute at that juncture because their ranks had been decimated by apostasy. He further argues that their ascendency began in 1841, after several returned from highly successful missions to England and just as polygamy was being introduced. At this point, Smith gave them more economic power by putting them over the settling of immigrant saints, putting them over church finances and donations for the temple. Many of them also began to practice polygamy in 1842-3.
response to questions then current in the religious debate about universal salvation. The revelation delineated a middle ground on the question of who might be saved and how.\textsuperscript{284} In essence, it granted salvation to everyone except the most egregious sinners, who would go to a form of hell called “outer darkness.” Everyone else would enter one of three kingdoms, the telestial, terrestrial or celestial, in that order, all of which were some form of glory. By moving away from a heaven and hell binary, it was possible to designate levels of glory related to different levels of commitment and behavior on earth.

In the Nauvoo period, the picture would be complicated even further because Joseph Smith introduced divisions within the telestial, terrestrial and celestial kingdoms.\textsuperscript{285} It was possible in this way to grant those who participated in polygamy or held a higher level of priesthood a greater degree of exaltation without necessarily damning those who were less committed. The promise of a higher level of exaltation would serve as a powerful motivating factor in convincing people to participate in polygamy.

\textit{Temples and the Endowment}

The temple was an effective tool used to integrate the disparate parts of Mormonism and support polygamy. Like Mormons’ understanding of priesthood and exaltation, Mormon ideas about the uses of holy places--temples--were evolving in the Nauvoo period. Mormons had built a temple in Kirtland and at the dedication had experienced a kind of Pentecost, where many spoke in tongues, prophesied and reported

\textsuperscript{284} \textit{D. and C.}, Section 76.
\textsuperscript{285} \textit{D. and C.} Section 131, dated May 16-17, 1843.
seeing angels and other heavenly beings. They called this an “endowment” of the spirit. The problem was that since it happened at the dedication of the temple, repetition of this kind of endowment could not be expected on demand. The temple therefore needed some kind of institutional purpose that would connect people together in powerful ways.

Occasional “endowments of the spirit” aside, in Kirtland the temple had served more or less as a meetinghouse, but such a purpose was far too prosaic for a sacred space that would serve powerful spiritual purposes related to priesthood and salvation. People needed to have a reason to go repeatedly to participate in specific spiritual activities that would tie them to each other, the church and the eternities. A truly sacred space could accomplish nothing less. In Kirtland, the endowment of the spirit had been ephemeral and experienced largely by men at the dedication. In Nauvoo, the temple would not be completed until late in 1845, only a few months before the saints moved west, but in it members would receive a specific ordinance, the endowment, related to their salvation and exaltation. The endowment did not exactly ensure salvation, but it was intended to facilitate and encourage behaviors and commitments that would lead to salvation and particularly exaltation; one of those behaviors was polygamy.

---

286 Buerger, *Mysteries of Godliness*, Chapter 2, pp. 11-34 describes the development of the Kirtland temple rites and the subsequent Pentecost at its dedication.
287 Ibid., p. 29.
288 *HC*, 2:474-5 describes the weekly meeting schedule typically followed in the Kirtland Temple. The Temple was used nearly every night of the week for quorum meetings and was used in the day as a school.
290 Ibid. For further information on the development of Temple rituals, see subsequent chapters in Buerger,
Finally, another concept that would integrate temple work, priesthood, exaltation and polygamy, was the idea that priesthood holders held the power, through earthly blessings and ordinances, to make binding contracts with God relating to heavenly connections and rewards. Drawn from a word found in the New Testament, this was called “sealing” power. The term in the New Testament is based on the custom of placing a wax or mud seal on documents to ensure privacy. Paul spoke of God sealing early Christians by the Holy Spirit of Promise in various New Testament passages.\textsuperscript{291} In contrast, the \textit{Book of Mormon} introduced the concept of a human acting to seal things on earth and in heaven.\textsuperscript{292} Shortly after the church was organized, Joseph Smith connected this power with the High Priesthood, but initially it was used in a general sense, as when one man invoked sealing power on a congregation to which he was preaching.\textsuperscript{293} In Nauvoo, sealing would evolve in ways that included sealing individuals to each other and would thus serve to support polygamy by creating extensive family ties.

\textbf{Institutional Growth After the Introduction of Polygamy}

All of these theological and organizational aspects of Mormonism were taking shape when Mormons settled in Nauvoo in 1839. They had grown and developed in the Mormon way, line upon line, precept upon precept, since before the church was organized in 1830, but had not quite fit themselves together in a way that allowed for an uncontested succession of leaders, effective church governance, high member retention

\textsuperscript{291} See Rom. 4:11, 2 Cor. 1:22, Eph. 1:13 and 4:30 and Rev. 13:16-18
\textsuperscript{293} Ibid., p. 6.
and other aspects of belief and practice that would give the church stability and longevity— that would, in short, institutionalize it. Most members already firmly believed in the *Book of Mormon* and Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling, but the Mormon theological narrative needed to be expanded and refined to fit together into a whole that could answer the spiritual and practical needs of the church. Polygamy facilitated that process in numerous ways.

It seems likely that the very weight and seriousness of undertaking to restructure family patterns meant that Smith and his trusted brethren would have to develop a powerful theology to support it, and that the crisis that developed when gossip and scandal rocked Nauvoo hurried the process along. In essence, polygamy created problems that needed to be solved, and since Mormonism had tended to grow and progress as problems arose and were solved through revelation and theological innovation, the problems it presented were something of an opportunity for the institution. The crisis ultimately allowed polygamy to be woven into the Mormon theological fabric as the connecting thread between other theological strands, including priesthood, salvation and exaltation, and the place of women in the eternal plan.

The spring of 1842 proved a time of tremendous progress for the church as polygamy worked its way into Mormon understandings of the eternal order.294 It was also a time of many important theological innovations.295 Most dramatically, a new scripture, the Book of Abraham, was published in the *Times and Seasons*, the Nauvoo newspaper in

---


295 Ibid.
March 1842. The book, five short chapters, covered the traditional story of Abraham with a few significant changes. The book followed the Biblical story of Abraham, with additional references to priesthood. Abraham and his descendants would be made a “great nation” and they would “bear this ministry and this Priesthood unto all nations.” Through his priesthood, Abraham was promised that his descendants would bless all people of the earth with the “blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even life eternal.”

Though Mormons were regularly adding to their own canon with revelations, Joseph Smith introduced this particular book as a translation from papyri purchased in Kirtland in 1835 along with some Egyptian mummies, which he claimed detailed the story of Abraham’s journeys into Egypt. Smith stated that he translated the book in 1835, but he did not publish it until 1842, after making some changes. The differences between this version and the Old Testament story were important for Mormons because it connected Abraham specifically to priesthood, promised eternal blessings to those who possessed priesthood, identified those who accepted the priesthood and gospel as the seed of Abraham, and promised salvation and eternal life to Abraham’s descendants or “seed.” By extension, the blessings were applied to the children of those who accepted the priesthood and the gospel.

---

296 Ibid., pp. 452-458. Bushman’s argues that though the Book of Abraham had no immediate applicability to church affairs, the book nevertheless was very important theologically because it set up a cosmic order that “was mirrored in humans’ relationship with God.” In other words, it provided a backdrop for the understanding of salvation and human progression that became an integral part of the Mormon salvation narrative, of which polygamy was a key part. See p. 455 especially.
297 Pearl of Great Price, The Book of Abraham, 2:9-11
298 Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, p. 453.
Since Abraham was well known as a polygamist whose seed was in this way greatly multiplied, the book of Abraham served as a strong support for polygamy, though not overtly. The reader had to make that leap by connecting priesthood to Abraham and his form of literal and cultural reproduction. The passage ends with a powerful promise of salvation and eternal life, thereby connecting the Abrahamic covenant—and polygamy—to salvation and exaltation.\(^\text{299}\) The Book of Abraham served to connect Abraham to the saints by making his story immediate and powerful to them. In the wake of amazing conversions by the Twelve Apostles in England, the Book of Abraham masterfully served to rationalize and legitimize polygamy by connecting the saints’ beliefs with the Abrahamic story. It gave greater meaning to the phrase that identified Mormonism as the “restoration of all things,” even though it did not overtly support polygamy.

Mormons were further connected to the ancient religious world, or so they believed, by the introduction of Freemasonry in Nauvoo on March 15, 1842. Freemasons claimed, among other things, a connection to the ancient temple built by Solomon.\(^\text{300}\) Some scholars argue that they believed that anyone who built anything in scriptural stories—including God himself, builder of the world—was a Mason.\(^\text{301}\) Masonry thus carried with it a similar connection to the ancient world as the Book of Abraham, and like

\(^{299}\) In recent years parts of the papyri have resurfaced and have been identified by Egyptologists as parts of the Book of the Dead. Mormons argue that parts of the papyri originally used by Joseph Smith have been lost.


the Book of Abraham, the introduction of Freemasonry in Nauvoo became part of the innovations that supported polygamy and served other purposes.

Since Masonry was a fraternal order, it united many principle Nauvoo men in brotherhood with each other and the men in other Masonic lodges in the state.\textsuperscript{302} Mormons surely hoped in this way to decrease persecution, though eventually their lodge was rejected by other Illinois Freemasons.\textsuperscript{303} Beyond this, the Masonic privileging of secrecy and brotherhood went hand in glove with the secrecy and brother/sisterhood encouraged by polygamy.\textsuperscript{304} Masonry underscored the point that secrecy in the service of higher aims was an important good. Michael Homer has observed, “The inclusion of women in these sacred ordinances, previously reserved for men, may have had as much to do with ritually teaching both men and women the virtue of silence regarding [polygamy] as it did with ritually securing patriarchal authority and obedience over female participants.”\textsuperscript{305} Beyond this, it attracted Joseph Smith because “Biblical imagery was mixed generously with a conglomeration of symbols—grips, signs, tools, architecture, objects, scriptures,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{302} Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, pp. 449-451.
\item \textsuperscript{303} Homer, “Similarity of Priesthood and Masonry,” pp. 1-127 Homer indicates that the Illinois lodges were becoming concerned that they would be overcome by Mormons due to the rapid growth of Freemasonry in Mormon communities. By contrast, S.H. Goodwin, \textit{(Mormonism and Freemasonry: Origins, Connections and Coincidences Between Mason and Mormon Temple/Templar Rituals}, published in 1920, available online) argued that Mormons were disciplined for allowing recruits to rise too quickly through the levels of Masonry.
\item \textsuperscript{304} Steven C. Bullock, \textit{Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1739-1840}, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1996. Bullock has shown how Freemasonry developed in America in the earth 19th century as a place where liberty and public virtue could be spread. As such, it adopted a Christian appeal in addition to its emphasis on science and enlightenment thinking. Over time, it almost accidently became a businessman’s and benevolent association as well. Along the New York canals Masonic Lodges became places where young and upwardly mobile men went to meet other businessmen and further their careers. Many prominent Mormons had previously belonged to Masonic Lodges. Freemasonry was exactly the type of organization that was likely to prosper in Nauvoo with its combination of religion, forward-looking enlightenment and secret rituals. Though the anti-masonry movement had decried the organization as elitist, anti-republican, and too conformist, the negatives of these considerations were minimal under the communal ethos of Mormonism in Nauvoo. By 1840, opposition to Masonry had begun to die down and lodges resurged just at the time when Nauvoo and Mormonism was growing rapidly.
\item \textsuperscript{305} Homer, “Similarity of Priesthood and Masonry,” p. 41.
\end{itemize}
stories, actions.‖ Freemasonry, in other words, helped to lend a sense of moral rightness to secrecy and instilled an increased sense of interconnectedness among church elite, which in turn aided polygamy.\textsuperscript{307}

By adding another layer of brotherhood and commitment to what was already encouraged by priesthood and polygamy, Freemasonry increased the familiarity and trust that would allow men to encourage their sisters and daughters to marry fellow masons polygamously. In this way, family connections were made and secrecy could be better enforced. Since, as a result of secret practice, polygamous husbands and wives rarely lived together in Nauvoo, in many cases close male relatives of secret polygamous wives would have more daily personal interaction with sisters and daughters married polygamously to fellow masons than did secret husbands. Even if a woman did not feel the need to protect a little-known and infrequently seen husband, she would be highly motivated to preserve secrecy to protect fathers and brothers, who would also have more responsibility to care for her than a secret, shared husband. Polygamous Masons in Nauvoo were in a position to reinforce the importance of secrecy, which became interwoven with their duty to protect fellow masons. It was especially important that Freemasonry taught that secrecy could be good as well as bad in light of Book of Mormon condemnation of “secret combinations” that could be devised for evil purposes.\textsuperscript{308}

Elements of Freemasonry were also adapted into a further theological innovation, the Endowment ceremony that Joseph Smith introduced to nine elite followers on May 4,\textsuperscript{306}

\textsuperscript{306} Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, p. 450.  
\textsuperscript{307} Buerger, \textit{The Mysteries of Godliness}, p. 51  
\textsuperscript{308} Homer, p. 41.
1842, less than two months after Freemasonry had been introduced.\textsuperscript{309} Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball were among the men selected.\textsuperscript{310} In a letter to fellow Apostle Parley P. Pratt, Heber C. Kimball wrote that most of the Twelve had joined Freemasonry and that “we have received some precious things through the prophet on the priesthood that could cause your soul to rejoice I cannot give them to you on paper for they are not to be riten… there is a similarity of priesthood in masonry. Bro Joseph Ses masonry was taken from priesthood but has become degenerated, but many things are perfect.”\textsuperscript{311} The precious things to which Kimball referred almost certainly meant polygamy and the endowment. Recall that at this time Kimball had recently married his first plural wife. The similarities between the endowment and freemasonry were not surprising to Kimball because he believed both came from the same source—God. Freemasonry had simply become corrupted in the days since the ceremonies were originated in Solomon’s Temple.

Joseph Smith had described the purposes of the Endowment in 1835, before even the Kirtland Temple was dedicated, as “power from on high” which would give them “a fountain of wisdom, knowledge and intelligence such as you never had” which God could give “without worldly pomp or great parade” that had “characterize[d] the ancient saints.”\textsuperscript{312} In Kirtland, men had participated in washing and anointing ceremonies and blessed one another, but the Endowment ceremony was much more extensive.\textsuperscript{313} Since

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{309} Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, p. 450. Bushman writes that Smith used the materials from Masonic ritual—grips, signs, stories, actions, etc-- in working out the ritual employed for the Endowment ceremony.
\textsuperscript{310} Buerger, \textit{The Mysteries of Godliness}, pp. 35-40.
\textsuperscript{311} Heber C. Kimball to Parley P. Pratt, June 17, 1842, LDS archives.
\textsuperscript{312} \textit{HC} 2:287. Also, Buerger, \textit{The Mysteries of Godliness}, p. 10
\textsuperscript{313} Ibid. (Buerger) p 48. Beurger points out that in Kirtland, Freemasonry had little or no influence on the rites practiced in the Temple.
\end{flushleft}
the Nauvoo temple was barely begun, a room above Joseph Smith’s store was arranged with scenery and props for the purpose. His clerk, Willard Richards, reported that the men were instructed

in the principles and order of the priesthood, attending to washings and anointing, endowments, and the communications of keys, pertaining to the Aronic Priesthood, and so on to the highest order of the Melchisedek Priesthood, setting forth the order pertaining to the Ancient of days, & all those plans & principles by which any one is enabled to secure the fulness of those blessings which has been prepared for the church of the first-born, and come up, and abide in the presence of Eloheim in the eternal worlds. In this council was instituted the Ancient order of things for the first time in these last days.  

In other words, the Endowment was regarded as a restoration of an ancient ritual which gave recipients information about how to gain salvation and eternal life and promises that they would be so blessed. Richards went on to explain that the endowment was intended for all the saints, even to the weakest, but only when a place was prepared for the ordinances to be performed. The creation of a sacred space—the Nauvoo Temple—was going to be crucial for the introduction of the endowment to most leaders and the rank and file of the church. The Endowment fulfilled a promise of an ordinance that connected the saints to the ancient church and would give them a sense of moving forward to the long-expected millennium.

As Kimball indicated, the Endowment was sacred and recipients were forbidden to speak or write about its content. Though the Endowment was not directly related to polygamy, it came to be part of a set of ordinances, like baptism for the dead, which were

---

314 Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, p. 452.
eventually perceived as pertaining to celestial glory.\textsuperscript{316} When the original nine men were endowed, only one, Heber C. Kimball, had entered plural marriage, though Young had tried unsuccessfully, as we have seen. Eventually, however, entering polygamy in combination with receiving the endowment would figure prominently in determining who would receive an even higher ordinance, called the Second Anointing or Fullness of the Priesthood, and beyond that, who would succeed in church leadership after Smith died.\textsuperscript{317}

The limited introduction of the endowment in May of 1842 corresponded to the most active period of Joseph Smith’s plural marriages, 1842-3. Scholars disagree on the number, but by the end of 1843, Joseph Smith had married up to 48 wives.\textsuperscript{318} During this time the theology surrounding the endowment, salvation and marriage grew together, bringing women into the picture and granting them a central place in the church through marriage to priesthood holders. Richard Bushman has written that after the lapse of a year, when he “renewed the [endowment] ceremony on May 26, 1843, Joseph taught the participants about the new and everlasting covenant referring to marriage. By then he knew that men and women must marry by the power of the priesthood to reach the highest degree of celestial glory.”\textsuperscript{319}

Women also benefitted from the spiritual advancements in spring of 1842 through the organization of Relief Society in March of 1842. The collective action of women in an association was novel in Mormon culture, perhaps because in the early period the entire movement was a kind of association that relied on the moral authority of

\textsuperscript{316} Ibid., p. 60.
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid., 62.
\textsuperscript{318} Compton, In Sacred Loneliness, p. 1-2. Compton errs on the side of caution and accepts only 33 wives as well enough documented to include in his book of biographies of the women who married Joseph Smith.
\textsuperscript{319} Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, p. 497.
priesthood and patriarchy. By contrast, the Relief Society was also related to the association movement in the rest of the country and shared many of its goals.

Associations grew up in most communities in Jacksonian America as a kind of buffer between the home, the church and the marketplace, especially thriving from 1825-45. They were often gender and cause specific, promoting abolition, Bible distribution, temperance, sexual purity and other such causes. The associations hoped to wield moral authority by not only the virtue of their cause, but also by the purity of their members. Women and children, for example, were assumed to be more pure and less tainted by contact with the world than men, and so their support for a cause carried a particular kind of moral authority. The sacralization of marriage, the introduction of polygamy and the endowment all helped define women’s place in Mormon theology, but did not necessarily give them the moral authority women in the rest of the nation enjoyed through their associational organizations. When the Relief Society was organized on March 17, 1842, Nauvoo women gained a powerful forum in which to exercise their spirituality and moral authority, one that they greatly valued, though the fledgling society proved to be a lightning rod for polygamy-inspired controversy. It started innocently enough as an organization that provided women with a charitable outlet and a vehicle for exerting moral authority.

The idea for the Relief Society came from the prosperous young matron, Sarah M. Kimball, who summarily refused Joseph Smith’s offer of marriage that same year. In forming the association, she, along with her seamstress, hoped to perform charitable labor

---

320 Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class, pp. 105-144.
to assist the men working on the Nauvoo Temple. They asked Eliza R. Snow, soon to be a secret plural wife of Joseph Smith, to write a constitution for their new organization. After the constitution was written, Smith told the women he had something better for them—he would organize them in the same way as the priesthood. Joseph told the women that their mission was to “provoke the brethren to good works” and to see to the needs of the poor and destitute, but he also cautioned them to “assist by correcting morals and strengthening the virtues of the community.” He thus encouraged them to act as moral watchdogs in addition to their benevolent function, behavior that was consistent with the role of charitable associations in the rest of the country.

Besides being in accord with the popular understanding of the purpose of associational organizations, Joseph’s admonition also reflected a rising 19th century understanding of women as communal keepers of moral behavior, an understanding connected to notions of republican motherhood and home training as the basis of democratic government that had grown since the revolution. The growing importance of the nuclear family also contributed to this understanding of women’s role in society. It posited a virtuous mother at the center of the family, a family pattern that was reinforced by the decline of the household economy that had utilized the labor of all family members for survival. The new family pattern relied on a father earning wages outside the home and a mother providing care and a moral center for children in the home. Mormon women were eager to tap into this moral authority, though they were to

323 Ibid.
324 Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, March 17, 1842.
325 See Cott, Public Vows and Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class. Both works illuminate the changes that occurred in marriage and family culture between the Revolution and the Civil War.
326 Ibid.
eventually find themselves at the center of a firestorm that attacked polygamy as a threat to the moral authority of women and the nuclear family.\textsuperscript{327}

It is interesting to explore Joseph Smith’s involvement with the organization of Relief Society, since the women had already effectively organized for themselves. He seems to have wished to give Relief Society a spiritual dimension similar to what men enjoyed by holding the priesthood, but there was also a Masonic character. The Masonic twist is not surprising given that the Relief Society was organized the day after the Nauvoo Masonic lodge. David John Beurger has observed that Joseph Smith employed Masonic allusions in his initial address to the women. “Let this presidency serve as a constitution;” and subject every “candidate” to a close “examination” so that “the society should grow up by degrees...he was going to make of this Society a kingdom of priests as in Enoch’s Day.”\textsuperscript{328}

Kent L. Walgren has argued from his reading of Nauvoo Relief Society minutes that part of Joseph Smith’s aim in establishing Relief Society was to “institutionalize secrecy.”\textsuperscript{329} As proof, Walgren has cited a passage from the Relief Society minutes that quotes part of a letter written to the women during the organizational period and signed by, among others, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. “There may be some among you who are not sufficiently skill’d in Masonry to keep a secret...Let this Epistle be had as a private matter in your Society, and we shall learn whether you are good Masons.”\textsuperscript{330}

\textsuperscript{327} Derr, Cannon, Beecher, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{328} Relief Society Minutes, March 17, 1842. LDS archives.
\textsuperscript{330} Relief Society Minutes, recorded after minutes for Sept. 28, 1842.
Plural wives of Joseph Smith would have instantly understood that injunctions to secrecy applied especially to them.

Though Joseph Smith did not include women in the first group of people who received the endowment in 1842, by the time more people were endowed in May of 1843, women were included. Later in 1843, women were, for the first time, included in a newly organized elite quorum, the Quorum of the Anointed. Oddly, their introduction to polygamy seems to have secured a specific place for women in the Mormon salvation story. Significantly, most of Joseph Smith’s plural wives came from within the ranks of Relief Society. By no means were all Relief Society members involved in polygamy, however. In fact, Gary James Bergera has found that except for the wives of Joseph Smith, women who entered polygamy in Nauvoo with other men were unlikely to be Relief Society members.

Beyond abstract purposes, however, Relief Society provided various services to the community, such as collecting donations for the poor and producing items needed by men working on the temple. Members also enriched their own spiritual lives through activities like speaking in tongues and interpretation. The Nauvoo Relief Society minutes record that when Sarah Cleveland spoke in tongues, Patty Sessions, a well-respected Nauvoo midwife who married Joseph Smith polygamously in February 1842,

---

333 Gary James Bergera, “Identifying the Earliest Mormon Polygamists, 1841-44,” *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought* 38 (Fall 2005): 51. The plural wives married by Joseph Smith were overwhelmingly seasoned members or their relations. By contrast, as Heber C. Kimball’s alliance with Sarah Noon illustrates, other men frequently married new arrivals to Nauvoo who needed care and protection for a variety of reasons. Like Sarah Noon, Olive Amanda Smith, who married John Fullmer, was a single mother with one child, whose father did not take responsibility for his son. In a sense, then, polygamy became a kind of welfare system for divorced, separated or widowed mothers.
334 Derr, Cannon, Beecher, *Women Of Covenant*, pp. 27-31. The process of choosing a name described here shows that the women intended their primary purpose to be engagement in charitable works.
interpreted in words that exhibited her hopes and vision for the fledgling organization. She said that “God was well pleased with this society, that if we would be humble and faithful the Lord would pour out upon the members generally the gift of prophecy.” Patty then laid her hand on the head of Eliza R. Snow, who was seated near her and said, “that not only she should have the spirit but that all should have it also.” The prediction that they would all receive the spirit of prophecy from God indicates what Relief Society women expected for themselves. Clearly they felt that they had become a central part of the spiritual narrative that had led most of them to Mormonism. Patty fully expected the women to be a moral and spiritual force in the community and even to become prophetesses. Given the consistent behind-the-scenes role of Mormon women between the time the church was organized in 1830 and the sudden flowering of Relief Society in the spring of 1842, it seems likely that the elevation of women in the theological narrative was connected to polygamy.

Another important development for the future of church governance in the wake of the introduction of polygamy was the elevation of the Quorum of the Twelve in the priesthood hierarchy. Members of the Quorum were far more amenable to polygamy than the Nauvoo High Council, and thus began a shift in the relative power of the governing quorums of the church. The two highest quorums were still equal in power at the beginning of 1842, with the Nauvoo High Council still technically in charge of local

---

335 Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, pp. 32-33. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Archives
336 Kent L. Walgren, “James Adams: Early Springfield Mormon and Freemason,” Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society 75 (Summer 1982) p. 131. Walgren argues that Joseph Smith meant to “institutionalize secrecy” when he helped establish Relief Society. If this was at least part of his purpose, then polygamy played a large role in its founding, at least Joseph Smith’s involvement in the founding, since the women had already organized for themselves.
affairs and the Quorum of the Twelve over foreign missions. Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball in particular became too valuable to Joseph Smith to send away for long periods after they returned from their missions to Britain in mid-1841. Brigham Young even merited his own revelation, given in July of 1841, telling him that “it is no more required at your hand to leave your family as in times past.” Young and Kimball served short missions in the United States after this, but no extended foreign missions—a good thing for their families, which were about to become very prodigious indeed! Between them, the men eventually married over 100 women.

As they supported him in introducing polygamy, Smith gradually began to give Young, Kimball and their fellow quorum members more responsibility in the day to day running of the church. Michael Quinn has observed that “the Quorum of the Twelve’s ascendancy began in 1841,” the year that polygamy was introduced. Of that same year, Joseph Smith wrote “the time had come when the Twelve should be called upon to stand in their place next to the First Presidency, and attend to the settling of emigrants and the business of the Church at the stakes, and assist to bear off the kingdom victoriously to the nations.” He also delegated responsibility for church finances to the Twelve. Quinn has written, “A year after their return from England, the apostles were directing the political, economic and ecclesiastical affairs of the church at home and abroad. Their authority would not become supreme at church headquarters until after the prophet’s death, but Smith had begun the alteration of revelatory and ecclesiastical limits

---

338 *Doctrine and Covenants*, 126:1-3
341 *History of the Church*, 4:403, 412.
which prevented apostolic supremacy before the 1840’s.” In addition to Young and Kimball, most of the other members of the Twelve began to practice polygamy before Joseph Smith died, and Quorum leadership was especially amenable to the practice. By contrast, the president of the Nauvoo High Council did not support polygamy and some of the council members left the church over it. The differentiation of power between the two quorums was to serve the church well when Joseph Smith died, leaving a power vacuum in the church.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, between the beginning of 1842 and the end of 1843, the Mormon theological narrative developed to connect polygamy to salvation and exaltation. The manner of Smith’s marriage to Brigham Young’s sister, Fanny Young Murray, illustrates how the narrative had evolved between his proposal to Mary Rollins Lightner in February of 1842 and his marriage to Fanny in November 1843. It also shows how polygamous marriage was used pragmatically, sometimes on the spur of the moment, to create important earthly and eternal family ties.

On November 2, 1843, when Fanny, twice a widow, was 56 and Joseph Smith was 38, they were discussing the afterlife with Brigham. Fanny opined that, “When I get to the celestial kingdom, if I ever do get there, I shall request the privilege of being a ministering angel; that is the labor that I wish to perform. I don’t want any companion in that world; and if the Lord will make me a ministering angel, that is all I want.” Joseph Smith responded, “Sister, you talk very foolishly, you do not know what you will want.”

---

343 Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, p. 311-313.
344 Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy: A History, pp. 63-64.
345 For an exceptionally erudite and nuanced discussion of this problem, see Quinn, The Mormon Hierarchy, 144-185.
He then requested of her brother, “Here Brother Brigham, you seal this lady to me.”

Three of Brigham’s wives served as witnesses and they were sealed there and then. Fanny thus became, in the important Mormon sense of sealings and ordinances that are believed to carry into the eternities, the connecting familial link between the prophet who founded the church and the great leader and institutionalizer who built it into a kingdom in the west, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. It is unlikely, however that this was a sexual union, rather a tool to bring Fanny and her relations certain privileges in the next life and to connect the families. Beyond this, the manner of Joseph Smith’s proposal in the context of their conversation indicates that he simply wanted to do something good for her, to bring her into the fold in a way that fit with Smith’s expansive vision of heavenly interconnection.

Fanny’s comment about preferring to be a ministering angel shows how the theology that supported polygamy had developed. Fanny was, so far as is known, Joseph Smith’s last plural marriage; by the time he married her late in 1843, Mormon theology had greatly advanced. At this point, Joseph Smith had begun to teach that marriages sealed by the priesthood were necessary in order to reach the highest degree of the celestial kingdom. Smith had thus managed to work polygamy into the larger Mormon salvation narrative in a way that it was not when he assured Mary Rollins Lightner that she would be saved because of her connection to him. Though Smith had told Parley Pratt early in 1840 that families would be connected into eternity, Pratt acknowledged

---

346 Brigham Young, “History of Brigham Young,” LDS archives, MS 1285, Book Y. Also found in Compton, In Sacred Loneliness, p. 616.
347 D. and C. Section 132
that the details were lacking at that time. In the intervening years, the theological narrative evolved to include polygamy. In Fanny’s case, Joseph was particularly anxious that she accept the narrative. So anxious, in fact, that when she asserted that she would be perfectly content to be a ministering angel to those lucky enough to marry polygamously and gain the highest level of celestial glory, he married her there and then. This was a principle that could not be taught openly in Nauvoo because of secret practice, but Joseph Smith apparently considered it to be a very important part of the salvation narrative.

Conclusion

Beginning in 1830s, Joseph Smith began to develop a family-centered system of salvation and exaltation. In 1840 this system began to make itself felt in remarkable social and theological innovations. Family-centered ordinances began with baptism for the dead and theological thinking that connected marriage and salvation. In 1841, Polygamy was secretly introduced to a few faithful followers. The theological innovations that followed in the spring of 1842 helped integrate polygamy into the Mormon theological narrative in a subtle way that also assisted the process of organizing and institutionalizing the church.

Polygamy also fit with the larger millenarian vision of the church because it was a way of connecting people through kinship networks under priesthood authority. In the Mormon millennial vision, Joseph Smith was head of the seventh and last dispensation,

the dispensation of the fullness of times. He was to lead the way in ushering in the millennium on the earth through the power of the priesthood. Joseph Smith’s conception of God and his relationship to humans was part of a larger Kingdom of God story that explained the course of history.

When the work was finished, the priesthood keys would be returned to Adam, who would turn over the earth and its inhabitants to Christ, who holds the “Keys to the Universe.” The presentation of the earth to Christ, with its inhabitants bound together by priesthood ordinances, was the culmination of history. Then “this earth will be rolled back into the presence of God and crowned with celestial glory.”

This earth was only one in a series of worlds that would have a similar fate, so that the work would go on forever with more and more worlds. Polygamy was thus intertwined with creating the Kingdom of God on earth that would be presented to Jesus Christ at the end of the millennium. It was an important component in binding the inhabitants of the earth together by priesthood ordinances, but also with visions of never-ending growth and progression to other worlds.

Polygamy was, of course, only one element in the mix that expedited changes in the Mormon theological narrative beginning in 1841, but was radical enough to make it a potent one. The necessity of convincing women and men to contradict their firm monogamous beliefs, combined with the likelihood of destructive gossip and scandal, clarified and hurried along changes to family theology that were already in the works.

The theological innovations that reached a crescendo in the spring of 1842 in turn helped

---

349 Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, pp. 10, 39, 79, 346. Taken together, these expositions on the last dispensation illustrates Mormon theology about the progress of history and dispensations. The head of all the dispensations was to be Adam, who would play a role in winding up the final dispensation.


351 Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 188. Joseph Smith here talks about the existence of 10,000 worlds.
create a place for polygamy in the Mormon narrative. There were, however, powerful people in Nauvoo prepared to fight polygamy tooth and nail.
Chapter Three:

Scandal and Resistance: 1842

Though the innovations of 1842 helped implement polygamy into the belief system of Mormonism, this was not necessarily obvious to most people. The innovations could have also been part of the narrative in a monogamous community. In truth, effecting theological and theoretical changes was a far different matter than effecting a monumental social change in the form of marriage. Since the very mention of polygamy raised a public outcry, Joseph Smith faced the problem of convincing people that polygamy was right without admitting publicly that he supported it. He could not, after all, hope to convince all of his thousands of followers one at a time, especially since powerful people in the community were strongly opposed to anything contrary to traditional marriage and morals, particularly his wife, Emma Smith.

In essence, what unfolded after the heady innovations in the spring of 1842 was a debate over whether the Mormon theological narrative would be a monogamous or a polygamous one, but it was a strange kind of debate. One side had moral clarity but did not understand the parameters of the debate, and the other side was obliged to publicly claim to endorse that moral clarity while secretly lobbying for an opposite position.

---

352 Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy, A History*, pp. 50-51. Van Wagoner argues that the John C. Bennett scandal of 1842 prevented Joseph Smith from introducing polygamy openly, as the public reaction to a pamphlet, *The Peacemaker*, printed in Nauvoo in 1842 showed. Certainly the Bennett accusations made public introduction more difficult since once accusations had been made, public preaching in favor of polygamy would look like an effort to justify bad behavior. Nevertheless, even without the Bennett exposures, I would argue that the Nauvoo population was not prepared to accept polygamy in 1842 because it had not yet worked its way into the theological narrative and the idea was too new and shocking.

353 Ibid., p. 64.

354 Emma Smith did not learn about polygamy with any certainly until February, 1843. Many of the highest-level leaders of the church did not learn about polygamy until even later than this. Many defended
Both, however, condemned seduction outside of marriage, even while some in the community were using secret polygamy as an excuse for seduction, which further muddied the waters.\textsuperscript{355} In 1842, the outcome of the debate was far from certain.

It is likely that Joseph Smith hoped in the spring and summer of 1842 to do three things to integrate polygamous theology and practice; he hoped to introduce polygamy openly, to initiate the endowment among a select group of men and women, and to bring other men into polygamy. Had this agenda succeeded, it would have gone far in making polygamy the favored form of marriage in Mormon life. He was, in fact, able to partially realize his hopes, but three obstacles intervened to seriously hamper his efforts.

First, his attempts to introduce polygamy openly failed, and, if anything, heightened community suspicion and opposition. Second, far from extolling the positive possibilities of polygamy, Relief Society meetings became a place where Emma Smith heartily encouraged openness about clandestine Nauvoo marital and sexual activities, which increased awareness of the issue in a negative way. Though Emma presumably did not know about her husband’s advocacy of and involvement with polygamy, she knew something strange was going on in Nauvoo and did her best to combat it.

Emma could learn nothing for certain and her ignorance hampered her efforts to combat polygamy per se, but nevertheless her calls for openness in Relief Society led to confessions and accusations of other sexual misdeeds that deeply polarized the city—

\textsuperscript{355} Smith, \textit{Saintly Scoundrel}, pp. 87-91. The Nauvoo High Council spent the summer of 1842 investigating charges against men who had seduced women by telling them that church leaders approved of “spiritual wifery” in the form of sexual relations outside of marriage based on a perceived “spiritual” union.
most notably those surrounding John C. Bennett. Bennett’s behavior precipitated a crisis in April that likely prompted Smith to scale back his plans for introducing the endowment, but in a way it also served to detract public attention from polygamy by focusing on seductions of women outside of any form of marriage.

The third problem Joseph Smith faced was unrelated to polygamy, but nevertheless affected its implementation. In May 1842, Orrin Porter Rockwell, Joseph Smith’s sometime body guard, returned to Nauvoo from an absence of several months to inform the city that Governor Boggs of Missouri had been shot. At first word was that Boggs had died, but then came the news that he had survived the attempt. Suspicions that Joseph Smith had played a role in the attempt sent him into hiding off and on for the rest of the year and proved to be a major distraction from the other things he hoped to accomplish. These problems did not curtail efforts to implement polygamy but were a serious setback.

Most people, Emma Smith among them, eagerly welcomed innovations that promised eternal glory and connected them to loved ones, living and dead. Joseph Smith had freely preached about ordinances like baptism for the dead and had long promised an endowment that would bring rich spiritual blessings. These ordinances and the anticipation of new ordinances gave shape, substance and meaning to the Kingdom theology that converts had so eagerly accepted. They were concrete things people could do to ensure their salvation and that of their kin, and they gave people confidence that through the work they would undertake in their soon-to-be-completed temple, they could

help usher in the millennium in short order. Most of the rank-and-file, however, assumed that these blessings would unfold in a monogamous community. Joseph Smith thus struggled to entwine new ordinances and theological innovation that people welcomed with a new marriage system that initially repelled nearly everyone. The fresh, innovative spring of 1842 was about to morph into a long hot summer of gossip and scandal, as a bitter battle commenced over the meaning of marriage and morality in Mormon culture.\textsuperscript{357}

The \textit{sub-rosa} debate over what kind of marriage would be favored in Mormonism was all the more dramatic because it emanated from the marriage of Mormonism’s first couple, Joseph and Emma Smith. Their marriage was a paradox. In many ways, they were a devoted couple raising four beloved children. Capable, practical, determined and compassionate, Emma had been a rock for Joseph through all the persecutions they had endured. He loved and respected her so much that in the Doctrine and Covenants she is called an “elect lady.”\textsuperscript{358} Though he went on to marry many wives, he needed Emma’s love and support in family as well as business matters and would not brook complaints from polygamous wives against Emma.\textsuperscript{359}

In their battle over the future of the Mormon theological narrative, Joseph and Emma Smith each wielded powerful weapons. The new theology that connected polygamy to salvation and exaltation, along with his prophetic mission, were Joseph’s tools in introducing polygamy. He also had the advantage of full knowledge of the state of affairs among church leadership. By contrast, Emma’s strongest weapon was

\textsuperscript{357} Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, p. 459.
\textsuperscript{358} \textit{Doctrine and Covenants}, 25: 3.
tradition, public opinion and sentiment, and her influence with Nauvoo women through Relief Society. She was supported by some of the male leadership who could not bring themselves to accept polygamy. Yet dissenters were hampered by their lack of knowledge about what was actually occurring and the mixed signals they were receiving from Joseph Smith. The ensuing pages will explore the social and communal challenges of integrating theology and practice of polygamy between 1842 and 1844 as gossip, scandal and furious debate escalated toward the violent deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith.

Suspicion Raised

Given the excitement of the saints over the theological innovations of the spring of 1842, one might imagine that open introduction of polygamy would then have been possible. People were already expecting and embracing innovation; including polygamy in the mix might have seemed natural in connection with the introduction of ancient priesthood ordinances. Joseph Smith sent out feelers during this period by giving a sermon one Sunday morning in which Helen Mar Kimball later reported he “hinted that the patriarchal order of marriage, as practiced by the ancients, would some day again be established. Yet as Kimball noted, the suggestion created such an uproar that Joseph deemed it wisdom, in the afternoon, to modify his statement by saying that possibly the Spirit had made the time seem nearer than it really was.”

361 Ibid., p. 50.
simply not ready to accept the introduction of polygamy along with other religious innovations in the spring of 1842.\textsuperscript{364}

Far from reassuring the saints, in fact, this cautious attempt at open introduction likely fueled their suspicions.\textsuperscript{365} Retreating from revealing the existence of polygamy within the community at this juncture, however, meant that some difficult problems could not be avoided. Soon information was revealed from hostile sources; once this had happened and church leaders had denied the existence of polygamy within their ranks, they were continually on the defensive. They could not then introduce polygamy publicly without appearing in a bad light because of previous dissimulation and the appearance of trying to justify their own behavior. In the spring of 1842, public introduction would have initiated a firestorm, but it might have saved Joseph and Hyrum Smith’s lives. Joseph could at least have openly made his case for the practice before leaks about it had poisoned the atmosphere.\textsuperscript{366}

\textsuperscript{364} Kingdom on the Mississippi Revisited, edited by Roger D. Launius and John E. Hallwas, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1996. Daynes’ article, “Mormon Polygamy: Belief and Practice in Nauvoo,” is part of this collection of essays about Nauvoo. She argues that he used polygamy as a means of testing the loyalty of church elite in the wake of high-level apostasy between 1837-39. Daynes avers that through polygamy Smith created not only kinship ties, but loyalty ties through the very secrecy of the practice, in addition to granting chosen followers special insider status and knowledge. It is clear that Smith used polygamy to test some of his followers, but his efforts to introduce polygamy by sermon and publication to the church at large suggest that measuring the loyalty of followers was not the goal of introducing polygamy, but rather that he hoped to live in polygamy openly with the approval of his followers. Since attempts to introduce polygamy openly did elicit vehement protest, his only choice was to introduce it secretly. That being the case, he naturally would begin with his closest, most loyal followers and enjoin them to secrecy in order to avoid the consequences of public outcry. In short, it seems likely that, though testing the loyalty of his followers might have been part of Smith’s motivation in introducing polygamy, it is not a complex enough reason to explain what a appears to have been a compulsion to introduce polygamy.

\textsuperscript{365} Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy: A History, p. 50 suggests that this is so, or at least that the Bennett scandal made people suspicious.

\textsuperscript{366} Ibid. Van Wagoner’s analysis suggests that he agrees with this assessment.
More Marriages

In spite of the failure to introduce polygamy openly, clandestine plural marriages continued apace. To the three plural wives he had married in 1841, Louisa Beaman, Zina Huntington Jacobs and Presendia Huntington Buell, Joseph Smith added more during nearly every month through August 1842. In January he married two women, his widowed sister-in-law, Agnes Coolbrith Smith and Lucinda Pendleton Morgan Harris. In February he married Mary Rollins Lightner and Sylvia Sessions Lyon; in March, Sylvia’s mother, Patty Bartlett Sessions, Sarah Cleveland and Elizabeth Durfee; in April, Marinda Nancy Hyde; in June, Delcena Johnson Sherman and Eliza Roxcy Snow; in July, Sarah Poulferer and Sarah Ann Whitney; and in August, Martha McBride Knight, for a total of 16 plural wives at summer’s end. By this time four men, Heber Kimball, Reynolds Cahoon, Brigham Young and Vinson Knight, who died on July 27 that year, had taken one plural wife each. It was Knight’s widow, Martha, who married Joseph Smith a week after her husband died.

Emma Smith, Relief Society and the 1842 Moral Crusade

In the meantime, Relief Society became a place where the battle over polygamy was fought publicly, though obliquely. Besides the quasi-Masonic references at the first meeting, Joseph and Emma Smith together stressed that the purposes of the society would be “to provoke the brethren to good works…to save the elders the trouble of rebuking…to look after the wants of the poor…[to] do good….to deal frankly with each

---

367 See Compton, In Sacred Loneliness, and Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy. Both works have extended descriptions of the wives of Joseph Smith, and, where the information is available, the nature of the approach and marriage. For a table on Nauvoo marriages, see Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, pp. 573-639.
368 Ibid., Smith.
other” and to “correct the morals of the community.” As Emma’s biographers put it, “There would be no arguments about doing good and caring for the poor, but women dealing frankly with each other and correcting the morals of the community would become explosive issues in Nauvoo.”

The moral watchdog role that the women chose for themselves and Joseph Smith assigned to them gave Relief Society women reason to deal with the issue of sexual irregularities in Nauvoo, and they threw themselves right into the fray at the second meeting, March 24, 1842. Emma Smith immediately articulated what became a mantra for her, stating in essence, “we will be open and honest with each other and we will assure that our members and all the community adhere to traditional morals.” When Vilate Kimball asked for a restatement of the purposes of the organization, Emma emphasized a standard of openness, “No one need feel delicate in reference to inquiries about this society. There is nothing private. Its objects are purely benevolent.” Emma apparently already understood that she was fighting a stealth assault, and hoped to garner the cooperation of the women in bringing things into the open—in figuring out what exactly was going on in Nauvoo. The negative response whenever polygamy was raised publicly showed that openness could go far in combating polygamy.

According to Joseph Lee Robinson, she even enlisted the help of her friend, Angeline Robinson, wife of Robinson’s brother Ebenezer, to help her keep an eye on Joseph in hopes of learning the truth about her husband. Robinson wrote that Angeline “watched Brother Joseph the Prophet had seen him go into some house that she had

---

369 Relief Society Minutes, first meeting, March 17, 1842. LDS archives.
370 Newell and Avery, Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, p. 108.
371 RS minutes, March 24, 1842.
reported to Sister Emma the wife of the Prophet it was at a time when she was very suspicious and jealous of him for fear he would get another wife.” He added that Emma was so angry at the report that she “said she would leave and was making preparations to go to her People in The State of New York it came close to breaking up his family.”

Robinson further reported that Joseph Smith was so upset that he had a talk with Angeline, but “she would not give him any satisfaction and her husband did not reprove his wife.” In spite of Angeline’s covert operations, Emma was not able to uncover the truth about clandestine activities in Nauvoo.

Bringing unorthodox sexual and marital behavior out into the open was a delicate problem, however, because negative publicity from the outside could destroy the church. Emma surely hoped that what leaders were saying—that polygamy was not practiced within Mormonism—was true. Her statements indicate that she strongly suspected that something untoward had crept in, though later events show that she had no idea just how involved her husband was in the practice.

Everyone understood, of course, that unforced sexual irregularities could not succeed without the cooperation of the women. Judging from Emma’s repeated, if veiled, references to the evils of behavior that stood outside the bounds of traditional morals, Relief Society seems to have become a prime venue in her fight to prevent and stamp out sexual irregularities of any sort.

After organizing the women to provide for the poor and find jobs for the needy at the second meeting, Emma introduced a report that a young woman, Clarissa Marvel, “was accused of scandalous falsehoods on the character of Prest. Joseph Smith without

---

373 Ibid., p. 61, n 2.
375 Ibid., pp. 107-118.
the least provocation.” The last part of her sentence indicates what was surely Emma’s fervent hope. Emma requested that the society “would in wisdom, adopt some plan to bring her to repentance.” Emma added, perhaps wryly, “I assume that most of you know more about Clarissa Marvel than I.” Besides indicating Emma’s reputation for fairness, this also reveals her understanding that people would hardly feel they could come to her with every tale about her husband. Emma’s sister-in-law, Agnes Coolbrith Smith, the widow of Joseph Smith’s brother, Don Carlos, came to Clarissa Marvel’s defense, apparently unaware that the gossip at issue concerned her relationship with Emma’s husband. “Clarissa Marvel lived with me nearly a year and I saw nothing amiss of her,” Agnes attested. The women agreed that someone should talk with Clarissa and that the parentless young woman needed friends, but Emma reiterated, “We intend to look into the morals of each other, and watch over each other.”\footnote{Ibid.} Given that Agnes had married Joseph Smith two months before, the gossip had some basis, but no one wanted the job of investigating Clarissa.\footnote{Agnes married her brother-in-law, Joseph Smith, on January 6, 1842. Smith, \textit{Nauvoo Polygamy}, p. 621.} \footnote{Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, available online with Joseph Smith Papers.}

Word that Relief Society was investigating gossip had quite an effect on membership. By the next meeting, the room was full to overflowing with prospective members, perhaps women who were hoping to catch gossip firsthand or avoid being the subject of investigation!\footnote{Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, available online with Joseph Smith Papers.} Poor Elizabeth Durfee, married to Joseph Smith only a few weeks earlier, was assigned to ferret out the truth about Clarissa Marvel. If uncomfortable with the job, she was nevertheless successful; within three days, Clarissa
had signed her X to a statement that she had seen nothing improper between Joseph
Smith and his sister-in-law, Agnes.379

Beyond the investigation of gossip, the women were exercising spiritual gifts.
They laid their hands on one another’s heads and gave blessings, particularly to those
who were sick. Elizabeth Durfee was blessed and “said she never realized more benefit
through any administration—that she was healed, and thought the sisters had more faith
than the brethren.” When someone questioned the propriety of women blessing one
another with the laying on of hands, Joseph Smith declared, “Respecting the females,
laying on hands…there could be no devils in it if God gave his sanction by healing—that
there would be no more sin in any female laying hands on the sick than in wetting the
face with water.” Joseph Smith then used priesthood terminology in further empowering
the women by “delivering the keys to this Society” where they could “receive instruction
thro’ the order which God has established…and I now turn the keys to you in the name of
God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from
this time.” 380 Since normally talk of “keys” referred to priesthood power, the women
surely felt a growing sense of the importance and power of their organization. Some
women perhaps connected their rise in status to polygamy.

Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were contradicting stories about polygamy
in general church meetings at this time as well. The story about Brigham Young’s ill-
fated proposal to Martha Brotherton was apparently circulating. During the April general
church conference that commenced on April 6, 1842, the twelfth anniversary of the

380 RS minutes, April 28, 1842.
organization of the church, Hyrum Smith, who had not yet learned the truth about polygamy, “spoke in contradiction of a report in circulation about Elders Heber C. Kimball, Brigham Young, himself and others of the Twelve, alleging that a sister had been shut in a room for several days, and that they had endeavored to induce her to believe in having two wives.”\textsuperscript{381} The exaggeration of shutting a woman in a room for “several days” made the story less believable. Joseph Smith followed his brother in contradicting the story, “showing the folly and inconsistency of spending any time conversing about such stories, or hearkening to them, for there is no person that is acquainted with our principles who would believe such lies, except Sharp, the editor of the \textit{Warsaw Signal}."\textsuperscript{382} Reflecting blame for the stories that circulated to Thomas Sharp, who was virulently anti-Mormon, was a clever way of marginalizing such gossip even more.

In spite of these denials, however, it seems probable that Emma Smith’s war on secrecy and sexual irregularities in Nauvoo helped some women to come forward about seductions. As a result, the Nauvoo High Council was busy investigating cases of adultery and fornication throughout the summer. Clearly the Relief Society campaign had some effect and probably served to prepare others to reject polygamous proposals. With all the currents and crosscurrents, an explosion of some kind was surely imminent.\textsuperscript{383} Women in the know would certainly have been inclined to wonder, because a document that church leaders had prepared for Relief Society, probably intended to contain the damage from coming revelations about John C. Bennett, was read by Emma

\textsuperscript{381} \textit{HC}, 4:585.  
\textsuperscript{382} Ibid., 4:586.  
\textsuperscript{383} Newell and Avery, \textit{Mormon Enigma}, pp. 113-115.
at the April 28, 1842 meeting. “We have been informed that some unprincipled men” had been guilty of attempting to “deceive and debauch the innocent” by claiming authority from Joseph Smith or other church leaders to do so. “We do not mention their names, not knowing but what there may be some among you who are not sufficiently skil’d in masonry as to keep a secret.”384 The message surely seemed contradictory—it reiterated that the church continued to adhere to established morals, but instead of encouraging women to expose the guilty, emphasized secrecy. Those initiated into polygamy would have understood the problem—“keeping a secret” was code for protecting polygamy. Emma would have seemed to be on the same page with the male leadership, but it is probable that those who understood the double meanings knew otherwise.

At the same meeting, Joseph admonished the women to “Let this Society teach [you] how to act towards husbands, to treat them with mildness and affection. When a man is borne down with troubles—when he is perplexed, if he can meet a smile, not an argument—if he can meet with mildness it will calm down his soul and sooth his feelings. When the mind is going to despair it needs a solace.” Emma likely assumed that the advice was directed at her to some degree for she did not reserve her plain and open speaking for Relief Society.385 That same day, however, Joseph promised other powers related to keys to the women, because he told them that “the keys of the kingdom are about to be given to them that they may be able to detect everything false, as well as to the elders.”386

384 RS minutes, April 28, 1842, LDS archives. Also available online.
385 Ibid.
386 Ibid.
The reasons for the curious admonition to exercise secrecy about practices that Emma encouraged them to expose became understandable the day after the April 28 meeting. Historian Michael Quinn has described the convergence of three different scandals on April 29, 1842 that Smith defined as “a conspiracy against my household.”

First, the Sidney Rigdon family was outraged to learn of his polygamous proposal to his first counselor’s daughter. Second, the charges and counter-charges involved in that crisis led to the discovery that Smith’s special counselor John C. Bennett had been claiming the prophet’s authorization for seducing several women. In his own defense Bennett apparently told others about his knowledge of Smith’s recent polygamous marriages and unsuccessful proposals. These interrelated scandals threw Smith’s wife Emma into a fury, as one woman after another began disclosing Nauvoo’s sexual underground. This controversy caused Smith to delay his plans to give the “grand key words of the Holy Melchizadek Priesthood” to his wife and other women, “as well as the elders.”

Newell and Avery speculate that the problems between Smith and Bennett came to a head when Joseph Smith proposed marriage that April to Nancy Rigdon, the daughter of Joseph’s counselor, Sidney Rigdon. Bennett had his eye on her himself and forewarned her about the proposal. Nancy’s brother-in-law, George W. Robinson, later wrote that Joseph arranged a meeting with Nancy through one of his other wives. When she arrived, he took her into a room and told her that he had long hoped that she could be his and that “he had got a revelation on the subject,” which told him that “there was no sin in it whatever.” Nancy refused, and Joseph later sent her a letter of explanation, which informed her that “that which is wrong under one circumstance, may

---

388 Newell and Avery, Mormon Enigma, p. 111.
389 George W. Robinson to James Arlington Bennett, July 27, 1842, LDS Archives; Bennett, History of the Saints, 245-47. Available online.
be, and often is, right under another” if it had been ordained of God, as polygamy was.\textsuperscript{390}

Sidney Rigdon later confronted Joseph about the encounter, which he denied until the letter was produced. It was the crossfire between Joseph Smith and John C. Bennett over this incident that led to the April explosion.\textsuperscript{391}

The breaking scandal likely had consequences for Joseph Smith’s efforts to integrate polygamous theology and practice. He had apparently hoped to begin to introduce the endowment to women as well as men that spring, but after the April eruption he was quick to scale back his plans to include only his most trusted male leaders when the endowment was introduced in May.\textsuperscript{392} It makes sense that Smith would deal with polygamy and the endowment together in his attempt to integrate theology and practice. Heber Kimball’s letter to Parley Pratt about the occasion indicates that this is exactly what he did. It also seems likely that Emma was not going to accept polygamy at this juncture, and since it would be strange to exclude his wife and the leader of Relief Society from the first group of women receiving this important ordinance, the scandals of April resulted in the exclusion of women from receiving the endowment in May.

The endowment, however, could be introduced to women later on. In May 1842, the fallout from the Bennett scandal was a serious obstacle to not only the further spread of polygamy, but to the very existence of the church.\textsuperscript{393} In spite of helping to further Emma’s aim of bringing sexual irregularities into the open, Bennett was a major source of problems for both Emma and Joseph. He had worked closely with Joseph in city and

\textsuperscript{390} Joseph Smith letter to Nancy Rigdon, Joseph Smith collection, LDS archives.
\textsuperscript{391} Newell and Avery, Mormon Enigma, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{392} Quinn, The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power, p. 492
\textsuperscript{393} Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, p. 462.
militia governance until May of 1842, was head of the Nauvoo Legion, mayor of the city, chancellor of the not-yet-established University of Nauvoo and a special counselor in the church presidency. He had benefitted the city and the saints in many ways—but in many other ways he was an unknown entity, and, it turned out, a perfidious one. It is not known whether Bennett heard the rumors about polygamy and took it upon himself to seduce women or if Joseph Smith thought Bennett could be trusted and introduced the principle to him, which Bennett then practiced in his own way.

In contrast to most men and women, who were troubled and horrified when they first heard about polygamy, John C. Bennett was eager to listen to talk of unorthodox sexual practices. Most men were reluctant to approach women about polygamy for fear of appearing to be garden variety lechers, but Bennett was surely happy to embrace polygamy because he really was a garden variety lecher. His wife had left him over his repeated infidelities. Secret practice of polygamy represented to him a great opportunity.\(^{394}\)

Though there were rumors about Bennett’s true character, nothing was known for certain until Hyrum Smith investigated and sent a letter to his brother in June 1841 affirming the rumors.\(^{395}\) Since Joseph himself entered polygamy in April 1841, it is possible he approached John C. Bennett about polygamy before learning of his abandoned family. By the time he learned the truth about Bennett’s character, however, the man was deeply entrenched in the affairs of the city as mayor and leader of the Nauvoo Legion. When confronted with the evidence Hyrum had uncovered, Bennett

\(^{394}\) Smith, *The Saintly Scoundrel*, p. 79.
\(^{395}\) JS to church, June 23, 1842, in *Times and Seasons*, July 1, 1842, 839.
expressed remorse and begged for forgiveness. He even attempted or pretended to attempt suicide to underscore his sincerity.\footnote{Smith, \textit{Saintly Scoundrel}, p. 80.} Since his skills were still useful, Smith did not expose him, though relations between the two men became strained.\footnote{Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, p. 460}

In the meantime Bennett began spreading something in Nauvoo, but not the carefully regulated patriarchal marriage Joseph was trying to institute. An attractive and dynamic man, Bennett was instead propositioning married and unmarried women to engage in what he called “spiritual wifery,” a term that had been loosely applied to various unorthodox schemes of sexual relations, including polygamy.\footnote{Smith, \textit{Saintly Scoundrel}, p. 89.} John C. Bennett’s version, however, involved privately attempting to convince women that church leaders had sanctioned engaging in illicit sexual intercourse freely so long as it was kept secret and that other church leaders were doing so themselves. He also told women that pregnancies would be terminated with abortion.\footnote{Taken from affidavits against Bennett printed in the \textit{Nauvoo Neighbor}. HC 6:407  Also, Times and Seasons 3 (1 August 1842):868-76}

Bennett illustrates one of the great dangers of secret practice of polygamy—it was all too easy for the unscrupulous to take advantage of the situation. Young women had reason to give credence to Bennett’s assertions in part because rumors were flying around Nauvoo, and in part because he was an important and well-connected man in the community. Since he was unscrupulous, Bennett ironically had more initial success with women than more honest men like Brigham Young, as the Martha Brotherton incident
illustrates! Bennett’s scandals threatened to reflect on Joseph Smith and other men who had entered polygamy.400

At the first Relief Society meeting held after the Bennett scandal broke, Emma reacted to the news she had received and pleaded for an end to secrecy. According to the minutes of the meeting she

said this day was an evil day—that there is as much evil in this as in any other place—said she would that this society were pure before God—that she was afraid that under existing circumstances the sisters were not careful enough to expose iniquity—the time had been when charity had covered a multitude of sins—but now it is necessary that sin should be exposed…that heinous sins were among us—that much of this iniquity was practiced by some in authority, pretending to be sanctioned by Pres. Smith. Mrs. Prest. continued by exhorting all who had erred to repent and forsake their sins—said that Satan’s forces were against this church—that every Saint should be at the post.401

Her husband had pleaded for the women not to publicly expose sexual irregularities, but Emma argued for exposure and seemed to believe that the very existence of the church was under threat when she averred that “satan’s forces were against this church.” Women who had married into polygamy with one of the Twelve were surely feeling very uncomfortable at this juncture. On the other hand, the speech offered a ready response to women who wished to reject polygamous suitors.402

For his part, Bennett tried to make peace with Joseph Smith after the crossfire over Nancy Rigdon. When Joseph confronted him, he acknowledged his guilt and begged forgiveness, but a break between the two men nevertheless occurred on May 7,

---

401 RS minutes, 8th meeting, 1842.
402 Newell and Avery, *Emma Smith: Mormon Enigma*
Stephen A. Douglas visited Nauvoo that day and Joseph Smith called for maneuvers from the Nauvoo Legion in honor of the occasion. Joseph suspected and accused Bennett of cooking up a plot to kill him with a seemingly accidental shot. There is no evidence that this was really true, but Bennett resigned as mayor and was excommunicated on May 25, charged, according to Brigham Young, with “seducing young women, and leading young men into difficulty.”

Hyrum Smith wrote that Bennett “wept like a child and begged like a culprit for forgiveness, and promised before God and angels to mend his life.” Bennett also pleaded that his excommunication not be exposed in the press for the sake of his mother and the story went unreported.

Rampant rumors and the threat of more scandal prompted an admonition from Joseph Smith at the 9th Relief Society meeting, held on May 26, 1842. He again contradicted Emma’s pleas for openness by telling the women to “hold your tongues about things of no moment. A little talk will set the world on fire. At this time the truth on the guilty should not be told openly—Strange as this may seem, yet this is policy. We must use precaution in bringing sinners to justice lest in exposing these heinous sins, we draw the indignation of a gentile world upon us…” Polygamy and seduction were hardly “matters of no moment,” but should John C. Bennett’s story be corroborated, it would be very bad for the church. Emma rose to clarify his remarks. “All idle rumors and idle talk

---

403 Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, pp. 85-86.
405 *Times and Seasons* 3 (1 August 1842):868.
406 Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, p. 460, declines to comment on the efficacy of the charge of attempted murder, but mentions the circumstances that led Smith to suspect foul play. The Nauvoo legion was essentially staging war games and Bennett asked Smith to take a position at the rear of the cavalry sans his guards. The head of Smith’s guards, Albert Rockwood, objected, and stayed by his side in a different location. Smith appears to have suspected that the request was prelude to a scheme to do him harm that was foiled by the presence of Rockwood. Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, pp. 85-86, has argued that there was no evidence that a plot was afoot.
must be laid aside yet sin must not be covered, especially those sins which are against the law of God, and the laws of the country.” Emma again pleaded for transparency, “All who walk disorderly must reform, and any of you knowing of heinous sins against the law of God, and refuse to expose them, becomes the offender—I want none in this society who have violated the laws of virtue!”407

The Society met again the next day to deal with unfinished business, and this time Joseph Smith let Bishop Newell K. Whitney, a high level Nauvoo leader, obliquely reassured those in the know about polygamy by telling the women that

In the beginning God created man male and female and bestow’d upon man certain blessings peculiar to a man of God of which woman partook, so that without the female all things cannot be restor’d to the earth---it takes all to restore the Priesthood…God has many precious things to bestow, even to our astonishment if we are faithful. I say again I rejoice in the prospect of what lays before….Far be it from me to harbor iniquity and outbreaking sins. We may have different views of things, still there is some criterion which all may come to, and by bringing our minds and wills into subjection to the law of the Lord, may come to unity…I tell you, there are blessings before to be confer’d as soon as our hearts are prepar’d to receive them.408

Whitney’s speech was a masterful work of double meaning. Those in the know would understand that women were necessary to the restoration of the priesthood through entering polygamy, one of the precious things God had to bestow as soon as people were spiritually prepared. In his mind, the law of the Lord included polygamy, and those who brought their mind into subjection to the Lord would soon see this, though they now

407 RS minutes, May 26, 1842.
408 RS minutes, May 27, 1842.
disagreed.\textsuperscript{409} “The priesthood” was a term used by insiders as a euphemism for polygamy, though everyone else understood it as the power of God given to man.\textsuperscript{410} Most people would assume Whitney spoke generally about the mission of Relief Society, the priesthood as they understood it and the restoration of the gospel, but insiders would know better. Whitney himself was thoroughly converted to the necessity of polygamy. Later that summer, his 17-year-old daughter, Sarah Ann, married Joseph Smith.\textsuperscript{411} In the meantime, Relief Society membership grew exponentially surely helped along by the polygamy side-show. By the time the women disbanded for the winter, the attendance had grown from 18 attendees at the first meeting to 1100.\textsuperscript{412}

\textbf{Secrets: Exposed and Kept}

Speaking in code and using double meaning was the means by which inducted Mormon leaders denied polygamy while promoting it secretly so that they could live with a clear conscience, a practice that required explanation for years to come.\textsuperscript{413} George A. Smith described how the code worked in an 1869 letter, “Any one who will read carefully the denials, as they are termed…will see clearly that they denounce adultery, fornication, brutal lust and the teaching of plurality of wives by those who were not commanded to do so.”\textsuperscript{414} An 1866 article in the \textit{Deseret News} elaborated on code words employed and the reason for their use, “When assailed by their enemies and accused of practicing things which were really not countenanced in the Church, they were justified in denying those

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{409} Newell and Avery, \textit{Mormon Enigma}, p. 116. Newell and Avery argue that the speech “diffused some of the consternation caused by Emma’s emphasis on virtue.”
\bibitem{410} Newell and Avery, \textit{Mormon Enigma}, p. 113. Here various words are delineated that were used as code for polygamy. In addition, they report on how distinctions between types of polygamy were used to mask sub rosa practices.
\bibitem{411} Compton, \textit{In Sacred Loneliness}, pp. 342-363.
\bibitem{412} Newell and Avery, \textit{Mormon Enigma}, p. 117.
\bibitem{413} Ibid., p. 113.
\bibitem{414} George A Smith to Joseph Smith III, October 9, 1869, RLDS Library Archives.
\end{thebibliography}
imputations and at the same time avoiding the avowal of such doctrine as were not yet intended for the world.” For example, “Polygamy in the ordinary and Asiatic sense of the term, never was and is not now a tenet of the Latter-day Saints. That which Joseph and Hyrum denounced…was altogether different to the order of celestial marriage including a plurality of wives…Joseph and Hyrum were consistent in their action against the false doctrines of polygamy and spiritual wifeism, instigated by the devil and advocated by men who did not comprehend sound doctrine nor the purity of the celestial marriage which God revealed for the holiest of purposes.”

After his excommunication, John C. Bennett left Nauvoo and in July began furiously writing letters to two newspapers, the Sangamo Journal and the Louisville Daily Journal, that purported to expose Mormon polygamous practice and Joseph Smith, but not in the way Emma hoped. She wished to expose polygamy internally, to stamp it out without harming the church. Bennett stated expressly that Mormonism should be stamped out. His claims were paradoxically an odd mix of truth and the most inflammatory falsehood. As a known scoundrel that the governor of Illinois called “probably the greatest scamp in the western country…he was everywhere accounted the same debauched, unprincipled, and profligate character,” it is clear that Bennett was not a trustworthy character. In addition, material was published later in the summer by Nauvoo residents who claimed that his charges against Joseph Smith were made to mask his own affair with Sarah Pratt, a Nauvoo woman whose husband, Orson, was on a

---

415 Deseret News, 20 May 1866, reprinted in Woman’s Exponent 15, (1886):10 The author was probably Joseph F. Smith.
416 John C. Bennett, The History of the Saints, Leland and Whiting, Boston, 1842. For a summary of the contents, see Smith, Saintly Scoundrel, 122-126.
mission. Bennett claimed that she rejected a proposal from Joseph Smith with the words “I have one good husband, and that is enough for me.”

The charges and countercharges in the case show how some Nauvoo residents regarded Bennett’s revelations. When Orson Pratt returned from his mission and heard the story about his wife and Joseph Smith, he was naturally very upset for a time, but though Bennett attempted to draft Orson Pratt and Sidney Rigdon to his cause, neither one joined him, and instead both rejected his claims in print and remained loyal to Joseph Smith. Sarah Pratt was rebaptized with her husband in 1842, though years later, after she had separated from Orson in Utah, she affirmed that Joseph Smith had proposed to her in Nauvoo and that allegations of an affair with Bennett were manufactured to discredit her and deflect attention away from polygamy. Nancy Rigdon joined with her father in rejecting Bennett’s claims publicly. Historians now concur that Joseph Smith approached Nancy Rigdon and Sarah Pratt about polygamy in April 1842, and that Bennett accurately reported many dates and names—actually indicated by initials in his writings. He also exaggerated and lied so shamelessly, however, that Mormons and non-Mormons alike were at a loss about what to believe, especially in light of his shady reputation. Soon Bennett was on the lecture circuit telling all he knew about Mormons and then some.

Bennett himself placed the blame for his fall on the Relief Society, and wrote that the society “would be the means of a mob forthcoming.” Emma responded that she was not afraid of mobs and called on the women in the 12th meeting, convened on June 24,

---

419 Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, p. 467.
421 Smith, Saintly Scoundrel, 114-122. Newspaper accounts allow Smith to report the lectures in great detail, right down to the lines that earned Bennett laughs.
1842, to expose Bennett with "convincing statements." Bennett was probably right that Emma’s calls for openness and honesty brought women forward to testify against him, and Emma was surely anxious to use him as a means to curtail the sexual and marital underground in Nauvoo. At this juncture, however, he was surely a problem for both Smiths because, from Joseph’s perspective, he was doing all in his power to expose polygamy and perhaps destroy the church, and from Emma’s perspective because, while she was happy to expose Bennett, she simply wanted to end polygamy, not expose her own husband and destroy the church.  

It appears from his behavior that Bennett, however, was not really opposed to polygamy or any other Mormon practices; he said himself that he joined Mormonism because “the surest and speediest way to overthrow the Impostor, and expose his iniquity to the world, would be to profess myself a convert to his doctrines, and join him at the seat of his dominion.” In this way he could expose “the secret wires of the fabric” from behind the curtain and “likewise those that moved them.” Newspaper editors generally scoffed at this, however. In the judgment of his biographer, Andrew Smith, Bennett instead hoped to gain the power and glory he had long sought and thought he deserved through Mormonism, knowing all along that if he got drummed out, he could profit from public doubts about Mormons with his insider knowledge. Joining Mormons was thus a positive course of action for Bennett no matter what happened, with the added advantage from his perspective that he was able to seduce a number of women under the

---

422 RS minutes, June 24, 1842.
423 Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, pp. 98-128. Chapter 8, entitled “Bennett’s Exposé of Smith” is a good synopsis of the back and forth between Smith and Bennett in the summer and fall of 1842.
425 Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, p. 61, 84. Smith argues that Bennett thought of himself as the real power in Nauvoo, but in this he was sadly mistaken.
guise of spiritual wifery. Though Bennett had correct information about some of Joseph Smith’s polygamous wives, his general characterization of polygamy was not corroborated by any other accounts. For example, his claim that there was a secret lodge in Nauvoo where women were kept as “cyprian maids,” or religious prostitutes, was a pure fabrication.

Effects of Rumor and Gossip

Ordinary faithful Mormons, however, had serious worries and doubts about polygamy. It is possible to trace the workings of the rumor mill in Nauvoo and the resulting dissention by looking at Ebenezer Robinson’s memoir of the Nauvoo period. Ironically, his memoir also shows that, while secret (but-not-always-so-secret) practice was harmful and divisive in many ways, it at least prevented open opposition for a time.

Robinson, who was until 1842 editor of the Nauvoo newspaper, the *Times and Season*, wrote that “in the spring of 1841, the doctrine of “spiritual wives” began to be secretly talked about.” Since it was in the spring of 1841 that Joseph Smith took his first plural wife, there appears to have been no delay in the activity of the rumor mill. Robinson discussed the spiritual wife doctrine with his friend and partner, Don Carlos Smith, brother to Joseph, on a business trip to Cincinnati in 1841, and this is when Don Carlos expressed his intense disapproval. The men clearly hoped that the rumors were exactly that, but they could not help but notice that there was some basis for the rumors—there were strange doings in Nauvoo that had set tongues awagging.

---

426 Ibid., 88-90. Numerous women brought charges of seduction against Bennett, which he did not deny.
428 Ebenezer Robinson, *The Return*, 1890, p. 287. Available online. Information for this section taken from this source.
Though Ebenezer Robinson and Don Carlos Smith were elite people with close ties to Joseph Smith and good community connections, Robinson indicates that they learned of polygamous activity through the grapevine like anyone else. He was confused by the behavior of church leaders in the face of continued denial that anything unusual was going on. His mental anguish over the issue was no doubt the experience of many, many members and leaders alike, some of whom eventually left the church. These were people who would probably not have questioned their belief in Mormonism if polygamy had never been introduced or if it had been introduced in a more open manner.

By the end of 1841, Ebenezer Robinson had bitter reason to know something more concrete about polygamy or something like it. At that time, Joseph Smith came to him to inform him that the twelve apostles had discussed acquiring his paper, the Times and Seasons. Richard Van Wagoner has suggested that the dismissal may have arisen from Smith’s resentment over Robinson’s wife, Angeline, reporting on his movements to Emma in her efforts to track down suspected polygamous activity. Robinson had worked hard to build up his business and was not looking to sell. Shortly thereafter, he and his family were asked by Joseph Smith to assist Nancy Marinda Hyde and her children, the family of missionary Orson Hyde, by giving them a home with them in the apartments over the printing shop. Robinson agreed and Nancy moved in.

Early in 1842, Brigham Young informed Robinson that the twelve did indeed wish to take over the Times and Seasons and the printing shop. Robinson dutifully agreed to sell and was informed that one of the apostles, Willard Richards, would be running the

---

429 Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy: A History, p. 61, n.2. Based on information taken from the diary of Ebenezer’s brother, Joseph Lee Robinson.
paper. To his surprise, Richards informed Robinson after the sale that he and his family would be expected to hastily move out of the apartment above the shop, though Nancy Marinda Hyde could stay, and Richards would be moving in. Robinson had no place to move his family on such short notice, but Richards was unsympathetic. He informed Robinson that “you must get out to-night or I will put you in the street.” Robinson and his family hastily moved into the attic of a friend’s house and reported “That evening Willard Richards nailed down the windows, and fired off his revolver in the street after dark, and commenced living with Mrs. Nancy Marinda Hyde, in the rooms we had vacated in the printing office building, where they lived” though generally a reliable memoirist, Robinson might have overdramatized this event. He was, however, an important actor in the drama.

Richards was a married man, but his wife, Janetta, was living in Massachusetts. Naturally his cohabitation with Nancy Marinda Hyde, whose husband, Orson, was on a mission, triggered gossip in Nauvoo. If Richards fired off his revolver in the street after dark, it would indicate his sense of commencing something reckless and untoward, though it would be curious behavior for a man who was attempting to keep his living arrangements secret. Perhaps Richards was in his own way informing Nauvoo residents of the state of affairs—after all, if polygamy gradually ceased to be a secret, it might stand a chance of becoming accepted practice without the confrontation that direct introduction would entail. This sort of scandalous behavior, however, would hardly pave the way for a sympathetic reaction to polygamy once it was publicly introduced. Like

---

Robinson, people in Nauvoo were at a loss about how to regard Willard Richards’ and Nancy Marinda Hyde’s cohabitation. Joseph Smith’s biographers later discovered that Mrs. Hyde actually married Smith as a plural wife in April, 1842. The exact nature of Willard Richards’ relationship to her is unknown, but their living in the same house was a scandal to Nauvoo citizens.432

Ebenezer Robinson illustrates why secret practice was successful in a way, however, because though he knew something was going on, he knew nothing for certain, and hence was able to sign a document defending Joseph Smith later in 1842. As a response to the Bennett claims,

a statement was written out and signed by a large number of the brethren and sisters, including myself and wife, setting forth the fact that we knew of no other form of marriage ceremony in the church except the one published in the book of Doctrine and Covenants, which statement was true at that time, as we had no knowledge of such a ceremony, or that "spiritual wifery;" or "polygamy," was taught by the heads of the church, as they had not up to that time taught it to us.‖433

The statement was the result of a mass meeting staged on July 22, 1842, where residents of Nauvoo expressed support for their prophet, then published their 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

432 Ibid., Van Wagoner has shown that both Rigdon and John C. Bennett assumed that Nancy Marinda Hyde was sexually involved with both Joseph Smith and Willard Richards, but this would be highly unusual. Though Joseph Smith engaged in polyandry with numerous women, simultaneous involvement of one woman with 3 men is unprecedented and would not be consistent with the “rules.” A woman could marry a man of higher priesthood without benefit of divorce, but sharing a woman in this way was not done in any other case that I have uncovered. It therefore seems likely that Richards and Nancy Hyde were merely sharing the lodgings. Richards later married other women polygamosly.

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, peacable 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 the United States.\textsuperscript{434}

Since he knew nothing for certain, Robinson apparently continued to ignore troubling signs of sexual and marital irregularities and likely hoped that some reasonable explanation would be forthcoming in the future.

\textbf{Other Distractions}

Though Emma used Relief Society meetings to speak against anything that subverted traditional morals in the spring and summer of 1842, she had many other things on her mind. Most importantly, she was attempting to clear her husband’s name from the May assassination attempt on the life of former Missouri governor, Lilburn W. Boggs. Boggs had been so hostile to Mormons while they lived in his state that he had issued an extermination order against them. Boggs believed, probably correctly, that the attempt had been made by Orrin Porter Rockwell, friend and sometime body guard to Joseph Smith.\textsuperscript{435} The new Missouri governor, Thomas Reynolds, contacted Illinois governor, Thomas Carlin, to issue arrest warrants for Rockwell on a charge of attempted murder and for Joseph Smith as accessory. This, along with the Bennett accusations that were unfolding during the summer of 1842 constituted an avalanche of bad public relations for the saints.\textsuperscript{436} In July, Emma made a visit to Illinois governor Carlin with her friend and

\textsuperscript{434} \textit{History of the Church}, 5:70.
\textsuperscript{435} Schindler, \textit{Orin Porter Rockwell: Man of God, Son of Thunder}, pp. 72-3. Schindler presents the evidence and suggests that Rockwell committed the crime, though he was never convicted of it. Rockwell was a truthful man and never denied shooting Boggs, though he vehemently denied that Joseph Smith ordered him to do so. Several people claimed that Boggs bragged to them about his attempt to kill Boggs.
\textsuperscript{436} Newell and Avery, \textit{Mormon Enigma}, pp. 121-125
Relief Society secretary, Eliza R. Snow, to assure the governor that Joseph had no part in
the Boggs assassination attempt and that the Bennett accusations were calumny. She was
unaware that while she was gone, her husband married 17 year old Sarah Ann Whitney,
daughter of Elizabeth Whitney, one of her counselors in Relief Society and that her
companion on the trip, Eliza, had married her husband in late June. When Eliza needed a
new home late in the summer, Emma invited her to live with them.\(^\text{437}\)

At this juncture, Emma used her Relief Society connections to gather 1000
signatures from Nauvoo women for a petition supporting her husband as a man “of
integrity, honesty, truth and patriotism” who should not be extradited to Missouri.\(^\text{438}\) For
the next several months, however, Joseph was intermittently in hiding. Emma meanwhile
continued at Relief Society meetings to hammer home the necessity of transparency in
Relief Society members’ dealings with one another. Emma’s hopes and fears can be seen
from a statement made to the women as the summer ended, “We can govern this
generation in one way if not another—if not by the mighty arm of power we can do it by
faith & prayer…God knows we have a work to do in this place—we have got to watch
and pray and be careful not to excite feelings—not make enemies of one another.”\(^\text{439}\)

Emma surely understood that if women combined forces to firmly resist sexual
irregularities in the community, they could put an end to such activities, but also that her
influence was limited. She still had no certain knowledge that polygamy was underway
and was in fact firmly committed to the prophetic calling of her husband and the
restoration narrative in most ways, but polygamy had been suggested more than once and

\(^{437}\) Ibid., p. 122.
\(^{438}\) Ladies Relief Society Petition to Governor Thomas Carlin, September 5, 1842, LDS archives.
\(^{439}\) RS minutes, Aug 4, 1842.
this she could not accept as a necessary part of that narrative. She accepted the restoration, but not the restoration of all things. Perhaps Emma could more easily separate polygamy from the rest of the Mormon theological narrative because she was close enough to her husband to presume to separate his human and fallible qualities from his prophetic ones, a distinction that the more distant faithful would be loathe to make. In combating the still-unknown enemy, however, she could only fall back on traditional morality. Her single-minded concern for what was happening to her marriage and her community is reflected in her reaction to one woman who moved that the Society extend a vote of thanks to Emma. “I do not want the thanks but the pray’rs of the Society.”

Emma deserved the thanks. Under her leadership, Relief Society had become integral to Nauvoo society, especially in dispensing charity to the poor and needy. But she needed the prayers because the women her husband had married polygamously were her support network. This consequently “put a wedge between Emma and her friends so that she became increasingly isolated.” Unbeknownst to her, Joseph had married many of her closest associates in Relief Society, even women much older than Emma herself, like midwife Patty Sessions and Emma’s dear friend, Elizabeth Durfee. Though they had secretly married Joseph Smith, however, women like Patty Sessions, simultaneously married to Joseph Smith and David Sessions, continued to hold Emma in high regard, as did most of the community.

---

440 Ibid.
441 Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, p. 117
442 Ibid., p. 147.
443 Paul M. Edwards argues in his review of Newell and Avery’s *Mormon Enigma* (Journal of Mormon History, Volume 11, 1984, pp. 119-124) that Emma Smith was cut off from the dialogue of her community and was hence a kind of exile among her own people in Nauvoo. “As an exile, she measured the moral distance between herself and the group and found the community wanting.” There is some basis for this
Though he was in hiding off and on during that summer, Joseph appeared with Emma at the Aug 31 Relief Society meeting and informed the sisters, “I shall triumph over my enemies…Altho’ I do wrong, I do not the wrongs that I am charg’d with doing—the wrong that I do is thro’ the frailty of human nature like other men…I would to God that you would be wise, I now counsel you, if you know anything, hold your tongues, and the least harm will be done.” Since the women were unlikely to know much about the Boggs assassination attempt, the admonition to hold their tongues must have referred to polygamy. If she understood this, however, Emma did not react in the meeting.

As the summer of 1842 drew to a close, the process of integrating polygamous belief and practice had not advanced very far. To be sure, Joseph Smith had acquired 13 new wives and 4 men had entered polygamy, though one had died. The endowment had been introduced, but not to the intended group of elite men and women who could most effectively introduce it into the community. Far from the positive public introduction that Joseph Smith had attempted early in the spring, Relief Society opposition and the John C. Bennett scandal had rocked the community and assured that publicity about polygamy was negative and scandalous. The Bennett situation was still unfolding and did not bode well for the future because Bennett was by no means finished

argument since Emma was isolated from her friends to some degree when her husband secretly married them, but there were also a great many people who supported her stance on traditional morality, which led to a battle, with significant numbers on both sides, over polygamy and monogamy in Nauvoo. As the theological narrative grew to support polygamy, however, and a majority of people were won over to the practice on those grounds, Emma did become more and more of an exile.

444 RS minutes, August 31, 1842.
445 Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, pp. 311-12.
with attempting to expose Mormonism. To some degree, however, as Ebenezer Robinson shows, secret practice of polygamy and Joseph Smith’s denials were working. The rank and file of the church might suspect something was going on, but they knew nothing for certain, and were by and large anxious to stand behind their prophet. The accusations against him from the hated Boggs had especially rallied the women behind him, as their petition to Governor Carlin shows. At summer’s end 1842, the debate had not advanced because its parameters had not emerged from the shadows. It was anyone’s guess what the future would bring.

**Fall and Winter, 1842-3: Respite**

In the fall and winter of 1842-3 Joseph Smith took a break from introducing polygamy to other men and from marrying other women, which meant a welcome hiatus for Emma Smith. Though Emma did not technically know about any of the wives Joseph had already married, she no doubt sensed that something was amiss in her marriage while he was continuing to marry more women. Three circumstances likely contributed to the break in plural marriages that fall. First, John C. Bennett’s book-length exposé of polygamy and Mormonism was published. It must have seemed prudent to Joseph Smith to curtail plural marriages for a time in light of increased scrutiny of his behavior by Nauvoo residents and outsiders alike. Secondly, in September Emma became gravely ill, perhaps from the stresses of the previous spring and summer. The illness

---

446 Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, pp. 129-141. Bennett lectured off and on about Mormons until 1844 and, after Smith’s death, joined for a time with a splinter group headed by James Strang.


448 Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, pp. 122-126. Smith notes that some people suspected that since Bennett was able to publish *The History of the Saints* so soon after his break with Mormons he had actually been writing it while a member of the church in good standing. Smith believes, however, that Bennett was able to publish so soon because he reprinted some of his own newspaper publications along with work that had been published by others, so that he actually compiled the book and added a minimum of new material.
lasted on and off throughout the fall. In fear of losing her, Joseph became very attentive, which surely strengthened their bond once again and also perhaps deterred him from taking new wives.\footnote{Newell and Avery, \textit{Mormon Enigma}, 132-33.} Thirdly, in September news reached Nauvoo that the Boggs accusations had prompted Illinois Governor Carlin to offer a $200. reward, and Missouri Governor Reynolds to offer a $300. reward each for Joseph Smith and Porter Rockwell.\footnote{HC 5:167} Emma and Joseph worked together that fall to free Joseph from the charges. The offered rewards forced Joseph to continue hiding, which likely combined with the other circumstances to curtail polygamy for awhile.

Emma’s illness greatly concerned the Relief Society women even though many of them were married to her husband. At a September 1842 Relief Society meeting, one of his polyandrous wives, Patty Sessions, “spoke most tenderly of Sister Emma our Prest said she was verry sick and desired that the society unite in faith and prayer for her that She may be heal’d Prayer was made on her behalf.”\footnote{RS minutes, September, 1842.} Joseph spent time with her when he could in spite of hiding from sheriffs sent to arrest him. His journal entries show his deep concern for his wife. On October 5 he wrote “My dear Emma was worse, many fears were entertained that she would not recover….she grew worse again at night and continued very sick indeed. I was unwell and much troubled on account of Emma’s sickness.”\footnote{Emma became ill on Sept. 29 and continued for the next few months. Joseph noted his concern on nine occasions, October 3-7, 10, 20, November 1 and December 1, 1842. \textit{HC} 5:166-67} Joseph continued to report on Emma’s condition and to be troubled by the state of her health throughout the fall. In fact, Emma was not only beloved of her
husband but the entire community. Emmeline B. Wells, a young woman in Nauvoo who later headed Relief Society in Utah, wrote of Emma many years later, that

Sister Emma was benevolent and hospitable; she drew around her a large circle of friends, who were like good comrades. She was motherly in her nature to young people, always had a houseful to entertain or be entertained. She was very high-spirited and the brethren and sisters paid her great respect. Emma was a great solace to her husband in all his persecutions and the severe ordeals through which he passed; she was always ready to encourage and comfort him, devoted to his interests, and was constantly by him whenever it was possible. She was a queen in her home, so to speak, and beloved by the people, who were many of them indebted to her for favors and kindnesses.453

While Emma suffered, the Bennett situation continued to worsen. In October, he published his searing exposé of Mormonism, polygamy and Kingdom of God theology, entitled *The History of the Saints; or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism.*454

Bennett’s exposé was in many ways very effective. Secret practice had not only allowed him to seduce women without marriage but, since his talents had put him at the center of Mormon society, had given him an insider’s perspective. He could report many details about polygamy in Nauvoo, and took the opportunity to put as negative a face as possible on polygamy while making money from writing and lecturing about it.455 Though church leaders denied his claims, they were in a bad position to refute them since many of them were true.456

Martha Brotherton’s letter describing her polygamous marriage proposal

---

455 Ibid., 115-141.
456 Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, pp. 109-114. Mormons not only published material against Bennett in their local papers, but published against him wherever they could and preached publicly about his perfidy. He was also expelled ignominiously from the Nauvoo Freemason’s Lodge and missionaries were sent out to keep an eye on him and contradict his accusations. In many instances such missionaries found that his own character had already worked against him, though the public had been decidedly titillated.
from Brigham Young, for example, was included in Bennett’s book. After such a story had been exposed, everyone would be looking for signs of suspicious behavior, which surely contributed to the cessation of new plural marriages that fall.

Bennett’s claims went far beyond polygamy in scope, claiming that Mormons intended to conquer Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa and Missouri and establish a religious empire in place of their legitimately elected governments, a perversion of the genuine kingdom mentality that existed in Mormonism. Local apprehension about Mormons was high, and this fueled the fire not only locally but in the rest of the nation. The claim perhaps seemed believable to some because of the remarkable growth of Mormonism and Nauvoo, the generous provisions of the Nauvoo Charter and Mormon implementation of them, the growing power of the Nauvoo Legion and heavy Mormon participation in Nauvoo and Illinois politics. Eventually Joseph Smith’s short-lived run for the U.S. presidency further fanned the flames.

Though the accusations about secret practice of polygamy did not necessarily bear on claims that Mormons hoped to establish their kingdom in the rest of the nation, the accusation of secret practice of polygamy did contribute to the idea that Mormons would be capable of any outrage. Bennett nevertheless overplayed his hand to some degree by demanding an all-out war against Mormons, calling on the nation to “quit the form for the field, and, meeting the Mormons with their own arms, crush the reptile before it has grown powerful enough to sting them to the death.” Many newspaper editors and other literati were skeptical about Bennett’s letters and exposé. Though it made sensational copy, there was little corroborating evidence and no one was sure what to do about the

---

457 Bennett, History of the Saints, 306-307
situation even if some of his claims could be proven.\textsuperscript{458} Bennett’s own bad reputation worked against his intentions, but the book was nevertheless regarded as a needed warning about Mormons by some and was also the beginning of stubborn beliefs about Mormons and polygamy that could not be overcome. Bennett initiated, for example, the idea of the Mormon seraglio that sold newspapers for the rest of the century.\textsuperscript{459} At the very least, Bennett put Mormons on the national radar in a highly negative way that would not be overcome for many years.

The fallout from the Bennett exposé was also severe within Mormonism. Ordinarily such an attack on a cohesive community of belief would have the effect of bringing people together in opposition to the attackers, as had been the case when Mormons were driven from Missouri. Most members would likely have been only too happy to rally around their prophet, and many did as the July 1842 rally and affidavit of support shows and the Relief Society petition show.\textsuperscript{460} Men and women alike, however, had seen enough evidence with their own eyes to know that something was afoot. Since no public explanation was possible, people had to wonder how much truth there was in Bennett’s accusations, which led to a great divide within Mormonism.\textsuperscript{461}

Though some elite people who had been invited to participate in polygamy rejected the idea altogether, others accepted and were, perhaps, flattered to be included among the elite. They were surely eager to gain the promised blessings. These people

\textsuperscript{458} Smith, \textit{Saintly Scoundrel}, pp. 126-128. Reviews of Bennett’s book ran the gamut from skepticism to shock. The \textit{Quincy Whig} wrote that it was “a pity for the cause of truth and impartial history” that Bennett was the author because his character was so suspect that “his statements will not go as far in convincing the public, as perhaps their truth and importance deserve.”

\textsuperscript{459} Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, p. 464.

\textsuperscript{460} Newell and Avery, \textit{Mormon Enigma}, p. 127.

would likely regard dissimulation to uninitiated Mormons and the world at large as necessary to protect God’s people as they worked to institute his will. Uninitiated Mormons, however, would hope that church leaders were being honest when they claimed that polygamy was not being practiced, would agree with non-Mormons in their moral beliefs, and would be repelled by the exaggerated claims they were reading from Bennett and the press. They would still wonder, however, if Bennett, the former insider, did not speak some truth. For people who had joined Mormonism to escape the confusion of rampant religious pluralism, who believed that in Mormonism they had found the true church of God, this confusion was extremely uncomfortable, especially since the accusations came from a former insider of high degree.

Annette Hampshire has argued that, “An apostate who “goes public” threatens the church from the inside as he can expose his former belief system in terms which other believers readily understand. He can break through the barrier separating Mormon reality from gentile reality. Bennett was therefore a greater threat to the plausibility structure of Mormonism than he was in terms of convincing gentiles that the Saints were “bad people.”"462 Richard Van Wagoner has argued that the Bennett exposé kept Joseph Smith from preaching polygamy publicly.463 This may have been true, but it seems likely, judging by the reactions to polygamy at Relief Society meetings the previous spring and summer that a negative reaction to polygamy at this point was inevitable regardless of what Bennett wrote. A public admission to practice of polygamy after the vehement denials in the press nevertheless surely would put Joseph Smith and the church in a bad

462 Ibid., p. 162.
light in the eyes of members and nonmembers alike. It would also have made the nation at large more inclined to believe the rest of Bennett’s claims. The evils of continued secret practice, however, were also very great. The damage from rampant rumors and from the growing resistance of some informed high church leaders was gradually tearing the church and the city apart.

In spite of the dangers of trying to introduce polygamy publicly after Bennett’s exposé, Joseph Smith sent out more feelers in late 1842. A pamphlet entitled *The Peace Maker or the Doctrines of the Millennium* written by Udney Hay Jacob, then a non-Mormon, was printed by the press at Nauvoo and distributed in the city.\(^{464}\) Joseph Smith was listed as the publisher. In his autobiography John D. Lee spoke about this period and Jacobs’ pamphlet—though he misremembered the name of the author.

During the winter Joseph Smith set a man by the name of Sidney Hay Jacobs to select from the old Bible such scriptures as pertained to polygamy, or celestial marriage, and to write it in a pamphlet form, and to advocate that doctrine. This he did as a feeler among the people, to pave the way for celestial marriage. This, like all other notions, met with opposition, while a few favored it. The excitement among the people became so great that the subject was laid before the Prophet. No one was more opposed to it than his brother Hyrum, who denounced it as from beneath. Joseph saw that it would break up the Church, should he sanction it, so he denounced the pamphlet thorough the *Wasp*, a newspaper published in Nauvoo by E Robinson.\(^{465}\)

Jacob’s pamphlet deserves some attention. Lawrence Foster has argued that though this pamphlet was probably written by Jacob, whose later writings are stylistically similar, it would not have been published in Nauvoo in the fall of 1842 without Joseph Smith’s approval, as John D. Lee also suggested, though Smith denied any connection to

---

464 Ibid. Van Wagoner agrees that Joseph Smith was behind the publication of *The Peacemaker.*
The pamphlet is a remarkable document because, as Foster has observed, unlike the revelation on polygamy that came in July, 1843, which treated polygamy as a revealed commandment, Jacob’s work was more practically oriented in delineating why polygamy was necessary and how it should be practiced. The pamphlet was an ingenious combination of scriptural exegesis and cultural diagnosis, basically a defense of patriarchy, delivered with missionary zeal.

Jacob’s argument was that though relations between the sexes were central to God’s plan, they were awry in American society because men and women had come to expect a kind of equality in marriage through sexual and other means. Referring to the story of Adam and Eve, Jacob asserted that since God had decreed in the Garden of Eden that Eve should answer to Adam and Adam to God; woman should negotiate the spiritual and secular worlds through her husband because “All law or government of a woman over a man… is a usurpation of power destructive to the order, peace and well-being of society.”

Through the reinstatement of polygamy, which Jacob called “God’s law,” men would be returned to their rightful place. Women would come to understand that they must continually work to gain the favor of the man and would cement the relationship by bearing children for him. A woman’s obedience to and affections toward her husband were considered crucial to producing children who honored, obeyed and revered their parents. In essence, polygamy would be a means to enforce a strictly patriarchal version of family organization. The pamphlet referred extensively to the scripture from Malachi about turning the hearts of the children to the fathers that had

---


467 Udney Hay Jacob, *The Peacemaker*, J. Smith, printer, Nauvoo, IL, 1842, p. 5.
undergirded Mormon family policy from the outset. Men were required to love and cherish their wives, but were to be undisputed heads of the family in all things.

Jacob not only cited scripture extensively in making his argument, but referred to the state of divorce in the United States as proof that chaos prevailed. Since divorce was then and is now under state jurisdiction, divorce laws varied from state to state. Taking a sacramental view of marriage consistent with the resacralization of marriage that had occurred within Mormonism in the 1830s, Jacob argued that like marriage, divorce was only valid when sanctioned by God. Drawing from scriptural sources decrying fornication in married women, he averred that since sexual infidelity in marriage is called adultery, the reference to fornication must mean alienation of affections, which he called the only valid reason for divorce apart from adultery. Women were not necessarily powerless in this scenario. They were to be given free choice in selecting their husband and in exiting the marriage when their affections became alienated. By contrast, so long as a woman’s affections were her husband’s, he was forbidden to seek divorce, though he could marry additional women.

The basic thrust of the argument was that the best way to ensure that women would concentrate their efforts on pleasing their husbands and gaining their affections without exerting undue influence on them through sexual and other means was by instituting polygamy. Interestingly, however, the word polygamy did not appear until page 36 of the 37 pages. In other words, Jacob presented his entire argument before spelling out the full meaning.\footnote{All information taken from Udney Hay Jacobs, \textit{The Peacemaker}. Available online.}
If the document encapsulated Joseph Smith’s thinking about the need for polygamy and the form it should take, however, it was a paradox when considered in light of his empowerment of women through Relief Society and his affection for Emma and his reliance on her. Such a paradox is not entirely surprising, however. Joseph Smith may have hoped to influence women to accept polygamy through Relief Society, but he also seems to have genuinely intended to increase their influence in numerous ways. In essence, goals, motives, ideology and the realities of life became all jumbled up in Nauvoo. For example, even if The Peace Maker were meant to be a more or less practical blueprint for why polygamy was needed and how it should be practiced based on early Mormon concerns about society and the coming millennium, it was nevertheless a highly theoretical document based on untested ideals. As with other Mormon institutions, when tested in real people’s lives, both theory and practice would have to change as a truly practical institution developed that would sustain individuals, families and communities.

Lawrence Foster has observed, “In the final analysis… the chief significance of the Peace Maker lies not in its authorship or in the authority behind it. Rather the pamphlet’s significance is to be found in the degree to which it may open a window of understanding into the values and felt social necessities underlying the remarkable Mormon effort to establish a distinctively American form of Biblical polygamy and the culture of the Hebrew patriarchs in mid-nineteenth-century America.” In other words, the pamphlet helps us understand why Joseph Smith and other early Mormons thought

---

polygamy was necessary. Nevertheless its significance is greater than this because, though Smith disassociated himself from the pamphlet after sharp public outcry, some of the principles influenced the development of marriage and divorce as polygamy worked its way into the Mormon population, in Nauvoo, during the journey west and in Utah.

Conclusion

1842, the year that had begun on a spiritual and theological high, ended in a stalemate or worse. Joseph Smith had made very limited progress in doing the three things he had surely hoped to do that year to expand polygamy; polygamy had not been introduced publicly, the endowment had been introduced to only a few select men, not the mixture of men and women Joseph Smith had hoped to initiate, and only four additional men had entered polygamy, one of whom had died. The reality instead was that a raging scandal and debate had made a public announcement of polygamous practice more remote than it had been at the beginning of the year. Though Emma Smith still lacked full knowledge of the situation, Relief Society had raised the issue of sexual irregularities and fought hard against anything departing from traditional moral understandings of sexual relations, empowering women to resist and putting both men and women on their guard about polygamy. Far from being able to ameliorate these obstacles, Joseph Smith was in hiding over the Boggs accusations and had ceased to marry more wives. John C. Bennett’s book had further roiled the waters in Nauvoo, had put the nation on alert about strange Mormon practices and had further damaged Nauvoo’s relationship with her neighboring communities. All of these factors worked against the further spread of polygamy. At the end of 1842, monogamy appeared to be winning the debate over the form of marriage in Nauvoo.
Chapter Four:

Integration, 1843

In spite of bleak prospects at the end of 1842, polygamy nevertheless expanded and became more firmly embedded in the church in 1843. During that year, Joseph Smith was able to further the cause of polygamy in three ways. First, he was able to integrate theology and practice of polygamy by expanding the number of people who were given the endowment and by the introduction of new ordinances, particularly ‘sealing’ and what was called the ‘Second Anointing.’ Though he could not preach publicly about polygamy, he could preach about ordinances, embed them in the theological narrative from the pulpit, and subtly (for the unconverted) or directly (for the initiated) connect them to polygamy. He also issued an extraordinary (though secret) revelation on marriage and polygamy that connected polygamy and salvation in no uncertain terms. The revelation more firmly embedded polygamy in the theological narrative because it made it the word of God to believers.

Secondly, he skillfully directed people he had already converted to polygamy to help him initiate more people. This naturally increased the risk of negative public exposure, but also increased his control of gossip networks and relieved him of the burden of continually making the case for polygamy himself. Two older women, Patty Sessions and Elizabeth Durfee, both polyandrous wives to Joseph Smith, proved to be valuable allies who could help him convert both women and men to the necessity of
polygamy.\textsuperscript{471} Beyond being respected members of the community, their participation and promotion deflected concerns about Joseph Smith’s sexual motivations. One particularly well-documented case illustrates how these women assisted Joseph Smith in convincing a young woman, Emily Dow Partridge, to marry him polygamously, and delineates the dilemmas she faced in accepting plural marriage. The case of William Clayton shows how one man was inducted into polygamy and the communal ramifications of his plural marriages.

Finally, through the new ordinances, Joseph Smith temporarily converted his wife Emma to the necessity of polygamy.\textsuperscript{472} In this way he managed to minimize the opposition of Emma and Relief Society, which had proven to be such an obstacle to the spread of polygamy in 1842. Emma did not participate in Relief Society that year.\textsuperscript{473} In all these ways, 1843 was perhaps the most important year for the implementation of polygamy, both socially and theologically.

**Improved Prospects for Polygamy in the New Year**

New plural marriages had halted in the fall of 1842 due to Emma Smith’s opposition, her severe illness and legal charges against Joseph Smith that kept him in hiding. By contrast, early in 1843 these obstacles evaporated. The year started triumphantly for the saints when the charges associated with the Boggs assassination attempt were resolved in January. Joseph Smith arranged to have himself arrested by his counselor in the first presidency, William Law, and traveled with 40 men to Springfield to stand trial before Judge Nathaniel Pope. His attorney, Justin Butterfield, successfully

\textsuperscript{471} See Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, Chapters Seven and Ten, pp. 171-204, 254-270.
\textsuperscript{472} Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 140.
\textsuperscript{473} Ibid., p. 157.
defended his client and the party returned to Nauvoo to celebrate. Emma, who had recovered from her illness by this time, was naturally thrilled that her husband was exonerated and a celebration was held in the spacious mansion to which they had recently moved. But though one worry was removed, her respite from worries about polygamy was about to end.

In February 1843, a month after the jubilant return from Springfield, Emma learned with certainty what she had no doubt suspected--that her husband was involved with polygamy. The blow was all the greater because her dear friend and Relief Society secretary, Eliza R. Snow, was the woman in question. To make matters worse, Emma had unsuspectingly invited Eliza to live with the Smiths the previous summer. Perhaps Eliza believed that this invitation meant that Emma approved of her plural marriage. If she believed this, she could not have been more mistaken.

Several versions of a confrontation between Emma and Eliza have survived in Mormon lore, the most dramatic of which involved Emma pushing Eliza down the stairs, causing Eliza to lose a child she was carrying. Contemporary accounts or accounts of lost contemporary accounts from Charles Rich and Solon Foster, men who were intimately involved with the Smith family, offer versions of the story. What is known is that Eliza moved out of the Smith home on February 11, 1843. Since Emma had certain knowledge of Joseph’s polygamy at last, the two of them were forced to confront

---

474 HC 5:211-245
475 Newell and Avery, Emma Smith: Mormon Enigma, p. 143.
476 Ibid., p. 134.
477 See Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, pp. 130-134. Smith includes a thorough discussion of the evidence, and seems inclined to believe the story is true.
the issue.\textsuperscript{478} He could no longer deny his participation, but neither did he give her a clue about the extent of his 16 plural alliances. Once Emma understood that her husband was a polygamist, however, he was able to use his persuasive powers to convert her to a theological narrative that included polygamy.\textsuperscript{479} The task was not hopeless since, polygamy aside, she had continued faith in his prophetic calling and desired the endowment and other promised ordinances and blessings.\textsuperscript{480}

**The Spread of Polygamy: Allies in the Cause**

In the meantime, unbeknownst to Emma, some of the most effective promoters of polygamy were her good friends, Patty Sessions and Elizabeth Durfee, both older women who had married Joseph Smith in spite of being married to other men. Emma would never have suspected them of being married to her husband because of their age and marital status--both still lived with their husbands. By virtue of their close ties with the Smith family, their age and experience, their oft-manifested spirituality, and, in Patty’s case, her medical knowledge, they were moral authorities in their community; their facilitation of polygamy was surely a powerful force in its spread. Moreover, as a respected midwife, Patty had ready access to all kinds of people in the community in the course of her profession.\textsuperscript{481} She was in and out of the homes of Nauvoo citizens from all walks of life at all hours of the day and night and hence would have her finger on the pulse of the rumor mill. Her central place in the community as a person with the ability to bring life into the world would make her especially valuable as a partner in promoting

\begin{thebibliography}{481}
\bibitem{478} Ibid., p. 137.
\bibitem{479} Ibid., p. 140.
\bibitem{480} Ibid., p. 143.
\end{thebibliography}
polygamy, besides the added benefit that she could deliver the babies conceived in polygamous unions without question or censure.

The ability of older women to control and direct gossip was also a significant point in their favor in rumor-rich Nauvoo. Experienced women like Patty and Elizabeth, who did not have young children at home, had leisure time to talk with other women and could influence attitudes and opinions. Though no one can entirely control the course of gossip and rumor, these women could skillfully hold their tongue when necessary, suggest and insinuate when prudent, refute and deny or approve and uphold with good effect. They were adept at finding out what people knew and when they knew it and directing and interpreting the rumors that flew around Nauvoo. More than any other segment of the population, they would be able to influence the flow of gossip. In addition, as friends of Emma Smith’s, Joseph surely hoped they could influence her to regard polygamy more benignly.

If gossip and rumor can be regarded as ways of dealing with the anxieties and uncertainties of life, Nauvoo in the age of secret polygamy was rich with possibility. Given that rumor and gossip thrive best in close-knit communities, and that the basis of polygamous rumors were, in fact, true and multiplying, there were endless sources to

482 Patricia Mellencamp, *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal. Age and Comedy*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1992, pp. 175-77. Mellencamp explores the stereotype that connects women and gossip, particularly the combination of older women and gossip and suggests that the combination is unfair. Nevertheless, she quotes Patricia Spack’s study of gossip as narrative in literature which argues that “gossip is a participatory form which can create intimacy, undermine power, serve eroticism, and propel stories” in the process of furthering “narrative, interpretations, and judgment.”

483 Ralph Rosnow and Gary Alan Fine, *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of hearsay*, Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, New York, Oxford, Amsterdam, 1976, p. 92. The authors point out that most communities have people in them who might be identified as “information specialists and news carriers.” These people might help “reaffirm values and social etiquette,” but they might also help direct the formation of communal values.
keep talk alive. The rumors were highly divisive and drove some people away, but they also served a valuable purpose from the standpoint of those who hoped to convince the uninitiated to accept polygamy. If the rumors could be stage managed by skillful people, and if the theological narrative that supported polygamy could be preached while the rumors circulated, over time social anxieties could be stilled. People would be motivated to reconcile the rumors that circulated underground with the new theology they were learning from the pulpit. In this way it might be possible for Nauvoo residents to make sense of the uncertainty, to calm the social anxieties engendered by polygamy and accept new meanings of marriage and family. Rumor mongering could thus serve as a form of community problem solving that allowed people to adapt to change. There was nevertheless considerable risk that community members would abandon Mormonism as some did, but it was also possible that rumor and gossip could facilitate gradual acceptance.

Patty Sessions was a lifelong diarist, but her diary does not exist in its original form for the Nauvoo period. Elizabeth Durfee was not a diarist or memoirist, but she flits in and out of other records. The episode, already recounted, where she was commandeered by Relief Society to speak with Clarissa Marvel about rumors she was accused of starting about Joseph Smith and Agnes Coolbrith Smith, tells us something

---

484 Ibid., p. 19, 32. The authors point out that rumor and gossip work as a communal attempt to resolve unclear and ambiguous situations. The attempt to institute polygamy secretly thus provided endless fodder for gossip over a long period of time because it was so outside the understood norms and took a long time to establish.
485 Ibid.
486 Ibid., pp. 35, 42.
487 Parts have survived that were used by Emmeline B. Wells in writing a retrospective of Patty’s life in 1894.
about Elizabeth Durfee’s character and her position in the community.\textsuperscript{489} We can infer, for example, that Emma Smith trusted her and that she was regarded as a woman with the social skills to negotiate such a delicate situation successfully. The experience of one of Joseph Smith’s plural wives, Emily Partridge, shows that Patty Sessions and Elizabeth Durfee facilitated the spread of polygamy by recruiting other women as wives, acting as a go-between for Joseph Smith and younger women, witnessing wedding ceremonies, delivering babies of women who became pregnant from polygamous liaisons and finding places for polygamous wives to live. Interestingly, the only child whose mother definitely told her that she was a daughter of Joseph Smith, aside from the children born to Emma, was Patty’s own grandchild, Josephine Lyon, born February 8, 1844.\textsuperscript{490}

Perhaps the moral clout of women like Patty Sessions and Elizabeth Durfee was enhanced because they could not be regarded as having personal interests in promoting polygamy unless they really believed it was of God. At least superficially, it would appear that, older married women aside, every other demographic group could work polygamy to their advantage in some circumstances. Men of any age might promote polygamy to gain sexual license or perhaps to curry favor with church leaders in order to rise in the leadership. Young single women might stand to gain ground in the marriage market through polygamy—they would at least have more marriage options if all men were suddenly available as marriage prospects. They might hope to ally themselves with men in high position and thus elevate their social status, or they might simply be most attracted to an already married man. Even younger married women, though they faced

\textsuperscript{489} R.S. minutes, third meeting.
\textsuperscript{490} Ibid., p. 12 Compton has documented the lives of all the known wives of Joseph Smith and concluded that the older women served these functions.
the negative prospect of having to share their husband with other women, might rejoice in greater marital flexibility if they were unhappy in their marriage. They might hope to catch the eye of a man possessed of higher priesthood than their husband and thus “marry up” to increase their social standing, or they might hope to shed their current husband for a more genial model.\textsuperscript{491} Older women were unlikely to be attractive as plural wives and faced the possibility of having to share their husband without much prospect of finding another.\textsuperscript{492} In this instance, Patty Sessions and Elizabeth Durfee did gain the approval of the prophet and a sense of secret power, but these are less obvious benefits.

Elizabeth Durfee especially played a major role in recruiting Emily Dow Partridge and her sister Eliza, both of whom worked in Joseph Smith’s household, into polygamy. The young women did not work for wages, but for room and board. Emily especially enjoyed young children and reported that she “delighted in” caring for the Smith children.\textsuperscript{493} Durfee was a central figure in Relief Society and in the fall of 1843 became the only woman to become part of the Quorum of the Anointed without her husband, Jabez Durfee.\textsuperscript{494} Her close friendship with Emma meant that she was constantly in company with both Smiths and this must have reassured young women who discovered that she supported the practice, particularly those who worked for Emma, even perhaps leading them to believe that her objections were only for show.

\textsuperscript{491} Kathryn Daynes, \textit{More Wives Than One, Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910}, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2001. Daynes points out that polygamy affected the entire marriage market and that a lenient divorce policy allowed women to remarry easily so long as they were still fertile.
\textsuperscript{492} Ibid., pp. 160-170. Daynes has shown that first wives were less likely to divorce and that if they did divorce when beyond childbearing age, they were unlikely to remarry.
\textsuperscript{493} Compton, \textit{In Sacred Loneliness}, p.406. Other information on Emily Dow Partridge is taken from this source, pp. 396-432.
\textsuperscript{494} Buerger, \textit{The Mysteries of Godliness}, pp. 64-5. Buerger includes tables here that show who received the endowment and belonged to the Quorum of the Anointed in Nauvoo.
Elizabeth seems to have been an enthusiastic and supportive person who attracted confidences and possessed the social tact to both assess situations and smooth the way for Joseph Smith in his efforts to convince women to marry him—negotiations that required delicate and nuanced social manipulation. Her value in this way is well illustrated by the part she played in helping him to win Emily and Eliza Partridge. Since they worked in the Smith home, Joseph first approached Emily about a plural marriage, but was discouraged in his advances.\(^{495}\) He was only successful in winning her after he enlisted Elizabeth Durfee to his cause, though she did not directly convince Emily either.

With her social tact, however she no doubt understood when to push, when to suggest and when to retreat. She invited the Partridge sisters to her home one afternoon after Joseph’s initial approach to Emily, and Emily wrote about the visit. “She introduced the subject of spiritual wives as they called it in that day. She wondered if there was any truth in the report she heard. I thought I could tell her something that would make her open her eyes if I chose, but I did not choose to. I kept my own council and said nothing.”\(^{496}\) Emily Partridge did not know at this time that Elizabeth Durfee was married to Joseph and promoting polygamy. Since Emily and Elizabeth were both Relief Society members, Emily would have assumed that Elizabeth opposed polygamy, since she had been assigned by her close friend Emma to ferret out rumors about the practice.\(^{497}\)

\(^{495}\) Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, pp. 406-408.

\(^{496}\) Emily Partridge memoirs, University of Utah, Marriott Library Archives.

\(^{497}\) See Relief Society Minutes, available online with the Joseph Smith Papers. The minutes list the names of members as they joined. Elizabeth joined at the second meeting, March 24, 1842. Emily joined a few weeks later, in April of 1842.
That Emily chose to keep her “council” at this point, when she could have unburdened herself to a woman whom she probably thought would have helped her extricate herself from the Smith household and Joseph’s advances, would tell Joseph Smith that Emily was not spreading rumors and was perhaps still considering his proposal, as indeed she was. The encounter, however, prompted Emily to confide in her sister Eliza about Joseph’s proposal on the way home from the Durfee household. Though shocked, Eliza was in this way prepared for overtures from Joseph when they came. He renewed his suit with Emily a few months later, on her nineteenth birthday, telling her that God had given her to him. Emily wrote that shortly thereafter, “Mrs. Durf__ came to me one day and said Joseph would like an opportunity to talk with me. I asked her if she knew what he wanted. She said she thought he wanted me for a wife. I was thirely prepared for almost anything. I was to meet him in the evening at Mr. Kimballs.” That Mrs. Durfee told Emily the reason for the requested interview told Emily that Mrs. Durfee knew about polygamy and presumably approved of it. The wedding took place that evening, March 4, 1843.

After all she had endured in the months before the marriage, Emily later wrote that by the time Mrs. Durfee approached her about the wedding, “My mind was now prepared and would receive the principles. I do not think if I had not gone through the ordeal I did that I could ever [have] gone off at night to meet him.” In this case, Mrs. Durfee provided valuable aid and information for Joseph Smith in winning Emily and Eliza, whom he married four days after her sister. Given Emily’s doubts and fragile state

498 Emily Partridge memoirs, University of Utah, Marriott Library Archives.
499 Ibid.
of mind, it is quite likely that repeated attempts by Joseph to win her after her initial rejection would have lost her entirely. The interventions of an older women so secure in the community and with the moral authority of Mrs. Durfee likely helped move Emily to the mental place where her “mind was now prepared” and the marriage could be performed. Sadly for the two young women, several months later Emma insisted that they be cast out of the Smith household, and here Patty Sessions became useful, because Emily went to live with her daughter, Sylvia Sessions Lyon. Emily wrote that, “I do not remember of seeing Joseph but once to speak to after I left the Mansion house and that was just before he started for Carthage. His looks spoke the sorrow of his heart although his words were guarded.”

In light of Emily Partridge’s story, it is interesting to explore the arena where the moral shift from monogamy to polygamy transpired. It is painful to think about the lonely corner where the battle over polygamy was fought occupied by eighteen-year-old Emily Partridge, who, with no one to counsel her, carried the burden of a moral conflict she was ill-equipped to resolve. She stated in her memoirs that Joseph Smith swore her to secrecy when he first broached the subject of polygamy and so she was denied the comfort she might have gained from discussing the situation with her sister till after the meeting with Mrs. Durphee. One can only imagine the mental torment she endured as she contemplated his proposal. She knew that her decision would irrevocably impact her future life, and, as it proved, in very unhappy ways. Emily’s description of the, as she called it, “ordeal” many years later gives a sense of the anguish she experienced.

500 Ibid.
501 Ibid.
Though she surely thought during those terrible days about the advantages a plural marriage to Joseph Smith might give her in the next life, she also instinctively understood that she had a great deal to lose in this one. Most obviously she understood that she was sacrificing the happy marriage she had always hoped would be hers; a marriage to her own husband who would give her and their children reliable and loving support. Perhaps she already had a young man in mind, since she described in her memoirs the lively social scene among the young people in Nauvoo.

As she thought through her options, Emily was surely filled with confusion. If she refused the man she believed to be a prophet, she would be denying the will of God. If she accepted and Emma learned of the liaison, she would likely lose her position in the household—as proved to be the case—and perhaps even her reputation in the community. If she went public with the information, she would become an outcast in Mormon society as had happened to Martha Brotherton. She surely recognized that if she accepted polygamy, even if all other obstacles could be overcome, she would have a much smaller claim than in monogamy on their husband’s support and attention in an era when women could do little to support themselves. She would, however, still owe her husband sexual fidelity and be expected to produce many children.

Emily’s fears at this juncture were well grounded; polygamy did not serve her well in the long run. Though she testified in the Temple Lot Case of the 1890’s that she and Joseph Smith had a sexual relationship, she never produced children with him.\footnote{Compton, \textit{In Sacred Loneliness}, 429. H Michael Marquardt, \textit{The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844}, Xulon Press, Longwood, FL, 2005, p. 601.} After his death, however, Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball between them married
for time most of the wives of Joseph Smith, though not Patty Sessions or Elizabeth Durfee. Brigham Young did, however, nominally marry his 59 year old cousin, Rhoda Richards. He also married Emily and fathered her 7 children, but though he provided some support, she was largely expected to fend for herself.\textsuperscript{503} There is no more poignant reading than Emily’s description in her memoir of leaving Nauvoo in the dead of winter, wandering from wagon to wagon carrying her child, hoping that someone would offer them shelter and food.\textsuperscript{504} When she was older and in poor health, she worried constantly about how support herself and her children in a very basic manner. One tax assessment of 75 cents in lieu of sending a man from her household to work on the water ditch presented a crisis to her. She could not afford the small amount, but could only provide the manpower by taking her son out of school to do the work.\textsuperscript{505} Emily Partridge’s story is a stark reminder that though polygamy may have created social networks and given people hope of eternal glory, in this life it often did not serve well the temporal needs of the weakest in the community.\textsuperscript{506}

Emily affirmed her belief in polygamy later in her life but was honest when writing in her diary about what it had meant to her. She wrote on July 29, 1881 at age 57

\begin{quote}
Today I have been thinking, thinking, thinking. My mind goes back to days gone by. And what do I find, can I find anything so pleasant that I could wish to live it over again or even to dwell upon it in thought, with any degree of satisfaction. No I cannot. My life has been like a panorama of disagreeable pictures. As I scan them over one by one, they bring no joy, and I invariably wind up with tears. I have been heart hungry all my life, always hoping against hope, until the years are
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{503} Ibid., (Compton) pp. 396-432.
\textsuperscript{504} Ibid., p. 412 Material taken from Emily Dow Partridge Young, “Incidents of the early life of Emily Dow Partridge,” typed copy, Emily Dow Partridge Smith Young Papers, Manuscript Division, Marriott Library, University of Utah.
\textsuperscript{505} Ibid., pp. 420-422.
\textsuperscript{506} Ibid., p. 432.
nearly spent, and hope is dead for this life but bright for the next. And then I ask myself what great or good thing have I done that I should hope for better things in the next world, or what great trial or exploit can I recount like many others perhaps, that will bring honor and greatness. I can only sum it up in one word, and that is I am ‘woman’ or if that is not enough I am a ‘mother’ and still more I am, as the world calls it, ‘spiritual wife’ of early days, when public opinion was like an avalanche burying all such beneath its oppressive weight. Some will understand what it is to be a woman, mother, or an unloved ‘spiritual wife’.

Emily’s remarkable insight into her own life and feelings indicate the price she paid to enter polygamy. The desires for her life that she forfeited by entering polygamy cannot possibly be stated more eloquently than she stated it herself. Her story, however, illustrates the process by which polygamy was spread in Nauvoo.

**William Clayton and the Polygamous Underground**

One especially helpful source for understanding the advancement of polygamy from the male perspective during 1843 is the diary of William Clayton, secretary to Joseph Smith. Clayton joined the church in England in 1837 along with his parents, siblings and the family of his wife, Ruth Moon, and soon became a Branch President (a congregational leader) in Manchester. In 1840 he led a group of saints to settle in Illinois, and by 1842 his talents had been tapped to assist Willard Richards in Joseph Smith’s office. Soon he was serving as Joseph Smith’s secretary, which put him at the nerve center of the church. He also kept an unusually candid personal journal, in which he openly discussed both his own challenges in polygamy and Joseph Smith’s.

---

507 Emily Dow Partridge Young diary, University of Utah, Marriott Library archives.
509 Ibid., xxii.
510 Ibid., xvi. Smith relates that novelist Wallace Stegner called Clayton “the clerkly Clayton” in reference to Clayton’s love of order and method. He nevertheless comes across in his journals as emotional, warm-hearted and able to express his feelings and the quandaries of life effectively.
His journal illuminates the process of introducing polygamy to more and more people in 1843.

Clayton does not indicate when he first heard about polygamy, but through his central position in the church offices he would have observed plenty. He was, for example, in the office when Martha Brotherton was brought in for Brigham Young’s ill-fated proposal. He did not participate in making the proposal, but when John C. Bennett’s exposé appeared, he no doubt put two and two together.\(^{511}\) He was officially kept in the dark, however, until 7 March, 1843, when “Elder Brigham Young called me on one side and said he wants to give me some instructions on the priesthood the first opportunity. He said the prophet had told him to do so and give me a favor which I have long desired. For this again I feel grateful to God and his servant, and the desire of my heart is to do right and be saved.”\(^{512}\)

The passage reveals a great deal about Clayton and the progress of polygamy in Nauvoo. First, it shows how Joseph Smith used already inducted people to induct others, but in initially veiled ways. Brigham Young spoke in code by informing Clayton that he wanted to give him “instructions on the priesthood,” which Clayton instantly understood meant polygamy. That Clayton understood what he was talking about and responded positively told Brigham Young that it was safe to proceed. The language also indicates

\(^{511}\) Martha’s Brotherton knew Clayton from England and therefore mentioned him in her statement, prepared in Warsaw, Illinois for John C. Bennett, and later affirmed before St. Louis County Justice of the Peace, Du. Bouffay Fremon. The affidavit was later published in the *Native American Bulletin* in St. Louis and was reprinted in newspapers around the country. It was later included in John C. Bennett’s *History of the Saints.*

the close connection between polygamy and priesthood and a conscious effort on the part of leaders to strengthen that connection.

Though he eagerly desired to participate, Clayton clearly understood that polygamy was to be by invitation only, through the priesthood. His positive response was part of his faith, but two other factors were also in play. First, judging from his later diary, he wanted to be part of Joseph Smith’s inner circle, many of whom participated in polygamy. Secondly, judging from earlier diary entries, he had his eye on other women. As Manchester Branch President in England before immigrating to America, he had become close to some of the single women in the congregation. He no doubt had reason to believe that he could successfully court plural wives.

That Clayton had long desired the favor of being introduced to polygamy shows that an attitude shift was occurring in Nauvoo as rumors continued to circulate. Secret practice combined with rumor and exposés had allowed people to become accustomed to the idea of multiple wives before it was introduced to them. Clayton’s journal indicates that he had always been strict about keeping conventional morals in spite of temptations, which shows that he accepted moral conventions. He was surely shocked when he first learned about polygamy, but by the time Young spoke with him had heard rumors, observed polygamous activity through his work in the church offices, become accustomed to the idea and desired to practice it himself. When Clayton expressed gratitude to God and stressed that he only wanted to “do right and be saved,” it is clear that he had accepted a theological narrative that linked polygamy and salvation. His

---

513 Ibid., p. 5  Sarah Crooks is first mentioned by Clayton on Jan. 13, 1840 when she gave him some of her own money for the married Clayton to buy some new trousers for himself. She appears frequently in the diary after this
protesting that he only wanted to do right, however, suggests that on some level he had nagging worries about the step he was about to take.

Two days later Smith broached the topic with Clayton. “At President Joseph’s office. Walked out in the P.M. He told me it was lawful for me to send for Sarah and said he would furnish me money.”514 This entry indicates that Brigham Young had reported to Joseph Smith Clayton’s positive reaction to his offer to “give instructions on the priesthood,” and Smith wasted little time in doing so personally. In 1874 Clayton elaborated on this conversation.

The Prophet Joseph frequently visited my house in my company and became well acquainted with my wife Ruth, to whom I had been married five years. One day in the month of February, 1843, date not remembered, the Prophet invited me to walk with him. During our walk, he said he had learned that there was a sister back in England, to whom I was very much attached. I replied there was, but nothing further than an attachment such as a brother and sister in the Church might rightfully entertain for each other. He then said, “Why don’t you send for her?” I replied, “In the first place, I have no authority to send for her, and if I had, I have not the means to pay expenses.” To this he answered, I give you the authority to send for her, and I will furnish you with means,” which he did. This was the first that the Prophet time Joseph talked with me on the subject of plural marriage.515

Clayton apparently misremembered the month, because this is surely the conversation described in the 9 March journal entry. The elaboration shows many interesting things. First it indicates how and where Joseph Smith usually introduced polygamy to men—during an intimate conversation in an outdoor setting in the course of

514 Intimate Chronicle, p. 94.
a walk or ride. It also suggests that Joseph Smith made an effort to learn something about the people to whom he intended to introduce polygamy, if they were aware and amenable certainly, but particularly what might be the best inducement to convince them to enter the practice. That he had taken the trouble to become well-acquainted with Ruth Moon Clayton suggests that he also tried to gauge how first wives would react. In Clayton’s case, Smith had learned, as is apparent in the part of his journal written in England, that while away from his family on a mission for the church, Clayton had become friends with a young woman to whom he was attracted, Sarah Crooks. Clayton had not acted on this attraction, but he was only too happy to be invited to do so, especially since Joseph Smith was willing to facilitate the journey by advancing the money to bring Sarah to America. Incredibly, Clayton’s first wife, Ruth Moon, appears to have taken polygamy in stride. Clayton even later recorded in his diary that she was willing to share a bed with her husband and sister.

William Clayton did not wait for Sarah Crooks to arrive before he entered polygamy, however. On 24 April, 1843 he wrote, “Sister Margt Moon went with me. She is a lovely woman and desires to do right in all things and will submit to council with all her heart.” Margaret Moon was the sister of his wife, Ruth. This passage indicates that his sister-in-law was counseled by an unnamed church leader to enter polygamy with him. On 27 April he and Margaret “went to Brother H. C. Kimballs where Sister Marg[are]t Moon was sealed up by the priesthood, by the president, and M[arried] to

---

516 Benjamin F. Johnson recorded one early instance of Joseph Smith requesting his sister as a plural wife. He said to Johnson, “Come Brother Bennie, let us have a walk,” and then proceeded to make his request. Benjamin F. Johnson, My Life’s Review, Archive Publishers, Heber City, Utah, 2001, p. 110.


518 Intimate Chronicle, pp. 118.
me…evening told Mother in law concerning the priesthood.” Margaret’s “desire to do right” and her willingness to “submit to council” are not words to connote an enthusiastic bride, though “with all her heart” is more promising. Future events would show, however, that these words were Clayton’s optimistic spin. One can only imagine the difficult quandary Margaret confronted when her brother-in-law proposed and his suit was supported by “council” from a leader she respected. She would naturally feel pressure to comply. Clayton’s specific mention of the onerous task of informing his mother-in-law about “the priesthood” indicates that he was worried about resistance from that quarter.

On 1 May, Clayton returned the favor to Joseph Smith by performing the ceremony for his marriage to Lucy Walker, domestic help in the Smith household, while Emma was in St. Louis buying supplies. This kind of reciprocity in finding and marrying plural wives was common in Nauvoo. Clayton had become one of the select few in Nauvoo who was allowed to perform such marriages with express permission from Joseph Smith. It was remarkable how rapidly he established himself in the alternate polygamous world that existed in Nauvoo. In essence, two Nauvoos with different rules existed together, a monogamous and a polygamous one, one public, one secret. What happened in secret Nauvoo impacted public Nauvoo on a subliminal level, but gradually secret Nauvoo was cannibalizing public Nauvoo. If polygamy could not be established by public pronouncement, it could be gradually established. One important way this happened was through the marriage market.

Ibid., p. 99.
Though he was a newly minted polygamist, Clayton was already courting more wives. He reported on 2 May that he “talked with Jane Charnock. She loves me and would sooner unite to me than R.” R remains nameless, but Jane Charnock was apparently awash in suitors—an unsurprising circumstance demographically speaking. Since men could have many wives and women only one husband, single women who knew about polygamy and were willing to discuss the possibility of entering such a union would be at a premium. There also appears to have been scant if any courtship. William had married Margaret scarcely a week before, but was already discussing love and marriage with Jane. Jane, however, rejected all polygamous suitors and married a monogamist, William F. Connor, later that year.

Clayton also reported that “Joseph rode out today with Flora W.” Joseph had married sixteen year old Flora Woodworth earlier in the spring and was apparently becoming bold about being seen in public with his plural wives, perhaps hoping to inform the public in Emma’s absence about secret Nauvoo without having to make a direct announcement. It seems rather odd, however, that he would ride out with Flora the day after marrying Lucy Walker, but rules and expectations were different in the alternate Nauvoo. Clayton was also bold about public courting; the day after his talk with Jane, he traveled to Carthage on business and took one of his future wives, Diantha Farr, with him.

Clayton and his family were facilitating the polygamous underground in other ways as well. On 13 May, Desdemona Fullmer, sister to John and David and secret wife

---

520 Ibid., p. 100
521 Ibid.
522 Ibid., May 2, 1843.
523 Ibid., May 3, 1843.
to Joseph Smith, asked if she could board with the Clayton family and he consented.\footnote{Ibid., p. 101.} Her ability to meet secretly with her husband would be greatly facilitated by living with a family that had been inducted into polygamy. Neither John nor David had taken plural wives at this point, so perhaps she did not live with her brothers or her parents because some in their households were still not inducted into the secret. The arrangement was not very satisfactory, however. On 29 January, 1844, Clayton reported that he “had some conversation with Desdemona C. Fullmer. She has treated my family unfeelingly and unkindly in various ways and I requested her to look out for another home. She said she would not until she had council from Joseph.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 125.} Since various members of the family seemed to come and go in the small Clayton house, it is not surprising that the presence of another woman, who was not particularly friends with the Moon or Clayton women, would be stressful. What is interesting is that Desdemona would feel obliged to counsel about her movements with a husband who was somewhat busy to attend to the movements of his growing number of wives. Apparently some of the ordinary expectations of marriage were still intact, or at least Desdemona liked to think so.

On 14 May, Clayton recorded that he walked out with his sister-in-law/wife Margaret, who “promises to be true.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 101.} It seems odd that he should be extracting such a promise from a woman who had already demonstrated her commitment by marrying him, but the reason for her doubts soon becomes clear. Before marrying Clayton, Margaret had been betrothed to a young man who was serving a mission, Aaron Farr. Here was an odd conflict indeed. Since both men, William Clayton and Aaron Farr, were serving the
church and exhibiting obedience, Clayton by entering polygamy and Farr by working as a missionary, whose claims to Margaret were greater? Public Nauvoo would regard her betrothal to Farr as a serious impediment to other suitors, but apparently this was not so in secret Nauvoo. The situation shows how the requirements of secret Nauvoo trumped the expectations of public Nauvoo, particularly because of the support of high-level leaders for polygamy. Fallout from the broken engagement was soon to cause great pain to all involved in this love triangle, and it served to drag a significant number of people from public Nauvoo into secret Nauvoo.

Within only a few weeks of his first polygamous marriage, William Clayton had become deeply entrenched in alternate Nauvoo, a world which had hardly existed for him before, but which affected his entire life, including his understanding of his own salvation. On 16 May, Clayton traveled with Joseph Smith, Smith’s young plural wife Eliza Partridge, her mother and some other men to a settlement called Ramus. There lived Benjamin Franklin Johnson, brother to two of Smith’s wives, Diademia and Almera Johnson. Smith had only married Almera a few weeks before and her brother later testified that on this occasion the two cohabited “as man and wife” and he “occupied the same room and bed with my sister, that the previous month he had occupied with the daughter of the late Bishop Partridge, Emily or Eliza, as his wife.” This was probably the wedding night for Joseph and Almera.

Joseph Smith had informed Benjamin Johnson about polygamy when he married his sisters, but on this occasion he expounded on the topic. Clayton wrote, “Before we

527 Ibid., p. 102. May 16, 1843.
529 See Compton, In Sacred Loneliness pp. 288-305 for information on the Johnson sisters.
retired the President gave Brother Johnson and wife some instructions on the priesthood. He put his hand on my knee and says, “your life is hid with Christ in God, and so is many others” perhaps meaning that his willingness to enter polygamy had made Clayton more holy and connected to God. The phrase “hid with Christ” is probably a reference to the secret nature of polygamy. He then told the Johnsons that “nothing but the unpardonable sin” (murder) could prevent Clayton “from inheriting eternal glory for he is sealed up by the power of the priesthood unto eternal life having taken the step which is necessary for that purpose.” In other words, because he had entered polygamy, Clayton’s salvation was assured. After expounding on other doctrine that would soon be part of the revelation on marriage, he added that “God told him in whom to confide,” in revealing the new doctrine on marriage and polygamy. Joseph Smith clearly understood the risks of practicing polygamy, but just as clearly it was embedded in the new theological teachings that he was gradually disseminating to trusted followers.

In the same way that Emily Partridge suffered over the loss of the monogamous marriage she had expected to enjoy throughout her life, Margaret Moon Clayton suffered the loss of the man, Aaron Farr, whom she had loved and had promised to marry before obeying counsel to marry William Clayton. Shortly after their marriage, Clayton wrote “Margaret received a letter from Aaron which made her feel bad. It also gave me unaccountable sorrow.” The sorrow was unaccountable to him because he was happy to possess Margaret and believed had behaved righteously. Joseph Smith’s astonishing words to him at the Johnson house had confirmed this. Nevertheless, at this distance it is

---

530 This sentiment would be echoed a few months later when Smith dictated the revelation on polygamy, now section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants, to Clayton.
531 Intimate Chronicle, p. 102.
easy to see the source of his sorrow. He had become an obstacle to what would have been, but for him, a happy marriage between a devoted young couple. Now he had to face Margaret and Aaron’s sorrow and perhaps even Aaron’s wrath. It was not a happy prospect.

Two days after Margaret received the letter, she and William discussed the situation. Apparently Margaret was not certain all was over with Aaron because Clayton wrote that “she promised she would not marry A[aron] if she can possibly avoid it. And if she ever feels disposed to marry she will tell me as soon as she thinks of it. She will seek my Council and says she will abide it.”

Even in the midst of this trauma with Margaret, Clayton reported that same day that Sarah Crooks, the young woman Joseph Smith had given him money to bring from England, “went away abruptly to T[homas] Millers but came back this AM.” Apparently Clayton was still keeping tabs on her.

The conversation with Margaret indicates that she had realized that in public Nauvoo she might yet marry the man she had planned to make her husband and that she presumably loved, since what happened in secret Nauvoo had no standing in public Nauvoo. She was making a choice, however, because the promises of future reward were much greater in polygamy and alternate Nauvoo. Margaret could conceivably reject secret Nauvoo at this juncture in favor of public Nauvoo and the life she had previously expected for herself, but naturally secret Nauvoo had a great deal to lose from the rejection of one person. The polygamous world in Nauvoo in was struggling to exist and

---

532 Ibid., p. 108.
533 Ibid.
grow at this point, and a person who rejected it would be highly tempted to expose it. Beyond this, her defection would undermine the idea that polygamous marriages were permanent (eternal) and inviolable. Margaret did not know how to tell Aaron about the new developments, and so a few weeks after she received the letter, William dictated a return letter to Aaron “informing him that she should not marry.”\textsuperscript{534} It is unclear if they disclosed to Aaron the reasons for the disrupted betrothal, but it seems unlikely.

When Aaron returned from his mission in July, the three of them had a long and painful conversation, after which Clayton wrote that Margaret “has stood true to her covenant” and, “though the shock is severe” Aaron “bears it patiently.” For his part, Clayton wrote, “I pray the Great Eloheem to make up the loss to him an hundred fold and enable him to rejoice in all things. My heart aches with grief on his and M[argaret]’s account and could almost say O that I had never known her.” He had only “done that which I have understood to be thy will…but if I have done wrong in this thing, show it me that thy servant may repent of it and obtain forgiveness.” He prayed that either his affections could be weaned from Margaret or that she would become wholly his “but to live in this state of feeling I cannot.”\textsuperscript{535} Clayton was coming to understand the toll exacted by secret Nauvoo, but there was no clear pathway to alleviate the situation. The next day he reported “M[argaret] appears dissatisfied with her situation and is miserable.” He offered to try to “have her covenant released if she desired it but she said she is not willing.”\textsuperscript{536}

\textsuperscript{534} Ibid., p. 109, July 8, 1843.
\textsuperscript{535} Ibid., p. 11, July 22, 1843.
\textsuperscript{536} Ibid., July 23, 1843
For Clayton and Margaret both, the costs of secret Nauvoo had been vague at the outset, but were rapidly coming into focus. Though they both had serious doubts initially, the promises and encouragement they received overcame them. When Aaron returned, the full emotional cost became clear. Conversations continued between the three miserable people during the next week. The situation soon became even more complicated because Margaret discovered she was pregnant. He reported that “Margaret seems quite embittered against me in consequence of which I called her to me and asked her if she desired the covenant to be revoked if it were possible. To this she would not give me a satisfactory answer only saying if it had not been done it should not be”

Clayton had a conversation with Aaron Farr in which “I reasoned considerable with him to prove that I had done right in all these matters so far as I knew it.” He also probed to see if Aaron were still willing to take Margaret, probably in light of the pregnancy, and Aaron affirmed that he was. Clayton consequently went to Joseph Smith to ask him if the marriage covenant between himself and Margaret could be revoked.

He shook his head and answered no. At this conclusion my mind seemed for the moment to get relief for the twofold reason that I had done all I could and I did not want the covenant revoked. I came back and Margaret and Aaron were together in the Farrs garden. I told them the answer I had got and advised them to take the best measures to make all things right between them. I cannot help thinking that Margaret has treated me not only unkindly but meanly and cruelly, but I forgive her before the Lord for I sympathize with her grief, but I can’t console her for she will not speak to me.

It is not surprising that Joseph Smith would refuse to dissolve the covenant. Once initiated into secret Nauvoo, defections could seriously damage the cause. It was thus

537 Ibid., p. 112, July 26, 1843.
538 Ibid.
539 Ibid., p. 113.
important to keep people’s hand to the plow once they had joined the secret polygamous world of Nauvoo, not only because of the fear of exposure, but also because the trials and sacrifice that secret Nauvoo exacted tied people more firmly to the faith in the kind of society Joseph Smith was struggling to build. It was a form of cognitive dissonance. Moreover, each person who entered secret Nauvoo brought a host of people with them, even though those people were not necessarily polygamists themselves. When Clayton entered polygamy, for example, a whole new group of people became initiates into secret Nauvoo; at the very least it included his family and his wife’s. Since Margaret had been betrothed and was obliged to break off the betrothal by informing Aaron of the reason, suddenly Aaron and his relations, not to mention friends and well-wishers of the defunct couple, would become new inductees into secret Nauvoo. If Margaret did not stand firm in her polygamous marriage, it would be much easier for these newly informed people to reject polygamy and secret Nauvoo.

The cost of maintaining the two Nauvoos was very high, however. Margaret’s unhappiness affected her mother, who suffered a breakdown a few weeks later. Clayton wrote “At night my wife’s mother went into the garden to pray just as we were going to bed. Margaret and Lydia went out and found her on her knees. She was deranged…Her hands and feet were cold and I feared she was going to die.” When she had come to herself, she confided in Margaret’s sister, Lydia, that she had been overcome by her worries about Margaret. Clayton wrote, “I feel as though I was in some measure a child of sorrow but am determined to try to do right in all things.” As if this were not enough, Joseph Smith informed Clayton that Aaron Farr’s brother-in-law, William

---

540 Ibid., p. 116, August 13, 1843.
Walker, and Emma as well, believed he had done wrong. “In the agony of mind which I have endured on this subject I said I was sorry I had done it, at which Joseph told me not to say so. I finally asked him if I had done wrong in what I had done. He answered no you have a right to get all you can.”

Joseph Smith’s statement here should be put in context. In a way, polygamy rested on a very American concept—progress and competition. By gaining more wives and family, a man’s glory in the next life would be greater. It was the ultimate big picture thinking. The sorrows the new marriage system brought in this life had to be endured and vanquished in order to gain a marvelous reward in the next.

The tensions created by the disparate demands of secret and public Nauvoo continued to fester, however, as the number of concerned people grew. Clayton learned from Newell Whitney that the Walkers were conspiring with Emma for his downfall. His mother-in-law continued to have fits of delirium, and Diantha Farr, Aaron’s teen-aged sister and William Clayton’s future wife, told Margaret that “she felt disposed almost to go to every house in the city and tell all she knew and then come home and kill herself.” This threat is perhaps not surprising from a melodramatic teen-ager with a crush on William Clayton, but it nevertheless illustrates an understandable response to the confusion created by secret Nauvoo.

Why would Diantha want go to every house in Nauvoo and tell everything she knew? She was surely profoundly uncomfortable with the alternate reality into which she had unwillingly been dragged and which caused so much misery to so many people that

---

541 Ibid., p. 115, August 11, 1843.
542 Ibid., n. 49. William Walker was married to Aaron Farr’s sister, Olive.
543 Ibid., p. 117, August 19, 1843.
she loved. If she told what she knew to every household in Nauvoo, the two realities
would be forced to confront one another and return to one understandable reality.\footnote{Rosnow and Fine, \textit{Gossip and Rumor}, p. 19. The authors argue that gossip and rumor help resolve unclear and ambiguous social situations. Diantha here appears eager to resolve such a situation by spreading rumor and gossip indiscriminately.}

Doing so, however, would threaten the Mormon belief system, something she did not
want to do, especially as a lowly (young and female) member of the community--hence
the thoughts of suicide. Diantha almost certainly did not think the situation through in
this way, but nevertheless, the profound desire behind the threat was surely to reconcile
the two incompatible Nauvoos that were causing her brother, her family and herself so
much grief. On some level she understood that what she threatened would be a way of
making her world whole again.

An interesting aside in the whole scenario concerns Margaret and Ruth Moon
Clayton’s sister, Lydia, and shows another way a young woman could deal with the
anxiety over polygamy. Clayton hoped to marry Lydia himself, but when he broached
the subject with Joseph Smith, was told that “the Lord had revealed to him that a man
could only take 2 of a family except by express revelation” because taking more would
lead to “wrangles and trouble.”\footnote{\textit{Intimate Chronicle}, p. 120, September 15, 1843.} This was no doubt convincing to Clayton because for him taking two in a family had indeed led to wrangles and trouble. Instead, Smith hoped
that Clayton would talk to Lydia about marrying him! Clayton lost no time in having the
conversation with Lydia, who “receive[d] it kindly, but says she had promised her mother
not to marry while [she] lives and she thinks she won’t.”\footnote{Ibid., September 17, 1843.} When Joseph Smith went to
talk to Lydia himself, she told him that she “wants to tarry with her sisters.”\(^{547}\) That she
gave two different excuses indicates that Lydia simply did not want to enter polygamy.
She had no doubt seen enough sorrow in her family to steel her to reject the offer.

Still desperately troubled while traveling for business, Clayton wrote that he “Had
some meditation about home &c. on the summit of the hill above Peru. [Missouri] Never
did M[argaret] and my little family appear more lovely and endearing than when my
anxious thoughts were pondering over their probable situation.”\(^{548}\) Though Margaret
continued to sulk and pine for Aaron off and on, by October, when Clayton returned from
a trip and Margaret was home alone, he reported that “We had a joyful meeting, and she
gave me warm evidence of her love, and never did my affections glow more warmly than
during our meeting embrace and until 3 o’clock when the rest of my dear family returned
home.”\(^{549}\) Though there were still lapses, apparently Margaret had become reconciled to
her lot and was beginning to transfer her affections to her polygamous husband.

Margaret and William went on to have six children together. Over the course of his life,
Clayton married ten women, though two divorced him, and had 47 children.\(^{550}\)

**Emma Smith Capitulates**

The new theological arguments that had been revealed to William Clayton in the
Johnson household were likely used to convince Emma to allow Joseph to marry more
wives in May of 1843. After Eliza R. Snow left the Smith household in February, Emma
was in a difficult situation. She had four young children to raise, loved her husband and
believed him to be a prophet of God, but she hated polygamy. There were no good

\(^{547}\) Ibid., pp. 120-21, September 21, 1843.
\(^{548}\) Ibid., p. 121, October 1, 1843.
\(^{549}\) Ibid. October 7, 1843.
\(^{550}\) Ibid., pp. lxix-lxxi.
resolutions to this impasse, but Joseph apparently used all his powers of persuasion to
convince Emma that polygamy was right and required. Emma was, in fact, susceptible
to theological arguments that involved promises of eternal connection to the husband she
loved. Joseph was therefore able to temporarily convince her that she should allow him
to take some young wives if she could select them and, afterwards, be sealed to him
herself for eternity.

Emma selected the young women who lived in her household, the Partridge
sisters and another set of sisters who were actually wards of the Smiths, Sarah and Maria
Lawrence. Joseph was already married to the Partridge sisters, of course, but he
convinced the young women to submit to another secret ceremony since he did not want
to roil the waters by admitting he had married them already. The re-marriage took place
on May 23, 1843 with Emma as a witness. The Lawrence sisters also married Joseph that
month. Five days after the re-marriage to the Partridge sisters, Emma was sealed to
Joseph for eternity.

The church had been moving toward a meaning of the word “sealing” that now
emerged—it was an inseparable bond between two people for eternity. Joseph explained
the meaning to his Quorum of Anointed two days before he was sealed to Emma. The
plural marriages that had already been performed were considered marriages and sealings
all rolled into one, but people who had been married civilly first had to be sealed with the

---

551 Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, p. 142. The authors speculate that Joseph Smith used a variety of
stratagems to convince Emma to accept polygamy. In addition, as he did when explaining polygamy to
fathers, brothers and perhaps husbands of hoped-for brides, he used time spent with Emma in the outdoors
during carriage rides in her case) to explain the rationale for polygamy.
552 Ibid., pp.142-3.
555 Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, p. 494. Quinn includes a very useful appendix with
information about meetings and initiations into the Anointed Quorum or Holy Order.
imprimatur of church sanction later.\textsuperscript{556} Emma was thus far from the first woman sealed to her husband, but the Smiths were the third civilly married couple to be sealed. In fact, only four of the 30 men who entered polygamy before Joseph Smith’s death were first sealed to their first wives.\textsuperscript{557} Sealing was also being used at this point to seal men and women to wives and husbands who had died through proxy ordinances in the same manner as baptism for the dead. The actual ordinance was performed with live people standing in for those who had died.\textsuperscript{558} The sealing ordinance was thus used to unite people, just as baptism for the dead was being used for this purpose.\textsuperscript{559}

Joseph Smith was surely delighted that Emma had at last accepted polygamy. He had long wanted her to lead the way as an example to other women.\textsuperscript{560} She was more than happy to receive her endowment and to be sealed to her husband, but she was clearly conflicted over polygamy and the presence of young wives in her household. The very day of the marriage to the four young women, William Clayton reported that Joseph told him that he was talking to Eliza Partridge in an upstairs room when Emma came along. “He shut the door not knowing who it was and held it. She came to the door and called Eliza 4 times and tried to force open the door. President opened it and told her the cause &c. She seemed much irritated.”\textsuperscript{561} Emma’s irritation was to increase with the advent of summer. It would take very strong medicine indeed to convince her again that she should allow her husband to marry more plural wives.

\textsuperscript{557} Ibid., p. 48.
\textsuperscript{558} Ibid., p. 51.
\textsuperscript{559} See \textit{D and C}, 128:18.
\textsuperscript{560} Newell and Avery, \textit{Mormon Enigma}, pp. 142
\textsuperscript{561} \textit{Intimate Chronicle}, p. 106.
The stories of Elizabeth Durfee, the Partridge sisters and the Clayton entourage illustrate how the process of introducing polygamy in Nauvoo worked. Key people helped expand the secret world, and as more entered, collateral people were necessarily drawn into the secret. According to George D. Smith, during the course of 1843, 20 men entered polygamy with 29 women.\textsuperscript{562} Perhaps most of these unions did not carry so much baggage as the Clayton situation involved, but nevertheless, each one brought with them a group of people who were new inductees into the growing world of secret Nauvoo, a world that was about to receive a significant boost from a new revelation on polygamy.

**Summer 1843: A Revelation**

Summer 1843 proved to be a time when polygamy became much more deeply embedded in the Mormon theological narrative for two reasons. First, Emma Smith and Relief Society did not overtly fight polygamy that summer, which opened the door for another major development; a revelation on polygamy that was received and written in July, and promised amazing blessings to those who entered the “new and everlasting covenant.”\textsuperscript{563} The revelation was read to the Nauvoo High Council in August and passed from hand to hand, which meant that more and more people were becoming a part of secret Nauvoo.\textsuperscript{564} In written form it became a kind of scripture for believers and effectively furthered the cause of polygamy in many ways, but also spurred rebellion in other quarters.

---

\textsuperscript{562} Since Mormons are meticulous about family history, most of the unions contracted in Nauvoo did not remain secret once polygamy was admitted publicly in Utah in 1852. George D. Smith and other researchers have thus been able to reconstruct many, though surely not all, of the polygamous unions that were contracted in Nauvoo. See Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: But We Called It Celestial Marriage*, especially pages 311-312, which includes very useful tables of polygamous unions in the Nauvoo period.

\textsuperscript{563} *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 132.

\textsuperscript{564} Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, pp. 56-7.
Relief Society did not resume until June in 1843, but Emma did not attend that summer, in part because she was either absent or ill, but surely also because she had lost the will to speak out against polygamy when she had become a party to it herself, though most people were unaware of this.\textsuperscript{565} Without the fireworks over polygamy membership dwindled, and by the July 28 meeting, few members were attending and the women worried that their organization would be discontinued.\textsuperscript{566} The contrast between Relief Society 1842 and 1843 shows the strength of Emma Smith’s influence in Nauvoo. It is quite possible that many Relief Society ladies learned through the rumor mill that Emma had acquiesced in her husband’s polygamy, and this surely went far in reconciling them to polygamy. It also opened the door for the revelation on polygamy later that summer.

Ebenezer Robinson, former editor of the \textit{Times and Seasons}, illustrates the difficult position in which uninitiated Mormons found themselves that summer. As mentioned, Robinson and his wife signed the 1842 statement in support of Joseph Smith.\textsuperscript{567} Though Robinson did not know anything for certain, he \textit{suspected} a great deal by then and was troubled by his suspicions. He would sign no other statements because soon he had reason to know that his suspicions were well founded. In the spring of 1843 Robinson and his wife were called to go on a mission to the east later in the summer. Before they left, he was troubled and distracted over polygamy. He “prayed almost constantly to my heavenly Father to know what \textit{I should do},” because “I did not wish to embrace anything that was not of the Lord, nor reject anything that was from him.” He did not “trouble myself about others, what they should do,” but only strove to understand

\textsuperscript{565} Newell and Avery, p. 143. Emma quickly repented her capitulation but by then was already a party to polygamy according to Emily Partridge.
\textsuperscript{566} Newell and Avery, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{567} Ebenezer Robinson, \textit{The Return}, volume 3, Number 2, February, 1891. available online.
his individual duty. After three days of prayer he got his response when God “spake to me, clear and distinct, and said, “I have not placed you to set in order the affairs of my church, stand still and see the result of all things, but keep yourself unspotted from the world.” Robinson then felt certain “that if others could have more wives than one, and have the spirit of the Lord, I could not, and there I let the matter rest. It troubled me no more.” 568

Robinson thus limited his decision about polygamy to personal choice and was able to proceed in good conscience on his mission, though he was challenged in this decision by Nauvoo High Council member, Austin Cowles, who opposed polygamy.

One day, in July, before I got ready to start on my mission to New York state, I met Bro. Cowles on Main Street, when he said to me: "Brother Robinson, how can you go out on a mission under these circumstances, with things as they are?" I replied: "I can go readily, for I would preach the gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." "Yes" said he, "And when people have obeyed that, have them come here to this sink of iniquity." I replied, "that was no part of my mission," that when they obeyed the gospel I left them in the hands of their heavenly Father, before him they must stand or fall." 569

Again, Robinson was able to put the onus of responsibility for polygamy on the individual and thus retain his belief in and support for the church, but this compartmentalization was ultimately unsustainable. If he could not fit polygamy into his theological narrative he was not likely to make the sacrifices necessary to remain with the church; he was only postponing the inevitable. Other dissenters from the doctrine however, were pushed in the direction of overt resistance.

568 Ibid.
569 Ibid. The Return, Volume 3, Number 2, February, 1891. Only a month after this information was published, in March of 1891, Robinson died.
When Robinson and his wife set off for the East on their mission in July of 1843, they traveled in company with church leaders Wilson Law and William Marks and their wives—all of whom were opposed to polygamy—and they discussed it freely as they traveled. William Marks was president of the Nauvoo High Council, and Wilson Law was a general in the Nauvoo legion. His brother William was a counselor to Joseph Smith in the first presidency of the church. William Marks informed the party that “They have got a revelation on the subject.” All of them would have understood that “they,” (those trying to introduce polygamy) would be able to use a revelation, regarded as the word of God, to permanently alter the theological narrative. Ebenezer Robinson wrote that, “Notwithstanding the revelation every member of our party were opposed to the doctrine.”

They were right that a revelation—though also secret—significantly changed the circumstances. With a revelation, especially a written one, polygamy became the word of God. It gained authority and the ability to persuade those who accepted Joseph Smith as a prophet. As an official revelation, it could gradually be revealed to church members as proof that polygamy God’s will for the church. It would supersede approval for monogamy found only in the 1835 and 1844 versions of the Doctrine and Covenant. The Book of Mormon preached monogamy, but made provisions for polygamy. Most importantly, it would codify polygamy in the theological narrative and put it on the road to becoming a policy and practice that reinforced that narrative.

The loss of one key anti-polygamy supporter illustrates why those who opposed polygamy feared a revelation. Joseph Smith’s brother, Hyrum, had joined William Marks

---

570 Ibid.
and William Law in a plot to ferret out the truth about polygamy in May, 1843.\textsuperscript{571} These men were members of the quorum of the anointed—they were in the select group who had been given the endowment in 1842—and they had defended Joseph Smith during the Bennett revelations in the belief that Bennett was vindictively defaming Joseph Smith to cover his own sins.\textsuperscript{572} Perhaps understanding that they were deeply principled men who would resist the doctrine, Joseph Smith did not try to convert them to polygamy in 1842. In the meantime, they engaged in a crusade to root out unorthodox sexual practices from Nauvoo. Andrew Ehat has argued that Joseph Smith did not attempt to introduce further ordinances in 1842 after he introduced the endowment in May because of the Bennett scandal and because he first wished to convert these particular men to polygamy, a central doctrine of the theological edifice that he was erecting. He also hoped to bring Emma on board. Their objections, according to Ehat, led to a long plateau in the progress of polygamy and Mormon theology in general. The men used their connections in the Nauvoo councils to ferret out irregularities and punish offenders. As time went on, however, they suspected there was some substance to the rumors.\textsuperscript{573}

The issue came to a head in May, 1843, when the men decided to attempt to resolve the problem by forcing polygamy into the open.\textsuperscript{574} While Joseph Smith was out of town, Hyrum spoke to the saints, quoting passages from the Book of Mormon that condemn polygamy. He told the saints, “If an angel from heaven should come and preach such doctrine,” they “would be sure to see his cloven foot and cloud of blackness

\textsuperscript{572} Buerger, \textit{The Mysteries of Godliness}, p. 64, lists members of the Quorum of the Anointed during Joseph Smith’s lifetime in addition to endowment, marriage and sealing and second anointing dates.
\textsuperscript{574} Ibid., p. 56.
over his head.‖  

William Law preached on the same passage on other occasions.  

Later that month, Hyrum Smith decided to directly confront his brother about polygamy. He told Law and Marks that that though “he did not believe in it… he was going to see Joseph about it, and if Joseph had a revelation on the subject, he would believe it.”  

Brigham Young reported in 1866 that Hyrum actually ran into him before he had a chance to talk to his brother and insisted on hearing the truth. The two sat down on some fence rails by the Masonic Lodge and Young, aware that Hyrum was prepared to revolt, made him swear that if he confided in him, Hyrum would “never say another word against Joseph and his doings, and the doctrines he is teaching to the people.” Hyrum agreed, and Brigham “told him the whole story, and he bowed to it and wept like a child, and said ‘God be praised.’ He went to Joseph and told him what he had learned, and renewed his covenant with Joseph.”

The principle was convincing to Hyrum because he had lost his first wife and was pleased to learn from Joseph that he could be sealed for eternity to his first and second wives by the authority of the priesthood.  

When he related this to his second wife, the faithful Mary Fielding Smith, she said, “I will act as proxy for your wife that is dead and I will be sealed to you for eternity myself for I never had any other husband. I love you and I do not want to be separated from you nor be forever alone in the world to come.”

---

575 Levi Richards diary, 14 May, 1843, LDS archives.  
576 Ehat, p. 56.  
577 Brigham Young, “A Few Words of Doctrine,” 8 October, 1861, LDS Archives.  
579 Manuscript History of the Church, 8 April, 1844, LDS archives.
Hyrum still retained some doubts, but thereafter he supported his brother in advancing polygamy.\textsuperscript{580} His desire for a revelation on the subject, however, did not abate.\textsuperscript{581}

William Clayton recounted in later years the story of the revelation, which he wrote out on July 12, 1843. Joseph and Hyrum were in Joseph’s store discussing Emma’s opposition to polygamy, and Hyrum urged his brother, “If you will write the revelation on Celestial Marriage, I will take it and read it to Emma, and I believe I can convince her of its truth, and you will hereafter have peace.” Joseph told him that “You do not know Emma as well as I do.” Hyrum averred that “The doctrine is so plain, I can convince any reasonable man or woman of its truth, purity and heavenly origin.” Hyrum encouraged his brother to use the Urim and Thummim, the device he had used to translate the Book of Mormon, for the revelation. He probably believed this would give the revelation more legitimacy. Joseph told him that this was unnecessary because “he knew the revelation perfectly from beginning to end.” Joseph dictated the revelation then and there with Clayton acting as scribe. Hyrum immediately took it and read it to Emma, then returned to say that “he had never received a more severe talking to in his life, that Emma was very bitter and full of resentment and anger.”\textsuperscript{582}

Joseph later told William Clayton that Emma had so teased him about destroying the document that he had at last relented, but copies had already been made, and in addition, he still knew it so well that he could dictate it again at a moment’s notice.\textsuperscript{583}

Beyond the existence of a copy, however, Clayton reported that that “The Revelation was

\textsuperscript{580} Van Wagoner, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{581} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{582} William Clayton, \textit{Deseret Evening News}, 20 May, 1886.
\textsuperscript{583} Newell and Avery, p. 154. The authors speculate that the revelation was destroyed on July 15, 1843, a Saturday evening. The next day Joseph Smith preached concerning “a man’s foes being those of his own house.” Diary of JS, 16 July, 1843.
read to several of the authorities during the day.”\textsuperscript{584} This was exactly the fear of the dissenters—that the document would be clandestinely passed from hand to hand in Nauvoo and would be a powerful tool in convincing the people of the efficacy of polygamy. Most converts, had, after all, joined the church because they believed that through Joseph Smith, revelation was still on the earth. Since the revelation itself was secret, however, it was still difficult for dissenters to combat it publicly.

Emma’s insistence on the destruction of the manuscript is understandable in light of the influence of a written revelation on the beliefs and behavior of Mormons. Ironically, her resistance to polygamy had prompted the production of the very thing that would serve to cement plural marriage into Mormonism. There is some debate about when the revelation was actually received, with some arguing that it was a product of the 1830’s even dating back to Joseph Smith’s liaison with Fanny Alger. The content of the revelation, however, reflects the theological innovations of spring 1842 and Joseph’s need to use very strong arguments indeed to convince Emma. In addition, Joseph Smith’s diary for 25 August, 1843 records “My brother Hyrum in the office conversing with me about the new revelation upon celestial marriage.”\textsuperscript{585} The ideas behind the revelation had been in the process of forming for the entire existence of the church, but the revelation itself was probably a product of July, 1843.\textsuperscript{586}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{584} Clayton, \textit{Deseret Evening News,} 20 May, 1886.
\item \textsuperscript{585} \textit{HC}: 5:541. Richard S. Van Wagoner has included this observation in \textit{Mormon Polygamy: A History}, p. 57, and agrees that it likely was a new revelation, though many of the ideas had been forming for some time. My emphasis in quotation.
\item \textsuperscript{586} Daniel Bachman’s seminal article on this question, “New Light on and Old Hypothesis: The Ohio Origins of the Revelation on Eternal Marriage,” \textit{Journal of Mormon History}, volume 5, 1978, pp. 19-32, breaks the revelation down into three different questions that it addresses and argues that Joseph Smith had sought answers to these questions and received revelations regarding them beginning in the Ohio period. In other words, the revelation developed over a long period of time. This argues against regarding it as Joseph
\end{itemize}
The Revelation on Polygamy

It is likely, however, that Joseph Smith used arguments from the revelation on polygamy in his efforts to convince Emma to accept polygamy in the spring of 1843. The revelation, found in the Doctrine and Covenants, section 132, shows the striking development of Mormon theology to make polygamy central to salvation and exaltation, and states at the outset that it was an answer to Joseph’s inquiry about the wives and concubines of the ancient patriarchs, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and Solomon. “Therefore, prepare thy heart to receive and obey the instructions which I am about to give unto you; for all those who have this law revealed unto them must obey the same.”\(^{587}\) In other words, the new law was to be for everyone and they must obey. The revelation stated in no uncertain terms the fate of those who refused to obey. “For behold, I reveal unto you a new and everlasting covenant; and if ye abide not that covenant, then are ye damned; for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory.”\(^{588}\) The revelation did not immediately define what the new and everlasting covenant was, but admonished that men and women had to be sealed by a priesthood authority in the covenant, in order to “inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities and powers, dominions, all heights and depths—then it shall be written in the lambs book of life.”\(^{589}\) These were wonderful promises, but not surprising from a Christian perspective—more or less a version of mansions in heaven for married people.

---

\(^{587}\) Doctrine and Covenants, Section 132, v. 3.

\(^{588}\) Ibid., verse 4.

\(^{589}\) Ibid., v. 19.
A more startling promise follows, however. Verse 26 states that those so sealed would be assured salvation even if they sinned greatly thereafter, “and he or she shall commit any sin or transgression of the new and everlasting covenant whatever, and all manner of blasphemies, and if they commit no murder wherein they shed innocent blood, yet they shall come forth in the first resurrection and enter into their exaltation.” Even more striking, they would have “a fullness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever. Then shall they be gods, because they have no end” and will have “all power, and the angels are subject to them.” In other words, their salvation would be assured, they would become gods and their posterity would continue forever! Remarkable promises indeed.

Unless sealed by God’s authority, however, marriages would end at death. Those not sealed would be ministering angels in heaven because they had not abided by the law and could not be exalted. The law was important because “Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye abide my law ye cannot attain to this glory.” Those who abided by the new and everlasting covenant, however, even if they sinned egregiously, would eventually become gods, not only because they would live eternally, but because the angels (those not so covenanted) would be subject to them.

The first half of the revelation thus emphasized the importance of sealing and the law, explained the remarkable rewards to be gained, and then connected the not-yet-named law to priesthood. “I am the Lord thy God, and will give unto thee the law of my

---

590 Ibid., v. 26.
591 Ibid., v. 20.
592 Ibid., v. 21.
593 Ibid., see v. 20.
Holy Priesthood, as was ordained by me and my Father before the world was.”\(^{594}\) The covenant, then, became a kind of beginning and culmination of priesthood. Abraham had already been firmly connected to priesthood in the recently published Book of Abraham. His covenant with God had promised him endless posterity, who would be blessed of God “both in the world and out of the world should they continue as innumerable as the stars.”\(^{595}\) After many references to the chosen status of Abraham, the law was finally almost revealed in verse 32, “Go therefore and do the works of Abraham; enter ye into my law and ye shall be saved.”\(^{596}\) But what are were works of Abraham? Verse 33 spelled out the meaning, “God commanded Abraham, and Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to wife. And why did she do it? Because this was the law; and from Hagar sprang many people.”\(^{597}\) The work of Abraham was polygamy and the birth of many people.

All of this was possible because “I am the Lord they God, and I gave unto thee, my servant Joseph, an appointment, and restore all things….For I have conferred upon you the keys and power of the priesthood, wherein I restore all things, and make known unto you all things in due time.”\(^{598}\) Here was justification then—though it was called the “new and everlasting covenant” polygamy was really a restoration that had been made known in the Lord’s own due time. In other words, it was not a new form of morality dreamed up by Joseph, but an old form practiced by the patriarchs and prophets. This was a point that could be used to argue against Emma’s defense of the old, established sexual moral order. This moral law was even older.

\(^{594}\) Ibid., v. 28.  
\(^{595}\) Ibid., v. 30.  
\(^{596}\) Ibid., v. 32.  
\(^{597}\) Ibid., v. 33.  
\(^{598}\) Ibid., vs. 40, 45.
Emma was then personally instructed that she should “receive all those that have been given unto my servant Joseph, and who are virtuous and pure before me” and threatened, “But if she will not abide this commandment she shall be destroyed” then promised, “But if she shall abide this commandment, then shall my servant Joseph do all things for her…and I will bless him and multiply him and give unto him an hundredfold 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.” Interestingly, he would be given not just wives and children, but fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers. In short, those who obeyed would not only see their descendants multiply forever, but they would gain kinship connection with multitudes of people.

The revelation ended with a general warning to all wives that they would be destroyed if they were taught these things by a righteous husband and did not obey. In spite of the law of Sarah, whereby the first wife would give permission for her husband to take another wife, the woman who would not give her husband more wives “then becomes the transgressor; and he is exempt from the law of Sarah.”

As unsavory as the threats in Doctrine and Covenants 132 are for women, it is not difficult to see from reading this revelation why polygamy was called the “capstone” of Mormonism. The threads of numerous theological innovations from the beginning of Mormonism culminated in this revelation in July of 1843. It was the consummate family-centered theology. In this way, all members of the Kingdom of God would be connected through tangible kinship connections. These were surely the principles taught to Emma

599 Ibid., vs. 54-5.
600 Ibid., vs. 64-5.
to convince her to accept polygamy the previous May. It was a coherent theological narrative that people could understand and some could accept. The language could hardly be more vehement about the necessity of practicing the new and everlasting covenant, nor could the promises be greater. If the aversion to polygamy when it was initially introduced was deep and strong, the reward promised for compliance soared to unimaginable heights. The revelation on polygamy was powerful, but though it was shared with many in secret Nauvoo, it was not made public at this time.\textsuperscript{601}

**Emma’s Dilemma**

Though she did not participate extensively in Relief Society in 1843, Emma’s response to Hyrum’s introduction of the revelation on polygamy indicates her attitude toward polygamy less than two months after she tacitly approved secret polygamy and witnessed the marriage to the Partridge sisters. It seems likely her non-participation in Relief Society had deeper roots, however. First, after her principled campaign to uncover irregular sexual liaisons the summer before, she would be uncomfortable in Relief Society in 1843 no matter what position she took. If she ignored the issue altogether the sisters would wonder why, since polygamy and rumors continued apace. If she fought against it again, she would look like a hypocrite, since she had approved four polygamous wives for her husband. Even though these doings had been secret, rumors had no doubt reached many Relief Society women. In 1843, then, Emma had lost her public power to fight polygamy, at least temporarily.\textsuperscript{602}

\textsuperscript{602} Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, p. 158. In addition, Emma was still in the process of determining the extent of polygamy, as Newell and Avery document. Ignorance had made her fight against polygamy difficult in the past. She was becoming aware that when she had more complete knowledge, she could better combat the enemy.
Emma’s absence from meetings could nevertheless be explained to Relief Society women by her travel and other concerns that summer. In the process of travel, however, she regained her moral certainty. When she returned from a trip to St. Louis in August, she informed Joseph that she wanted a divorce unless he abandoned polygamy.\textsuperscript{603} Thoroughly converted to the necessity of polygamy and secrecy at this point, Joseph agreed, but told William Clayton, that he had no intention of giving up his wives.\textsuperscript{604} During the summer he had married Elvira Annie Cowles and Rhoda Richards in June and Olive Grey Frost, Nancy Maria Winchester and Desdemona Fullmer in July. He possibly married Hannah S. Ellis and Mary Ann Frost that summer as well.\textsuperscript{605}

By this time Emma was highly suspicious. The Partridge sisters later reported that she kept a close eye on them as they went about their work, and if she did not know where one of them was, searched until she found them.\textsuperscript{606} In addition, she searched Joseph’s pockets, became very upset when she found two letters from Eliza Snow and accused William Clayton of delivering them.\textsuperscript{607} Late in August, she and Joseph went on a carriage ride, and stopped to visit friends, the Woodwards. Emma did not know that their sixteen year old daughter, Flora, was married to her husband, but surmised as much when she discovered that Flora had a gold watch like one that she knew Joseph had given to Eliza Snow. She confronted Flora, then berated Joseph all the way home and into the

\textsuperscript{603} Clayton, An Intimate Chronicle, p. 117, August 16, 1843.  
\textsuperscript{604} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{605} George D. Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, p.622.  
\textsuperscript{606} Emily Partridge memoirs, Marriott Library archives, University of Utah.  
\textsuperscript{607} Intimate Chronicle, p. 118, 21 August, 1843.
night. He told Clayton that he had to employ “harsh measures,” presumably a tongue lashing, to stop her.\textsuperscript{608}

Emma’s life had become a nightmare of suspicion and jealousy. When he was asked in later years if Emma ever discussed Joseph’s other wives with him, William Law reported that “She never came to my house for that purpose. But I met her sometimes on the street and then she used to complain especially because of the girls whom Joseph kept in the house, devoting his attention to them.” He also indicated that Emma told him on one occasion that “the revelation says I must submit or be destroyed. Well, I guess I have to submit.” She sacrificed Law’s respect, however, because he concluded that “Emma was a full accomplice of Joseph’s crimes.”\textsuperscript{609}

Summer 1843 thus proved to be a giant step forward for polygamy in some ways, though at the same time the seeds were sown for the violent events of summer 1844. Since the voice of the most powerful opponent of polygamy, Emma Smith, was effectively silenced that year, the window was opened to introduce the revelation on marriage that would cement polygamy into Mormon theology. Indeed, her opposition likely contributed to the revelation being committed to paper. On 12 August the revelation was read to the Nauvoo High Council when one member, Dunbar Wilson, inquired about rumors of polygamy that he felt had some substance. Joseph Smith was not in attendance, but his brother, Hyrum, left the meeting to fetch the revelation and read the document to the group, exhorting them to follow its counsels.\textsuperscript{610} It was at this point that resistance to polygamy from prominent church leaders began in earnest. Emma too

\textsuperscript{608} Ibid., 23 August, 1843.

\textsuperscript{609} Salt Lake City Tribune, July 31, 1887. The Tribune published an interview with Law about the Nauvoo years on this date.

\textsuperscript{610} Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy: A History, p. 158.
was not converted, as her reaction to the Partridge sisters, the revelation and her divorce request in August indicates, but the summer was soon over, and with it went her venue to publicly combat polygamy—the seasonal Relief Society Meetings had ended.

**Political Overreach and Polygamy**

Polygamy was taking a back seat to other problems at this juncture, however. During June, 1843, while on a visit to Emma’s sister, who lived 200 miles away from Nauvoo, Joseph Smith was arrested by a Missouri sheriff and an Illinois constable intent on returning him to Missouri to stand trial. A large party of men set out from Nauvoo and succeeded in rescuing Smith and returning him to Nauvoo, where the city courts released him.\(^{611}\) The rescue and the action of the city courts came at a cost, however. Thomas Ford, the Illinois governor wrote in his history, “From this time forth the whigs generally, and the party of the democrats, determined upon driving the Mormons out of the state; and everything connected with the Mormons became political.”\(^{612}\) Not only did Nauvoo residents seem to flout the authority of the state through their municipal courts, but Mormons had waffled between the two parties as they played them off against each other, a practice that caused deep resentment.\(^ {613}\) This strategy finally caught up with them in the August 1843 elections. Joseph agreed to deliver the Mormon vote to a Whig, but thinking at the last minute that the interests of the church might be better served by the democrats, informed the electorate that he intended to vote for the Whig candidate, but his wise brother Hyrum would vote for the democrat. The democrat won.\(^{614}\) After this, Mormon credibility with the political parties was gone, and Ford wrote that their

---

\(611\) *History of the Church*, 5:431-449
\(613\) Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, p. 508.
\(614\) Ibid., pp. 508-9.
uniformity in voting “arrayed against them in deadly hostility all aspirants for office who were not sure of their support, all who have been unsuccessful in elections, and all who were too proud to court their influence.”

Shortly after the August elections, a meeting of anti-Mormons in nearby Carthage appointed a committee to draft a resolution to deal with the problem. The resolution declared that “A certain class of people have obtruded themselves upon us” in “the sacred garb of Christianity” in order to “perpetrate the most lawless and diabolical deeds, that have ever… disgraced the human species.” They believed that Mormons gave “implicit obedience” to “a pretended prophet” who “set aside, by his vile and blasphemous lies, all those moral & religious institutions which have been established by the Bible” as “the only means of maintaining those social blessings, which are indispensably necessary for our happiness.” They were convinced that since Joseph Smith was at once “regardless…of his obligations to God” and full of “contempt for the laws of man” he could not fail to become “a most dangerous character,” especially when placed “at the head of a numerous horde” that were “either equally reckless and unprincipled as himself, or else made his pliant tools by the most absurd credulity that has astonished the world since its foundation.”

The resolution, printed in the Warsaw Signal in September, indicates the scope of non-Mormon fears about their neighbors in Nauvoo. Klaus J. Hansen, John E. Hallwas and others have argued that polygamy was not the signal issue to anti-Mormon communities surrounding Nauvoo. Rather, the main source of the conflict was over

---

different conceptions of political authority. For the rugged individualists who inhabited the Illinois frontier, political authority rested with the people. Government was for them a contract among individuals, and in light of this understanding they were highly suspicious of the hierarchical, authoritarian, religious and collective quality of Mormon society and government, which was a direct threat to their conceptions of democracy. Since Mormons saw themselves as exercising their religious freedoms in creating what Joseph Smith called a “theodemocracy,” or a Kingdom of God on earth, at the behest of God in preparation for the millennium, they were naturally somewhat blinded about their contribution to the consternation of their neighbors.617

This analysis indicates the complexity of anti-Mormon fears. Soon a secret political body, the Council of Fifty, would be created to help initiate the political Kingdom of God on earth. The strength of the Nauvoo Legion, Mormon bloc voting, and Smith’s run for the presidency certainly fueled local fears of Mormonism in surrounding communities. Polygamy was inextricably bound up with such fears, however, as the first part of the resolution shows. It seems likely that when they accused Smith of setting “aside, by his vile and blasphemous lies, all those moral & religious institutions which have been established by the Bible” as “the only means of maintaining those social blessings, which are indispensably necessary for our happiness,” they were talking about what they regarded as the foundational institution of society--marriage.

In fact, their fears of being overwhelmed politically by Mormons and their shock at tales of polygamy fed on one another. Why, after all, did they value political autonomy? In large measure it was because it gave them the right to establish, support and raise their families as they saw fit. At bottom, the specter of a polygamous Mormon theodemocracy was a threat to what they held most dear, their liberty and their families. Tales of spiritual wifery and polygamy were immediately shocking and titillating and seemed to offer proof positive of the moral degeneracy of Mormons. The resolution implied another terrible fear—-that wives and daughters could be lured away by Mormons to enter polygamy. After all, in the course of living in proximity, Mormons regularly interacted with other Hancock County residents. Demographically this fear made sense.\(^6\) Where, after all, were Mormons to find the women to populate their seraglios?

By contrast to the awful thought of losing family members to predatory Mormons, Kingdom of God thinking was somewhat vague and shifting. Was it heavenly or earthly? Was it meant to occur before or after the millennium? Was the grand talk concrete or symbolic? The existence of the Council of Fifty that was meant to bring it about was a secret that was hinted at but never fully revealed in the Nauvoo period. Political consternation was real as the resolution shows, but it was bundled together with fears about a polygamous threat to the moral order. In addition, to the nation at large, far removed from the Mormon threat, tales of sexual irregularities would be vastly more

\(^6\) Carmon Hardy, *Doing the Works of Abraham*, The Arthur H. Clark Company, Norman, Oklahoma, 2007, pp. 67-8. This sample of a newspaper article written by Thomas Sharp of the *Warsaw Signal* illustrates the fearful rhetoric that came from anti-Mormon neighbors. “Smith’s principal supporters, and confidential friends, are among the basest seducers, and violators of female virtue,” which Smith encouraged because he “unscrupulously avered that he acted from the impulse of Heaven’s dictation while endeavoring to rob virtuous females of their chastity.” Fed a constant diet of such reports from Sharp and other editors, it is unsurprising that local people were fearful of Mormons.
interesting than the idea that a tiny far away sect would be likely to overwhelm the nation to create a Kingdom of God. The idea of a Kingdom of God to be established on earth was, like polygamy, part of the Mormon theological narrative that was developing that was so compelling to Mormons and so repellant to many others in Hancock County, Illinois and the nation at large.

**Fall and Winter, 1843-4: Second Anointing**

With fractious political situation and Emma’s resistance in the summer, fall and winter of 1843-4, Joseph Smith’s plural marriages slowed and then stopped for good. Polygamy nevertheless became more thoroughly embedded in Mormonism at this point because new men and women continued to join the ranks of polygamists. In addition, a new ordinance was introduced that indirectly supported polygamy and helped cement it into the Mormon theological narrative. Serious resistance nevertheless began to take root among some of the highest-level church leaders in the wake of the revelation on celestial marriage.

Efforts to keep polygamy secret were still relatively successful, however. A non-Mormon resident of Nauvoo, Charlotte Haven, arrived in Nauvoo early in 1843 to live with her brother and his wife, and by September reported home that she had heard rumors

---

619 Ibid. Here Hardy illustrates how obsessed Joseph Smith was with polygamy and how absorbed the surrounding countryside was by the issue. With what was regarded as an immediate threat to female virtue, it is unlikely that the Council of Fifty was a greater concern.

620 One woman, Cordelia Morley Cox, was a teen-ager in 1844, and in her old age told how Joseph Smith had come to the Morley Settlement where she lived and asked her parents if they would consent for her to marry him. She refused, but in 1846 was sealed to Smith. The incident shows that Joseph Smith made some overtures toward contracting more marriages in 1844, though so far as is known he was not successful. Cordelia Morley Cox, Autobiographical statement, Mar. 17, 1909, Perry Special collections, BYU. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, p. 232-3.


622 Cook, *William Law*, p. 43. Cook shows that by spring 1843, the connection between sealing and polygamy was becoming clear to William Law who would soon be a dissident Mormon over polygamy.
of polygamy, but “I cannot believe that Joseph will ever sanction such a doctrine, and
should the Mormons in any way engraft such an article on their religion, the sect would
surely fall to pieces, for what community or state could harbor such outrageous
immorality? I cannot think so meanly of my sex as that they could submit to any such
degradation.” Her words illustrate the attitude that many non-Mormons and uninitiated
Mormons held, both toward the possibility that polygamy was in their midst and its likely
effects.

The Robinsons, however, could not continue their willful ignorance of polygamy
that fall. When they returned from their mission, they learned that the revelation had
indeed been read to the Nauvoo High Council the month after they left, and that their
friend Austin Cowles, had resigned from the council, along with another member,
Leonard Soby. The hostile reaction to the revelation from some leaders of the council
probably further prevented full public presentation, a possibility the Bennett revelations
had already made very tenuous. Most High Council members, like David Fullmer,
accepted the revelation, but Richard Van Wagoner has argued that “the revelation on
celestial marriage confused and divided the church as had no other single event.” To
proponents of polygamy, however, “confused and divided” was progress, since
heretofore any public hint that polygamy might be introduced led to vehement resistance

Ebenezer Robinson, perhaps like other Mormons, chose to continue to regard
entrance into polygamy as a personal decision. In December of 1843, he was at last

623 Charlotte Haven to her family, 8 September, 1843, printed in Overland Monthly in December, 1890 as
“A Girl’s Letters From Nauvoo.” Taken from William Mulder and Russell Mortensen, Among the
invited to join the polygamous ranks by Hyrum Smith. Though Hyrum suggested ways to proceed and to keep his participation a secret, Robinson refused; but neither did he join with his friends the Law brothers and William Marks in resisting polygamy.\textsuperscript{626} He was content for the time being to live and let live. He would be unable to do this much longer, however, because in the fall of 1843 began the final stages of cementing polygamy into Mormon ritual and ceremonial life. This was when the highest ordinance of priesthood was introduced to both men and women.\textsuperscript{627}

\textbf{The Second Anointing}

On September 28, 1843, Emma and Joseph Smith united in being the first to receive the crowning ordinance of Mormonism, the Second Anointing, also known as the fullness of the priesthood.\textsuperscript{628} They were anointed as King and Priest, Queen and Priestess in the Kingdom of God. People who entered this order were said to have their “calling and election made sure,” in other words, though still in the flesh, they were assured salvation and exaltation in the next life.\textsuperscript{629} This was exactly the promise made to William Clayton during the visit to the Johnsons and in the recent revelation on marriage. The parallels could hardly be missed.

After her second anointing, Emma assisted in giving the endowment to other select women, most of whom also received second anointings and became members of the Quorum of the Anointed, a group that met regularly for ordinances, prayer circles

\textsuperscript{626} Ebenezer Robinson, \textit{The Return}, Volume 3, no. 2, February, 1891.
\textsuperscript{627} Buerger, \textit{The Mysteries of Godliness}, pp. 64-65.
\textsuperscript{628} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{629} Ibid. 63-67.
and, as the fall advanced, political strategizing. For the most part women admitted to the council were first wives and widows, which indicates that polygamy was still not fully accepted even in these circles—as indeed it was not. William and Rosannah Marks and William and Jane Law received the second anointing, but joined Emma in rejecting polygamy.

The Quorum of the Anointed is an interesting body. Michael Quinn has called it “an appendage to polygamy.” Todd Compton has argued that its history tracks the history of polygamous marriages. The quorum was started when the endowment was given to a few men in May 1842. The group met through June, and then, so far as the record shows, did not resume meetings until May 1843, when Emma Smith and other women began to enter the quorum. Compton speculates that the Bennett exposé prompted the cessation of both polygamy and Quorum of Anointed meetings. This makes sense in light of the argument that Joseph Smith was building a theological narrative with the help of his closest associates that integrated polygamy into the family-centered social vision and salvation narrative of Mormonism.

The Quorum did not exactly serve as a strategy-making group for promoting polygamy, however. Rather it served as a place to introduce the family-centered ordinances that supported the practice. Moreover, Compton has argued that the reward of entering the quorum gave people incentive to accept polygamy, which explains the

---

630 Michael Quinn has included a very useful appendix that describes the agenda of specific Quorum meetings in his Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power, pp. 491-517. It is his observation that political considerations began to creep into quorum meetings in the fall of 1843. Also see: Newell and Avery, p. 170.

631 Buerger, The Mysteries of Godliness, pp. 64-5


634 Ibid., p. xi.
entrance of polygamy foes William and Jane Law and William and Rosannah Marks. These were important leaders in Nauvoo and their cooperation was needed to help integrate polygamy, which they were more likely to do if they became insiders who were trusted to help spread the word with discretion. If they did not accept polygamy, they might be denied the sealing or the second anointing. Compton has observed, “The Quorum of the Anointed facilitated the teaching of secrecy; and Joseph’s polygamy, which could have had disastrous legal implications and caused adverse publicity if it became public knowledge, was one of the main reasons secrecy was needed.”

Though Emma was not a diarist, her attitude toward polygamy that fall can be deduced from various events. It is clear, for example, that trust between Emma and Joseph had been seriously compromised. In November, the two of them did not participate in the prayer circle at the Quorum of the Anointed meeting, almost certainly because Joseph had become violently ill while eating that day and accused Emma of poisoning his coffee. By early 1844, Emma had sent the Partridge and Lawrence sisters away and relations between husband and wife improved. Soon she became pregnant with their last child.

The second anointing was very important for the future of polygamy for several reasons, even though participation in polygamy was not required in order to receive it. By making people kings and priests and queens and priestesses in the next life, polygamy

---

635 Ibid.
636 Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, Chapter 11, pp. 155-168, “The Poisoning.” Newell and Avery suggest that Joseph Smith believed Emma had poisoned him, but argue that there is no evidence that she did and that it was not in her character to do so. p. 164.
638 Newell and Avery.
639 The Marks’ and Laws’ received it but did not accept polygamy. Buerger, p. 64-5.
was assumed in the developing Mormon narrative because it meant that recipients would be at the head of large interconnected families in worlds to come. The purpose of polygamy was to increase this large posterity exponentially. In addition, having received the second anointing along with polygamy became extraordinarily important in the succession crisis that followed Joseph Smith’s death.\textsuperscript{640} Those polygamists who received the anointing regarded themselves as possessing the keys to carry on at that juncture.\textsuperscript{641} Polygamy was simply too serious and important and too many people were involved for it to be tossed aside when Smith was gone. Those who received the anointing in the fall of 1843 who were not polygamists eventually found themselves engaged in a losing battle to purge polygamy from Mormonism.\textsuperscript{642}

**Conclusion**

By the end of 1843, polygamy had become far more deeply embedded in Mormon culture than it had been at the beginning. More and more people had been brought into the secret world of Nauvoo polygamy, either through actual marriages or through knowledge of the marriages of friends or kin. Emma Smith had briefly accepted polygamy and not protested publicly through Relief Society, which had silenced a significant source of resistance from 1842. Her private resistance had, however, ironically led to another institutional support for polygamy, the revelation on marriage, that would make its way into the Mormon canon. The admonitions and promises in the

\textsuperscript{640} Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 169.
\textsuperscript{641} Ibid., 174. Heber Kimball spoke before a congregation a few months after Smith’s death and told them, “We have got to carry out Joseph’s measures and you have got to assist us.” By then Young and Marks were in the process of marrying the widows of Joseph Smith.
\textsuperscript{642} See Andrew Ehat, *Joseph Smith’s Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the 1844 Mormon Succession Crisis*, Unpublished Manuscript, 1980, BYU Library. As his title indicates, Ehat argues that those who received the second anointing along with polygamy, particularly members of the Quorum of the Twelve in Nauvoo, were the only ones who possessed authority, in Mormon parlance “keys” to lead the church after Smith died.
revelation provided remarkable incentive to participate in polygamy. In addition, new ordinances had been instituted that supported the vision of salvation and exaltation that polygamy undergirded. It had been a remarkable year for the new order of marriage.

Not surprisingly, however, the growth of polygamy sparked resistance from seasoned Nauvoo residents as well as newcomers. For example, the woman that William Clayton had brought from England to become his plural wife, Sarah Crooks, had instead gravitated toward dissenters, become more and more opposed to polygamy and Joseph Smith as the year passed, and had married someone else monogamously.\textsuperscript{643} This group of committed monogamists within Mormonism, particularly the Law family and a local doctor, Robert Foster, would expand their influence in the most pivotal year in all of Mormon history, 1844.

\textsuperscript{643} Smith, \textit{Intimate Chronicle}, p. 135-6, 28 June, 1844.
Three situations converged in 1844 that helped precipitate the tragic deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in Carthage, Illinois on June 27. First, the already tense political situation heated up. In January, Joseph Smith launched a run for the presidency of the United States, and in March started a new quorum, the Council of Fifty, dedicated to promoting the growth of a political Kingdom of God on the earth.644 These developments, one public and one secret (but part of the rumor mill) exacerbated the fears of Nauvoo’s neighboring communities that had already been stretched to the breaking point by tensions over the political and other power wielded by Mormons.645

The second problem was that virulent internal resistance to polygamy grew as the year progressed, including renewed attacks from Relief Society when meetings resumed in March.646 Serious dissent also came from powerful men inside the church, who started a newspaper, the Nauvoo Expositor, which was meant to expose polygamy. The Nauvoo Expositor and the destruction of its press were the catalysts for Joseph and Hyrum Smith’s deaths.647 A third event that affected polygamy in the spring of 1844 was a sermon given by Joseph Smith at the funeral of a church member, King Follett, which

644 History of the Church, 6:188-9.
645 Hampshire, Mormonsim in Conflict: The Nauvoo Years, p. 189. Hampshire has described the sources of discontent in Hancock county against Mormons, which centered around what was regarded as misuse of power by Smith, the City of Nauvoo and the courts. They saw Smith’s run for the presidency as a bid to gain additional spheres of influence above what he already wielded. They were at once derisive about the run and anxious about the very audacity of it.
646 Newell and Avery, Mormon Enigma, p. 173.
647 Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy, pp. 67-71.
completed the theological narrative undergirding polygamy.\textsuperscript{648} This was vitally important in determining the fate of polygamy after Joseph Smith’s death.

In addition to laying a theological groundwork for polygamy, Joseph’s hope was surely to gradually convert the lion’s share of his faithful followers to the necessity of polygamy while creating an ideal polygamous community to present to the world as a model of Christian harmony and communal living. In other words, he hoped to gradually merge secret and public Nauvoo, and then present to the world a united front with his followers. If he could present reasonable justifications based on scripture, and an already functioning, even utopian, polygamous society, he surely hoped to eventually live polygamously in the sunshine of public knowledge and regard.\textsuperscript{649} If principled, respected and highly placed men from the inside began to fight polygamy, however, it would be difficult to realize this plan. Absent the ideal community and the united front, there was no telling where exposure might lead. In the first six months of 1844, that dream crumbled and Smith soon learned where exposure could lead—to violence.\textsuperscript{650}

The relative role that politics and polygamy played in the assassination is a continuing debate in Mormon scholarship. Klaus Hansen has argued that Mormon political inconstancy and the creation of the Council of Fifty led to fears for their political autonomy in the non-Mormon segment of Hancock County. He has argued that far too much emphasis has been placed on polygamy for the Illinois troubles and indeed for all

\textsuperscript{648} Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, pp. 533-7.

\textsuperscript{649} A pamphlet published, though not written, by Smith, \textit{The Peace Maker}, discussed above, illustrates the sort of social world Smith likely envisioned polygamy would create. It argues that familial discord could be significantly curbed by polygamy.

\textsuperscript{650} Hampshire, \textit{Mormonism in Conflict}, pp. 182-226. Hampshire traces in this chapter the process of legitimation of violence in Nauvoo in 1844, a year of “crisis and transition,” during which violence came to be accepted as an “instrument of justice.” Non-Mormon Hancock County residents lost faith in institutions to address their grievances and came to believe that they could legitimately take the law into their own hands against what they regarded as unfair and unjust use of power by Mormons.
of Mormon troubles. Hansen would probably agree, however, that polygamy was deeply embedded in the mix of contentious issues that led to the perfect storm that precipitated the deaths of the Smith brothers and was particularly important to internal dissenters who precipitated the events that led to Joseph Smith’s death.

Source of Dissent

By fall of 1843, Hyrum Smith had become one of the chief proponents of polygamy and had begun to introduce it to prospective new entrants in place of his brother. Besides attempting to bring the Robinsons into the polygamous fold in November, he gave the revelation on polygamy to the William and Jane Law to read and ponder. As second counselor in the first presidency of the church, a member of the Quorum of the Anointed and a highly successful and respected businessman in Nauvoo, William Law’s compliance was very important for the future of polygamy. The Laws studied the document, but they could not bring themselves to accept it. The Law family, Wilson, William and Jane, and a respected local doctor, Robert Foster, slowly became more and more resistant to polygamy, increasing the chaotic social situation in the city.

Other church leaders, William and Rosannah Marks for example, were also deeply conflicted.

William Law and William Marks, president of the Nauvoo High Council, had been devoted to Joseph Smith until polygamy arose. The revelation on celestial marriage

---

651 Klaus Hansen, *Quest For Empire*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1967, see Preface (unnumbered pages.)
652 Hyrum Smith introduced polygamy to both William Law and Ebenezer Robinson that fall. He seems to have become a major promoter at that point in place of his brother. See Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, pp. 63-4. Also see *The Return*, vol. 3, no. 2, February, 1891.
pushed the men into action and they did everything in their power to convince Smith that polygamy should be terminated.\textsuperscript{655} Both men and their wives became part of the Quorum of the Anointed, but Joseph Smith had refused to seal the Laws to one another because of their doubts about polygamy and their growing discontent in fall, 1843.\textsuperscript{656} Law at least considered entering polygamy. He confided to his diary on 1 January, 1844 that “had it not been for the goodness of God, surely we had been lost, overwhelmed, swallowed down in the vortex of iniquity, through our religious zeal” by entering polygamy.\textsuperscript{657}

When he encountered Joseph Smith on the street on 8 January, he did not mince words, and informed him that “polygamy was of the Devil and [Smith] should put it down.”\textsuperscript{658} Law later wrote that Joseph “seemed much disappointed in my not receiving the revelation…He was very anxious that I would accept the doctrine and sustain him in it. He used many arguments at various times afterward in its favor.\textsuperscript{659}

It is not surprising that Joseph would be greatly disappointed that his second counselor refused to accept polygamy. Joseph knew that though secret practice could continue for awhile, eventually polygamy would have to be made public so that it could be accepted as a way of life. If he could not convince people like the Law brothers and William Marks, who believed in the Book of Mormon and regarded him as a prophet, then he had little chance of convincing the nation at large. In addition, the defection of men who were highly respected in the community would go far in corroborating the

\textsuperscript{655} Van Wagoner, \textit{Mormon Polygamy}, pp. 63-69.
\textsuperscript{656} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{658} Ibid., p 47.
doubts of rank and file members and inflaming the surrounding non-Mormon community. John C. Bennett had created a significant problem by writing his exposé, but his bad reputation and tendency to overplay his hand went far to neutralize the impact. Moreover, the loyalty to Smith of many key players in Bennett’s exposé eroded the effect still further. Respected men of good reputation could do far more damage than Bennett had managed to do.

In addition to these concerns, Joseph greatly resented William Law’s sympathetic response to Emma over polygamy, which he likely believed fueled the fires of her resistance. He might even have suspected that Emma and William were romantically involved, though they were not. With all of these pressures on him, Joseph refused to seal Law to his wife Jane, and released him from his position as counselor in the first presidency. Law became more and more overt in his resistance and wrote in his journal that the doctrine of polygamy “paralyses the nerves, chills the currents of the heart, and drives the brain almost to madness.” The feud over polygamy would only grow more acrimonious in the coming spring.

**Political Deterioration**

Hyrum Smith tried to act as a mediator and peace-maker between his brother and the Laws, and told William Law in April, 1844 that “they were not doing anything in the plurality of wife business now, and that he had published a piece against it.” When Law read the piece, however, he discovered that it “amounted to this, that no one should

---

660 Law vehemently denied this charge in a 7 January, 1885 letter to Wilhelm Wyl printed in the Salt Lake Daily Tribune on 3 July, 1887. Emma Smith may have suggested a liaison between herself and Law in an effort to turn the tables on her husband. Acting on the suggestion was not in her character, however, though she was friends with William and Jane Law.


preach or practice such things unless by revelation.” Law understood the code by then and decided there was no longer any point in negotiating with church leaders over polygamy. In reality, however, Smith was not taking more wives, though he was allowing other men to do so. So far as is known, his last plural wife was Brigham Young’s 55 year old sister, Fanny Murray, whom he married on 2 November, 1843. Why did Smith cease to marry more women at this point? Perhaps a combination of factors was responsible. One reason might have been the deteriorating political situation in Nauvoo. Between the hostility from surrounding communities and both political parties, Mormons were, in spite of their large population, thriving city and formidable Nauvoo Legion, becoming extremely isolated in Illinois that fall. Richard Bushman has observed that Smith had come to understand that Nauvoo was no longer a “secure fortress” where he and his people could live in safety. It was at this point that he began to consider the possibility of moving his people to the west.

Annette Hampshire has written that “the events of early 1844 pushed both the rhetoric of the anti-Mormon cause and the strategies of the anti-Mormon movement beyond any possibility of peaceful compromise towards collective, possibly violent, action.” A situation involving our old friends, the Fullmers, was a catalyst for an ever-increasing escalation of violent events between Mormons and non-Mormons and shows how everyday problems that occur in all communities, problems that would ordinarily have been solved without much fuss, contributed to the escalation of violence in the tense

663 Ibid., p. 48. Emphasis in original.
664 Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, pp. 311-13.
665 Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, pp. 512.
667 Hampshire, Mormonism in Conflict, p. 183.
atmosphere that existed between Mormons and non-Mormons in 1844. Recall that Olive Amanda Smith was the mother of a child, Chauncey Cook, when she began to work in the Fullmer household. Family tradition holds that she met Chauncey’s father, Milton Cook, when she was 17 years old and the two had planned to marry. Her stepfather, David Henry Orser, disapproved because he had hoped to marry her to his son. Olive and Milton consequently ran away together, but it is unlikely that they ever married, though Olive became pregnant. Milton Cook was not a Mormon, but lived near Nauvoo in Carthage, Illinois. The two apparently did not stay together. After Olive gave birth to Chauncey late in November 1843, she hoped to gain some support for her child and herself, and in January 1844, obtained an affidavit for Milton’s arrest so that he could be brought before a Nauvoo Judge. Sheriff Horace Eldredge, was dispatched to Carthage to arrest Milton Cook.

Perhaps Carthage residents would have been sympathetic to Olive’s plight and supported the arrest in normal times, but these were not normal times. Carthage residents instead assisted Cook in resisting Eldredge, who gathered reinforcements and returned to Carthage to accomplish his purpose. This time an even larger contingent of Carthage residents rallied to Cook’s defense; shots were fired and bayonets were drawn, but miraculously no one was injured. Eldredge returned empty handed. The Nauvoo Neighbor wrote that if the residents of Carthage were allowed to behave this way, “farewell to law, equity and justice! and farewell to all those sacred ties that bind men to their fellowmen!” For its part, the Warsaw Message opined that the ordinances of the

---

668 Wells, Peter Fullmer and Susannah Zerfas, Volume 1, p. 257.
669 HC, 6:171-3.
670 Ibid., p. 173.
city of Nauvoo showed “how utterly regardless of all law and right and decency, the authorities of that city can make themselves.” Failing to gain any redress from her baby’s father, Olive Amanda was forced to hire out to support herself and her son, and eventually became a polygamous wife. The incident demonstrates the depth of the divide between Mormons and their neighbors in Hancock County. Similar incidents continued to escalate the bad blood.

With the approval of the Quorum of the Anointed, Joseph Smith, who optimistically believed the rest of the nation regarded Mormons sympathetically, made plans to petition congress and send out a proclamation to the kings of the earth on their behalf. He also sent an appeal to the Green Mountain Boys of Vermont, which he identified as “my native state.” Since fears of arrest had curtailed polygamy for a season the previous fall, the political morass of fall 1843 probably explains why Smith quit marrying additional wives in 1844. Another contributing factor was surely Emma’s pregnancy and her increasing hostility toward polygamy, along with the unexpected resistance of the Law family and Robert Foster. Beyond this, perhaps Joseph Smith was simply becoming worn out with trying to please so many women. He received at least one rejection from a young woman, Cordelia Morley, that spring, however, which possibly shows that the prevalence of rumor and gossip had removed the element of surprise and allowed some young women to determine in advance that they wanted no part of polygamy.

---

671 Warsaw Message, January 17, 1844.
672 Hampshire, Mormonism in Conflict, pp. 181-216.
673 HC 6:79, Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, p. 512.
674 Ibid., 6:80.
675 Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, p 230.
Joseph Smith’s Presidential Bid

On 29 January, 1844 the Twelve Apostles met to consider who the saints should back in the upcoming presidential elections. They considered and dismissed all candidates. “It was therefore moved by Willard Richards, and voted unanimously—that we have an independent electoral ticket, and that Joseph Smith be a candidate for the next Presidency; and that we use all honorable means in our power to secure his election.”

Joseph Smith had a few things on his plate as the winter snows melted and spring returned to Nauvoo in 1844, but it is nevertheless ironic that just as he had ceased to marry new wives, polygamy should become the catalyst for a series of events that led to his death. At the same time, however, the theological narrative continued to develop to further embed polygamy in Mormon conceptions of family-centered salvation and community.

Dissent Returns to Relief Society…And Relief Society is Curtailed

The perfect storm that led to the deaths of the Smith brothers began to brew in earnest when Relief Society started their meetings for the year in March. Far from the public reticence and passivity she had demonstrated the year before, Emma returned to Relief Society fully determined to do all in her power to stamp out polygamy. On March 9, 1844, she began the first Relief Society meeting of the year by reading The Voice of Innocence. This document, written by a prominent and respected church

---

676 HC, 6:188.
677 Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, 9 March, 1843 meeting. Available online with Joseph Smith papers.
678 Newell and Avery, Mormon Enigma, p. 172. The authors have suggested that Emma was especially concerned about the implications of polygamy for her growing children. Her adopted daughter Julia was turning 13 at this juncture and was therefore only slightly younger than the youngest polygamous wife, Helen Mar Kimball, married by her father. In addition, Emma did not want to see her sons adopt polygamy as they matured. Newell and Avery suggest that concern for her children steeled Emma to resist polygamy in 1844 after her partial capitulation in 1843.
member, W. W. Phelps, beseeched the women to help protect “virtuous mothers, wives and daughters of Nauvoo” who were under attack by “debauchees, vagabonds, and rakes” that were attempting to lure women into the “spiritual wife” system, code for polygamy. Though *The Voice of Innocence* did not accuse Joseph Smith of anything-- in fact praised him for speaking out against a man, Orsimus Bostwick, who had boasted that he could “take half a bushel of meal and get what accommodation he wanted with almost any woman in the city” -- many Relief Society members would have known that Joseph was secretly promoting polygamy, since most of Joseph’s numerous plural wives belonged to Relief Society.  

A week later, at the March 16, 1844 meeting of the Nauvoo Relief Society, one day less than the second anniversary of the first meeting, Emma again read *The Voice of Innocence* in conjunction with a document that had been read at the second Relief Society meeting in March 1842, a letter signed by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young and other church leaders that warned the women against men “aspiring after power and authority, and yet without principle” who would attempt to lure them into spiritual wifery. The letter affirmed that “we do not want anyone to believe any thing as coming from us contrary to the old established morals & virtues & scriptural laws.” Emma clearly intended these two documents to convince the sisters that they should use all the moral authority they possessed as wives, mothers and daughters in Zion to combat polygamy, and that in asserting this she was supported by her husband, Brigham Young and other male church leaders. Those in the know, however, could have interpreted part of the letter

---

679 R.S. minutes, 9 and 16 March, 1844.
as a vindication of the practice-- “we wish to keep the commandments of God in all things, as given directly from heav’n to us, living by every word that proceeded out of the mouth of the Lord.” The statement implies that if, as Joseph Smith taught, polygamy was given directly from heaven, it superseded the old law.

Emma intended the statements to be taken at face value however. In other words, she intended the women to focus on the public pronouncements on marriage by Joseph Smith and other church leaders, and followed up by asking the women to “examine the leaders in this Society—that you may sit in judgment on their heads.” By this time, Emma was fully aware that Relief Society leaders and members like Eliza Snow were plural wives to her husband. She then evoked all the authority she could muster as president of the society by asserting that through the powers bestowed on her two years earlier when the society was organized, “if their ever was any Authority on Earth she had it—and had yet.” She was attempting to counter the authority of her husband with her own, but in this she was unlikely to succeed. Her husband was regarded by his followers as a prophet and she was simply his wife. It is quite likely that in asserting her authority she nevertheless saw herself as making a final desperate plea for her marriage, her family and her husband’s life. He had often spoken of the many people who had designs on his life. Rhetoric against him in the Warsaw Signal, a neighboring newspaper, was becoming more and more strident. He was wanted in Missouri and was becoming anathema in Illinois. It seems likely that Emma believed that if she could roll back

---

681 Ibid.
682 R.S. minutes, 16 March, 1844. Emphasis mine.
polygamy she could begin to dispel the hatred directed toward Mormons and her husband and bring some peace to Nauvoo.

Emma had the women take an oath with their hands raised in support of virtue and had the *Voice of Innocence* published in the *Nauvoo Neighbor* on March 20, 1844. After that meeting, however, the Relief Society organization ceased to function for over twenty years. On May 25, 1844, when controversy over polygamy had reached fever pitch between Joseph Smith and the Law brothers, Joseph Smith railed against the organization in a sermon, saying “I never had any fuss with these men until that Female Relief Society brought out the paper against adulterers and adulteresses.” Resistance had begun to foment against polygamy before the Relief Society meetings began in 1844, but he was probably right that the two Relief Society meetings of 1844 spurred it on. His words also indicate the power that Emma Smith and Relief Society wielded, a power the men thought they needed to curtail by shutting down the organization.

John Taylor, who succeeded Brigham Young as church president, said of Emma, “Sister Emma got severely tried in her mind about the doctrine of Plural Marriage and she made use of the position she held to try to pervert the minds of the sisters in relation to that doctrine.” If Relief Society minutes are accurate, however, Emma had never

687 *Women’s Exponent*, 9 (September 1, 1880): 53-54. Taken from an address to the R.S. general meeting, July 17, 1880.
really mentioned polygamy directly; she had simply stressed the supreme importance of traditional morals and let the women draw their own conclusions.\footnote{\textit{Newell and Avery, Mormon Enigma}, p. 174.}

With public opinion both in and out of the church strongly against polygamy, it is likely that Joseph and Hyrum saw no option but to continue to deny publicly that polygamy was sanctioned by the church and to punish a few for practice to give the denial force. Hyrum Brown, a Mormon in far-off Michigan was cut off from the church for “preaching polygamy and other false and corrupt doctrines.”\footnote{\textit{Times and Seasons}, 1 February, 1844} At that distance his excommunication sent a message without harming any local polygamists, and they surely hoped this action would dampen the flames of controversy in the tinderbox of Nauvoo. Relations between Joseph Smith and the dissident Laws and Fosters continued to deteriorate, however, and on April 18, 1844, Wilson, William and Jane Law and Robert Foster were excommunicated.\footnote{\textit{History of the Church}, 6:341.} A few days later, April 21, 1844, the dissenters organized their own church, a reformed version of Mormonism which accepted the Book of Mormon and other doctrine, but claimed that Joseph Smith was a fallen prophet.\footnote{\textit{JS Journal}, April 27, 29-30, 1844, William Law journal, June 1, 1844, in \textit{Cook, William Law}, p. 54.}

\textbf{The Quorum of Fifty}

As Relief Society met its demise, another group was forming. In March, Joseph Smith formed a new Quorum, the Quorum of Fifty, which was intended to act as a political body to bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth.\footnote{\textit{Hansen, Quest For Empire}, p. 60.} Joseph Smith meant the group to include non-Mormons, and Brigham Young and John D. Lee insisted that it did. One of these was Daniel H. Wells, who went west with the saints and later joined the
church, but Klaus Hansen has disputed the claims that three non-Mormons were included, though this appears to have been the intent.\textsuperscript{693} The original records of the Quorum are not available, but Richard Bushman has surmised that it was “the incipient organization for millennial rule, a shadow government awaiting the demise of worldly political authority and the beginning of Christ’s earthly reign.” Bushman adds “It would be typical of the literal-minded Joseph Smith to bring such a kingdom into being. While most millenarians waited for God to establish millennial rule, Joseph formed an actual government, just as he constructed an actual city rather than waiting for the new Jerusalem to descend from heaven.”\textsuperscript{694} Similarly, Joseph Smith fit polygamy into his millenarian social vision as a way of connecting people both on earth and into the eternities in the Kingdom of God.

Robert Bruce Flanders has argued that politically Mormons tried to practice a kind of religious “utopian politics” in a highly pragmatic American political landscape. “The Mormon millenarian concept of a new heaven and a new earth [their Kingdom of God] was speculative, visionary, idealistic, and doctrinaire.” It led Mormons into an impossible dilemma because “the attempt to translate Smith’s apocalyptic social vision—conditioned as it was by Bible literalism and a passion for “true doctrine”—into political action created a specter of theocratic tyranny intolerable to Illinoisans (and a minority of Mormons as well.).”\textsuperscript{695} In other words, Joseph Smith’s attempts to introduce a religious and utopian social vision clashed with the individualist democratic expectations of

\textsuperscript{693} Ibid., p. 61. Hansen disputes the
\textsuperscript{694} Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, pp. 521.
Illinoisans. The utopian vision even made some Mormons squeamish. When Joseph
Smith secretly had himself crowned King before the Council of Fifty, some believed he
had overstepped and leaked the information to the dissident Law brothers. 696

To the Law brothers and their supporters, the king-crowning incident added to
their perception that Joseph Smith had gone too far and had become a fallen prophet. 697
Since polygamy was embedded in the “apocalyptic social vision” that the Council of
Fifty was meant to implement, and one of the more incendiary aspects at that, rumors of
new attempts to implement the Kingdom of God contributed greatly to the explosive
atmosphere in Nauvoo that spring in part because it generated fears of violence and
tyrrany and in part because it exacerbated fears about polygamy. 698

**Becoming Gods: The King Follett Discourse**

To add to the tinderbox, another theological innovation was introduced by Joseph
Smith on 7 April, 1844 at the funeral of his friend, King Follett, which in many ways
completed the theological narrative supporting polygamy and contributed to the sense
that Joseph Smith had overstepped his bounds. Smith used the occasion to expound on
the ultimate destiny of man, which has since been summed up in a phrase used by
Mormons to encapsulate the doctrine; as man is, God once was, as God is, man may

---

697 Jan Shipps has argued in an article “The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Toward More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith,” (*JMH*, 1974) that if Joseph Smith’s charisma is seen not as a part of his personality but as an integral part of his role as prophet, seer and revelator, reasons for the reaction to his leadership of both Mormons and non-Mormons will be more intelligible. As in the case of the Law brothers, for example, when Joseph Smith’s pronouncements and actions led people to think him a fallen prophet, his charisma, for them, evaporated.
698 Quinn (*Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 136) has written, “What unified Smith’s political and theocratic acts in 1844 was his determination to use any means possible to protect the Mormon commonwealth” and, by extension, the Kingdom of God. Klaus Hansen has argued in *Quest For Empire* that the threat of the Kingdom of God was the incendiary issue among non-Mormons.
According to Bushman, the doctrine was based on Jesus’ statement that he did nothing but what he saw the father do. Smith told the mourners that “You have got to learn how to be a god yourself in order to save yourself—to be priests and kings as all Gods has done—by going from a small degree to another—from exaltation to exaltation—till they are able to sit in glory as with those who sit enthroned.”

Smith reiterated in the sermon the story of creation, where matter was not created, but organized. Similarly, humans had always existed as spirits, or “intelligences” with no beginning and no end. God was the organizer not the creator, but he was the most intelligent of the intelligences. The idea behind the doctrine was one of “eternal progression.” Humans would progress to become gods and continue to progress through eternity. Bushman has argued that these gods were not independent and willful, but like the Christian trinity, “the gods had formed an eternal alliance, welding their wills into one. The idea of earth life was to join that alliance and participate in the glory and power of the gods. The way to become a god was to conform to the order of heaven and receive light and truth. The unity and order Joseph strove to instill in the Church was a type of the higher unity among the gods in their heavens.”

Bushman’s interpretation makes sense in light of the patriarchal, authoritarian and communitarian religion Joseph Smith had founded. The priesthood was to seal people

---

699 This line is widely attributed to Lorenzo Snow, fifth president of the church and brother to Eliza R. Snow, plural wife to Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. I have been unable to find the original source.
700 Ehat and Cook, Words of Joseph Smith, pp. 344-45, 357-58.
701 Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, 535.
702 His interpretation also makes sense in light of the Mormon theology that had developed in Nauvoo and before, but such a conception of God is difficult for people to comprehend. This theology is not stressed in contemporary Mormonism, though most members are aware of it, but their understanding of its meaning can be detected in the jokes that stem from the doctrine. “In MY world… (there will be no mosquitos, chocolate will not make you fat, etc.) implying the kind of willful and all-powerful godhood that is commonly understood by the word.
together in a hereafter in which they would be connected through priesthood chains and hierarchies, sealings, adoptions and very literally through a thick web of interconnected kinship that would be established through these means and through plural marriage and the resulting prodigious progeny. People were becoming gods in order to fit themselves into an already existing chain of exaltation and power that would be assisted, in part, by the connections they gained through participating in polygamy. At the same time, Bushman has argued, Smith left free will intact because individual humans' nature was not “predetermined by their creator. They were what they were, not what God made them.”  

The doctrine also contained within it a certain expansiveness, because people had gained the opportunity to be continually progressing, even in the next life. Bushman has argued that the theology introduced in the King Follett Discourse also fit with Joseph Smith’s (in many ways puzzling) act of having himself crowned King in front of the recently organized Council of Fifty. That the information was leaked to the Laws indicates that some in the council found the act off-putting and audacious, but it takes on a new light when combined with the new doctrine. If everyone else were in the process of becoming kings and gods as well, his act was simply an indication of his place further along in the chain, a place the righteous would reach in due course.  

Again, polygamy fit admirably into this picture as a way of increasing connection. The promises in the revelation on polygamy and the Second Anointing showed that entering polygamy was something people could do in this life to assure a higher level of progression and a great

---

704 Ibid, p. 536.
many connections in the chain of exaltation when they entered the next life. In a sense, the sermon completed the theological narrative that so appealed to converts like John Fullmer. It explained the origins and ultimate fate of human existence.

**Mormon Dissidents Join With Outsiders Against Joseph Smith**

People in surrounding towns and the dissident Mormons fighting polygamy were not attuned to this narrative, however. Newspapers in surrounding cities, especially the *Warsaw Signal*, were only too eager to join the dissidents in reviling Mormons and came close to calling for all-out war. In addition, Law and Foster sought to frustrate polygamy by bringing legal suit against Joseph Smith in the Carthage court. On May 23, 1844, William Law brought suit against Joseph Smith for living in adultery with one of his plural wives, Maria Lawrence. A Carthage grand jury issued indictments, but when Joseph went to Carthage at the end of May, 1844 to obey the summons, a witness was absent and the cases were postponed.

Law’s lawsuit against Joseph Smith indicates the direction dissenters hoped to go in their fight against polygamy. They hoped that by shedding light on the secret doings in Nauvoo they could destroy secret Nauvoo—they could have their day in the court of law and the court of public opinion. They hoped, in essence, that polygamy would wither when exposed to the light and the law. To this end, they obtained type and printed 1000 copies of the only issue of what was intended to be an instrument to fight polygamy, the *Nauvoo Expositor*. The paper sought to condemn the doctrine of plural wives, called

---

“abominations and whoredoms,” but uphold the form of religion “originally taught by Joseph Smith.” The Expositor was published on Friday, June 7, 1844. 

Michael Quinn has argued that though a prospectus for The Expositor had surfaced before it was published, Joseph Smith did not seem too worried about the paper, perhaps because polygamy was old news by that time and therefore did not take steps to quash it before it came out. What he did not know was that the paper had plans to reveal the existence, and to some extent the plans, of the Council of Fifty. The plan for the new Council of Fifty was, according to Klaus Hansen, to make Nauvoo an independent state detached from the state of Illinois, a concept that would surely give surrounding communities renewed existential angst.

Beyond these objectives, in the Council of Fifty meetings, specific plans were being made to not only make Nauvoo independent, but to exploit international rivalries on behalf of Mormons. They would do this in the process of settling territory in the west that, in 1844, was disputed by a cadre of foreign countries, Mexico, England, France, Russia and the United States. The strategy involved sending emissaries to these countries to negotiate without the knowledge of the United States. It was a dangerous

707 Nauvoo Expositor, June 7, 1844. Available online.
708 Cook, William Law, p. 55, Law Nauvoo diary, 7 June, 1844.
709 Quinn, The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power, p. 138. Quinn points out that Smith was alerted to some degree about the dissidents intentions to include some information about the Council of Fifty and Kingdom of God ambitions because the dissenters published a prospectus for their upcoming publication of the Nauvoo Expositor on 10 May, 1844. In the prospectus they advocated repeal of the Nauvoo charter, something that was already old news, and threatened to expose “gross moral imperfections,” which likely meant polygamy, also old hat by this time. Quinn argues that what disturbed Joseph Smith most was a reference to Nauvoo’s “SELF-CONSTITUTED MONARCH.” This could only mean that the secret king-crowning incident in front of the Council of Fifty had been leaked to the dissenters. Joseph Smith called a meeting of the Fifty to discuss this on 13 May, and Sidney Rigdon was sent to unsuccessfully seek peace with William Law. Law countered that he would only relent if Joseph Smith would renounce polygamy, but he did not mention the Council of Fifty to Rigdon. Since he did not mention it, Quinn believes Smith was reassured and took no further action to suppress the Nauvoo Expositor before it was issued.
710 Klaus Hansen, Quest For Empire, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1967, p. 80.
game; exposure would build on John C. Bennett’s 1842 accusations that Mormons had plans to take over the country and would seem treasonous. Besides reiterating accusations of polygamy, the *Nauvoo Expositor* revealed the existence of the ultra-secret Council of Fifty, which told Joseph Smith that he had been betrayed by those he had most trusted. Quinn has argued that this exposure was so demoralizing to Smith that he was ready to abandon all the secret things that had grown up between 1841 and 1844, polygamy among them.\footnote{Ibid., p. 139.}

Smith told William Clayton to hide or bury the minutes from the Council of Fifty meetings for fear they would be discovered and used to incriminate him. Clearly Quinn is correct that Joseph Smith understood that the minutes could add to the saints’ problems, but he was also acutely concerned about polygamy. An encounter between Smith and William Marks, head of the Nauvoo High Council, related in 1853 indicates the state of Smith’s mind in the tumultuous weeks before his death.

> When the doctrine of polygamy was introduced into the church as a principle of exaltation, I took a decided stand against it; which stand rendered me quite unpopular with many of the leading ones of the church…Joseph, however, became convinced before his death that he had done wrong; for about three weeks before his death, I met him one morning in the street, and he said to me, “Brother Marks…We are a ruined people.” I asked, how so? he said: “This doctrine of polygamy, or Spiritual-wife system, that has been taught and practiced among us, will prove our destruction and overthrow. I have been deceived,” said he, “in reference to its practice; it is wrong; it is a curse to mankind, and we shall have to leave the United States soon, unless it can be put down and its practice stopped in the church.”\footnote{William Marks to “Beloved Brethren,” 15 June 1853, in *Zion’s Harbinger, and Baneemy’s Organ*, 3 July, 1853 p.53. Marks’ statement was made nearly 10 years after the encounter, when he was involved with groups that would later become the polygamy-denying Reorganized church. It seems plausible that}
The implications of Joseph Smith’s statement to William Marks do not necessarily contradict those of his admonition to William Clayton to hide the Council of Fifty minutes, and concurs with later arguments raised by Klaus J. Hansen that Kingdom of God thinking and the Council of Fifty were intertwined in Mormon theology and worked together to make Mormons inassimilable in Illinois. Smith’s statement to Marks, however, reflects the fact that the most effective attempt at stopping the Kingdom of God and polygamy came from inside the movement and was initially concentrated on polygamy, though the dissenters were perfectly willing to play on fears of the Kingdom of God to accomplish their purpose.

Marks did not go west with the saints and was later in the first presidency of the Reorganized Church, but his assertion that Joseph Smith was rethinking polygamy was corroborated by people who joined with the main body of the saints in their journey west. Even Brigham Young, who was away on a campaigning mission when the Smiths were killed, admitted, “Joseph was worn out with it, [polygamy] but as to his denying any such thing I never knew that he denied the doctrine of polygamy….Some have said that he did, but I do not believe he ever did.” Since Young was not in Nauvoo during the perilous months of May and June 1844, he was not in a position to know Joseph’s state of mind at that time. His admission that Smith was “worn out” with the practice of polygamy was

---

Joseph Smith would have been conflicted about polygamy at this point, however, because it was a central cause of many of the serious problems that appeared to be leading to the ruin of the church. Hansen, *Quest For Empire*, Introduction, unnumbered pages. Also, p. 52. Here the revelation concerning the Kingdom of God is called “political dynamite.” Transcription of Brigham Young’s unpublished sermon, 8 Oct. 1866, LDS archives, also quoted in Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 179.
remarkable, given how important it was in Utah when he thus spoke in 1866, and lends credence to Marks’ claims.

**Fallout From the Expositor**

One can only imagine the rumor and speculation that inundated Nauvoo after the first and only issue of the Nauvoo Expositor appeared on Friday, June 7, 1844. The Nauvoo City Council met the next day for 6 ½ hours and again on Monday, June 10 for 7 ½ hours deliberating about what to do. In the end, they condemned the *Expositor* as a nuisance that spread lies and slander calculated to disturb the peace, and the council ordered the city marshal, John P. Greene, to destroy the printing press and type that had produced the newspaper.

It was the destruction of the *Expositor* that led to intense public outcry from surrounding communities, outcry that corresponded with Smith’s equally intense discouragement about his betrayal at the hands of one or more members of the Council of Fifty. The situation became so heated that Joseph, Hyrum and bodyguard Porter Rockwell clandestinely left Nauvoo on the night of June 22 and crossed the Mississippi river to the Iowa side intending to escape to the west, a situation which threw all of Nauvoo into panic. Emma and others encouraged the men to return to stand trial, which led Joseph Smith to declare “If my life is of no value to my friends, it is of none to myself.” He returned to Nauvoo and then went to Carthage with his brother and other church leaders to await trial. It was at Carthage Jail that the brothers were attacked at the hands of a vigilante mob, leading to their deaths on June 27, 1844. The citizens of

---

716 *HC* 6:430-433.
717 Ibid.
719 *HC* 6:549.
Nauvoo sorrowfully brought their prophet and his brother back to their city and buried them in a secret grave lest it be disturbed by mobs.

**Conclusion**

Secret practice of polygamy had indeed taken a frightful toll. Besides contributing to the Smith brothers’ deaths, it had prevented Joseph Smith from using his persuasive powers and extensive charisma to convert the saints to polygamy from the pulpit and in other public ways, it had put Joseph Smith and the church in a deeply negative light on many occasions, and it had alienated some important community members. Gossip and rumor had also damaged community cohesion. Repeated attempts to introduce polygamy publicly had shown that members on the whole were not ready to accept such a drastic change to marriage culture. Emma and the dissenters’ campaign against polygamy seemed to be winning.

On the other hand, through secret introduction, in spite of its perils, polygamy had been accepted by many, and others were gradually becoming accustomed to the idea. The campaign had been subtle and persuasive in many ways, as the Emily Partridge and William Clayton stories show. In addition, polygamy had influenced the trajectory of the Mormon theological narrative, which the introduction of the endowment, the second anointing, the revelation on polygamy and the King Follett discourse had completed. Mormons now understood what they had to do to not only be saved, but to continue to grow and progress, even to achieving godhood. Polygamy was deeply embedded in this narrative.

The immediate problem after Joseph Smith’s death, however, was to find a way forward. Mormons had to find a new leader and determine what shape the church would
take without their prophet to guide it. The dissenters who had published the *Expositor* had hoped that exposure to public opinion, and later the death of Joseph Smith, would kill polygamy. They were certainly aware that many in Nauvoo had grave doubts about polygamy and despised the secretive way it was implemented. Those who had embraced plural marriage and formed polygamous family bonds, by contrast, had accepted a theological narrative that required polygamy and were determined that it should go forward. After Smith died, they could add martyrdom to their defense of all he had taught. In the summer of 1844, as Nauvoo grieved their fallen prophet, it was anyone’s guess whether the church would chart a monogamous or polygamous course.
Chapter Six:

Polygamy and the Succession Crisis, 1844-46

When Joseph Smith was killed, church members were stunned and confused. They had believed he was a prophet who would establish the Kingdom of God on earth. How could such a man be murdered by a mob? How would they continue without him? Certainly Joseph Smith’s death precipitated a crisis that required church adherents to determine what direction the church should go and who could best lead them in the desired way. Polygamy was an integral part of this crisis, but still a hidden one. By the time Joseph Smith died, some leaders and elite members had internalized the tenets of the revelation on polygamy, were firmly committed to it, and regarded it as central to the Mormon theological narrative. Others believed it was wrong and sinful and would destroy the church. Most members remained ignorant of the doctrine, or were at least uncertain about the rumors they had heard. 720

Though a strong leader was needed right away to deal with the Mormons’ hostile neighbors, succession could not be settled immediately after the murders because most church leaders were away campaigning for Joseph Smith’s bid for the presidency of the United States. 721 Only one of the most likely leadership possibilities, William Marks, president of the Nauvoo High Council, remained in the city. Polygamy, however, began to play a role in the succession crisis even before Brigham Young and Sidney Rigdon, the two other most likely successors among the Mormon leadership, returned to Nauvoo. 722

720 Quinn, Mormon Hierarchy, p. 174.
721 Ibid., p. 144.
722 Ibid., pp. 149-50.
Since the debate over polygamy was still *sub rosa*, people who knew the truth had to support their side of the issue by manipulating circumstances regarding the succession crisis.\(^{723}\) Everyone in-the-know understood during the summer of 1844, however, that the future of Mormon polygamy depended on who became the new leader of the church, a prospect that was very much in doubt. Given the storied nature of Mormon belief, it was likely that the successful candidate would be the man who built upon the theological narrative that Joseph Smith had established.

**The Importance of Strong Leadership in the Wake of Assassination**

The importance of a strong leader became more and more obvious as the days passed after the murder. The church itself was in a confused state, but even worse, the saints were at risk from surrounding communities. Governor Ford, who had essentially lost control of the conflict, wrote in July 1844 to inform church leader W.W. Phelps that “public feeling is now, at this time, as thoroughly against [the saints] as it has ever been.”\(^{724}\) He admonished Phelps that strong leadership would be necessary to avoid further bloodshed, because the temporary ceasefire could be, and would be, reignited on the slimmest pretext. Renewed violence would not be started by Mormons, however.\(^{725}\) Anti-Mormons had feared that the powerful Nauvoo Legion would destroy them after the murders, but instead Mormons adopted a passive attitude.

Annette Hampshire has argued that two reasons explain Mormon passivity at this juncture; the disarray and controversy over succession that followed the murders and the

---

\(^{723}\) Ibid.

\(^{724}\) *HC*: 7:204

\(^{725}\) Hampshire, *Mormonism in Conflict*, p. 228.
Mormon eschatological view of the disaster.\footnote{Ibid.} A July 1844 letter, sent from the two members of the Twelve in Nauvoo to their proselytizing brethren, stated, “And we have now every reason to believe that the fulfillment of his great purposes are much nearer than we had supposed, and that not many years hence we shall see the kingdom of God coming with power and great glory to our deliverance.”\footnote{HC 7:189.} Mormons, it seems, acted passively because they believed their day of triumph was coming soon. All-out war with anti-Mormons would only decimate their own people and would not usher in the Kingdom of God. The saints instead needed to reach a consensus on the meaning of Joseph Smith’s life and mission and determine how they could move forward to establish the Kingdom of God on earth they believed Joseph Smith had begun.\footnote{Hampshire, Mormonism in Conflict, p. 229.} In the wake of the assassination, people were primed for a conversation on these weighty topics, but lacked the necessary leadership. The Quorum of Anointed continued to meet with William Marks at their head, but July 1844 was nevertheless a period of troubled uncertainty for the church.

**Confusion Over Succession**

Young, Rigdon and Marks were obvious possibilities for succession, but they could not really claim that Joseph Smith had designated them to succeed him, though he had designated various successors to himself over the years.\footnote{Quinn, Mormon Hierarchy, Chapter 6, pp. 189-243.} Many of them had fallen out of favor or died, but members of the Smith family were still possibilities and other claimants would step forward in the months that followed, which naturally led to
confusion about who should succeed.\textsuperscript{730} The process for making the change was also murky, since none of the quorums had been given clear authority to make such a decision.\textsuperscript{731} The quorums of the Seventies and the Twelve still technically had equal authority with the Nauvoo High Council in matters of church governance.\textsuperscript{732} Joseph Smith had given more and more authority to the Twelve in Nauvoo, especially as they had supported him in introducing polygamy, but they had not officially been elevated above the other quorums. Leadership possibilities included Joseph’s brothers William and Samuel, but neither had been central to church leadership as Hyrum and Joseph had been.\textsuperscript{733} Joseph Smith had once ordained his son, Joseph III, to succeed him, but at 12 years of age, he was too young to take the reins of the church.\textsuperscript{734} Some favored establishing an interregnum while young Joseph grew into his majority, but this still left the problem of appointing a leader during the interregnum period.\textsuperscript{735}

The Quorum of the Anointed waffled about how they should proceed. They had been a very active group in the months before Smith’s death and were the select people who received the endowment and second anointing. Most of them, Marks excepted, had entered polygamy. They seemed to be the most intact quorum of leadership that might possibly deal with the succession crises.\textsuperscript{736} By contrast, the Nauvoo High Council had been reduced by defections from men who opposed polygamy, and most of the Twelve had not had time to return from their campaign missions. At first quorum members

\textsuperscript{730} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{731} Quinn, \textit{The Mormon Hierarchy}, p. 143.
\textsuperscript{732} The revelation on priesthood is found in \textit{Doctrine and Covenants} section 107. Also see D Michael Quinn, \textit{Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power}, p. 158.
\textsuperscript{733} Ibid., pp. 213-226.
\textsuperscript{734} Ibid., pp. 212, 226-241
\textsuperscript{735} Ibid., p. 238.
\textsuperscript{736} Ibid., Chapter 5, “The Succession Crisis and the Twelve,” pp. 143-185
thought they should wait until the Twelve returned to Nauvoo before making a decision. Emma Smith insisted, however, that it was important to appoint someone quickly “on account of the situation in business.” 737

By July 12, the Quorum of the Anointed was ready to act by voting to appoint William Marks to head the church, when the issue of polygamy intervened. Newel K. Whitney privately alerted William Clayton to the likelihood that polygamy would almost certainly be curtailed if Marks were appointed. Speaking in code, Clayton wrote that Whitney “referred me to the fact of Marks being with Law and Emma in opposition to Joseph and the Quorum. And if Marks is appointed Trustee our spiritual blessings will be destroyed inasmuch as he is not favorable to the most important matters.” 738 “Spiritual blessings” and “the most important matters” meant polygamy. Using these terms indicates how polygamy was regarded not only by Clayton, but by Brigham Young and the Twelve as well.

Both Whitney and Clayton were involved with polygamy—Clayton’s plural wife, Margaret, had given birth to her child by this time, and Whitney’s daughter, Sarah Ann, had married Joseph Smith. The men successfully lobbied other anointed quorum members to prevent the vote on Marks, which unfortunately led to corrosive infighting for the rest of the month. 739 The incident shows that though the men had not necessarily thought through the implications of the various leadership possibilities in the initial confusion of the leadership crisis, when they did begin to think about the likely policies of future leaders, polygamy became an important factor in their leadership choices. In

738 Ibid.
739 Quinn, p. 151-2.
their minds, polygamy had to be preserved; it thus became an important part of their strategic thinking about succession.

The impasse would soon be settled when Sidney Rigdon and Brigham Young arrived in Nauvoo at the beginning of August. Rigdon arrived first and commenced to make the case that he should lead the church. In spite of his position in the first presidency and his vice presidential spot on the ticket with Joseph Smith, Rigdon and Smith had had a rocky relationship for many years. Rigdon had not been given the second anointing, though he did receive the endowment in May 1844.\textsuperscript{740} When events became tumultuous in early June 1844, just before the murder of the Smith brothers, Rigdon had fled Nauvoo for the safety of Pittsburgh. This was not necessarily from cowardice, however. Joseph Smith noted in his journal that he had sent Rigdon away in order to avenge his blood should anything happen to him, which would seem to set Rigdon up to be the new leader of the church.\textsuperscript{741}

Rigdon arrived in Nauvoo on August 3, a Saturday. The next morning he delivered a sermon to a large gathering of saints, arguing that Joseph Smith could not be replaced, but that he, Rigdon, had received a revelation on the day Joseph Smith was killed that he should be sustained by the saints as guardian of the church to “build the church up to Joseph, as he had begun it”\textsuperscript{742} In fact, he promised that Joseph would remain head of the church; he, Rigdon, would more or less channel Smith in his

\textsuperscript{741} Joseph Smith diary, loose sheet for 22 June 1844, Smith Papers, microfilm copies at Lee Library, Marriott Library. Also, Ibid, 335-6.
\textsuperscript{742} HC 7:224
leadership because he had been “commanded to speak for him.” Here was an interesting claim to authority. In essence, Rigdon claimed the same authority that Smith had possessed; he did not claim that he should lead because of any authority that Smith had given to him, but instead that he would be a mouthpiece for Smith.

In fact, this was the only claim Rigdon could make because he knew that Joseph Smith had given the second anointing and polygamy to others but not to him. In the terms of Joseph Smith’s theological narrative then, their claims to authority were greater than his. Nauvoo people were religious folk who believed in communication with heavenly messengers, however, so Rigdon’s claim was not necessarily outrageous. He managed to garner tentative support from some church leaders, including William Marks. With these two prime succession possibilities united in his favor, Rigdon seemed to be primed to succeed. Robert Bruce Flanders has asserted that a vote ratifying Rigdon’s leadership “appeared certain.” Before the vote could happen, however, Brigham Young arrived in town. Had Rigdon succeeded in securing the approbation of the saints before Young arrived or as he arrived, the Mormon future might have been radically different. Almost certainly, polygamy would not have continued, since Rigdon opposed it.

The Importance of “Keys”

Young had been devastated when he had heard about Joseph Smith’s death, and concerned that the church now lacked authority. “I forgot myself,” he wrote in his history, “The first thing I thought was, whether Joseph had taken the keys of the kingdom

---

744 Flanders, Nauvoo, Kingdom on the Mississippi, p. 312.
745 HC, 7:228.
with him from the earth….My head was so distressed [I] thought it would crack.” Then he remembered, “The keys of the kingdom are right here with the Church.” He meant that they had been given the keys through the priesthood ordinances they had received in the two years before Smith’s death, particularly the second anointing. He no doubt also remembered that he had been inducted into polygamy and that by entering it he had secured the amazing promises of assured salvation and endless kingdoms in the next life contained in the revelation on polygamy. The promises did not only pertain to the next life, however. The plan initiated by Joseph Smith was that the kingdom would begin in this life and would grow in the same the way the ancient patriarchs had increased their earthly kingdoms—through polygamy and the resulting prodigious posterity of the most faithful. Brigham Young’s doubt and despair did not last long; when he spoke of the keys of the kingdom, he meant that the authority to administer the church had been given to him and the Twelve. Fortified by this knowledge, he received a “vision of the Spirit” on his way back to Nauvoo, which told him that the Quorum of the Twelve should lead the church because they had the right of succession. The combination of the second anointing, polygamy and his vision gave Brigham Young supreme confidence that he and the Twelve apostles should lead the church; he was able to project that confidence to the saints when he made his case in Nauvoo.

The very day he arrived in Nauvoo he began to organize, and arranged a meeting with the assembled quorums for the following day, at which he made his case for apostolic leadership.

---

746 Ibid., 7:194.
747 Brigham Young remarks to a meeting to the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, 12 Feb., 1849. LDS archives.
Joseph conferred upon our [the Twelve’s] heads all the keys and powers belonging to the Apostleship which he himself held before he was taken away, and no man or set of men can get between Joseph and the Twelve in the world or in the world to come. How often has Joseph Said to the Twelve, “I have laid the foundation and you must build thereon, for upon your shoulders the kingdom rests!”

**Showdown**

Two days after Young arrived in Nauvoo, Thursday, August 8, the saints met to choose a successor. About 5000 people, by Brigham Young’s estimate, met outdoors because no indoor space was large enough to contain the crowd. In the morning meeting Sidney Rigdon spoke for one-and-a-half-hours about choosing a guardian for the church, eventually identifying himself as best qualified. When the people met again in the afternoon, Brigham Young spoke and reiterated that the Twelve Apostles had been “ordained and called by revelation through the Prophet Joseph…and anointed to bear off the keys of the kingdom of God in all the world.”

He told the people that they had hitherto walked by sight and not by faith because they had had their prophet with them, but now they must walk by faith. He then asked them point blank if they wanted the church properly organized or if they wanted “a spokesman to be a chief cook and bottle-washer….Elder Rigdon claims to be spokesman to the prophet. Very well, he was, but can he now act in that office?” Young pointed out that in order to do so, Rigdon would need to join the Smith brothers on the other side of the veil, an unsavory prospect for the very much alive Rigdon. Young went on to argue that the people “cannot appoint a prophet; but if you let the Twelve remain and act in

---

748 *HC*: 7:230 Brigham Young remarks at August 7, 1844 meeting of the assembled quorums.
749 *HC* 7:231.
750 Ibid., 7:232.
751 Ibid., 7:232-6.
their place, the keys of the kingdom are with them and they can manage the affairs of the church and direct all things aright.” They could not do so under Rigdon, however, because “No man has a right to counsel the Twelve but Joseph Smith.”

The performance was masterful and convincing to the saints. In essence, Young told them that if they voted for Rigdon they would be presuming to appoint a prophet, and if they did this, Rigdon’s authority would come from them, not God. On the other hand, the Twelve had already been appointed and given authority from God by Joseph Smith. The choice was no choice really. Did they want to be led by those with authority or did they want to take responsibility on themselves to give authority to Sidney Rigdon? Young’s reasoning had even convinced two men that Rigdon had asked to speak for him, Amasa Lyman, the man he meant to appoint as his first counselor, and W.W. Phelps, an old friend who had convinced Joseph Smith to admit Rigdon to the Quorum of the Anointed in 1843. Lyman arose to speak after Young and told the people, “I do not make exceptions to anything [Brigham Young] has said. I believe there is no power, or officer, or means wanted to carry on the work, but what is in the Twelve.”752 His words were surely disappointing to Rigdon.

Phelps’ words were even more damaging to Rigdon’s case because he revealed to the people the existence of the previously secret Quorum of the Anointed and identified it as a vehicle for authority. “There is a quorum that the Twelve belong to, and that the people will receive and endowment. I brought President Rigdon into that quorum, and he received in part the blessings. I could not bear the thought of President Rigdon going in

752 Ibid., pp. 236-7.
to the world without his endowment. He did obtain part, and I hope he will submit.”

If Rigdon had not received all the blessings that the Twelve had from Joseph Smith, and if he had been brought to the special quorum only at the behest of Phelps, then the Twelve clearly had been given more power by Joseph Smith than Rigdon. Phelps did not specify what blessings Rigdon had not received, but many people would surely have suspected that polygamy was a possibility.

Young’s authority was bolstered by another phenomenon--some who were present at the meeting later reported that he took on the voice and demeanor of Joseph Smith as he spoke. This was not experienced by all those present, but was reported by more than one person. When Young called for a vote, support was nearly unanimous in favor of the Twelve. The result was not surprising given the way Young had framed the argument in terms of authority. Moreover, Rigdon’s plan to be guardian of the church by essentially channeling Joseph Smith was not part of any narrative that Joseph Smith had presented while alive. Instead, there was the danger that Rigdon would, on pretense of speaking for Joseph Smith, autocratically rule over them all. Wilford Woodruff summed up the attitude of the Twelve toward Rigdon’s vision, calling it “a kind of second class vision” which designated him to “come and offer himself to lead the church.” Brigham Young “showed that their could not be any one before the Twelve.”

Richard Bushman has written that Brigham Young’s “Appealing to the Church on these

---

753 Ibid. p. 238. Also see Quinn, Mormon Hierarchy, p. 169.
755 HC, p. 240.
756 Wilford Woodruff journal, 7 Aug, 1844, LDS archives.
terms assumed that the members had incorporated the constitution of priesthood authority into their thinking.”

Andrew Ehat has argued that leadership of the Twelve was the only option, since Joseph Smith had elevated the Twelve in church governance and entrusted them with polygamy and priesthood ordinances. The Twelve did not presume to take the prophetic mantle of Joseph Smith, however, and acknowledged that they could not “call a man to be a prophet.” In essence, as Michael Quinn has pointed out, they had sidestepped the succession question for the time being, still hoping that Joseph Smith III might one day lead the church. After the meeting, however, the Twelve had considerable power to shape the leadership and direction of the church because of the unusual ordinances and form of marriage Joseph Smith had introduced to them. Michael Quinn has argued that “Nauvoo’s secret history was the foundation of apostolic succession.”

Some were less enamored of the proceedings, however. George Miller, for example, who held the important church office of bishop in Nauvoo, was disgruntled that an exploratory mission to Texas that he had supported had been curtailed and eventually joined Lyman Wight in a splinter group there. He wrote in a letter that Young’s August 8 speech was a

---

758 Ehat, *Joseph Smith’s Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the 1844 Mormon Succession Question*. Ehat’s argument is convincing, but I would counter that what is obvious to historians at a distance would not have been clear to anxious people looking for a leader at that time. Sidney Rigdon had been very high in church circles and still retained his position in the First Presidency of the church. Joseph Smith had preached about the importance of ordinances, but had not necessarily tied them to Brigham Young and the Twelve. Polygamy was still secret. For these reasons, though Ehat is right that Smith had given authority to the Twelve in numerous ways, this would not necessarily have been obvious to the rank and file of the church at this juncture. Sidney Rigdon would have seemed like a viable possibility to succeed.
760 Ibid., p. 169.
loud and long harangue. I had always took him to be a blunderbuss in speaking and on this occasion apparently more so, for the life of me I could not see any point to his remarks than to turn over Sidney Rigdon’s pretensions…I must confess that all the proceedings at this time was anarchy and boisterous confusion…Let me be excused from saying more on this painful subject.\(^{761}\)

But Miller was in a minority, though Quinn has made the important point that Joseph Smith had arranged so many paths to succession that there was a significant splintering effect after his death. Not only Rigdon, but Alpheus Cutler, James Strang, Lyman Wight and others started movements that pulled members into their orbit, dividing not only the church but families as well.\(^{762}\) Some scholars estimate that 50% of church members followed the Twelve and the rest were divided among the other groups or left altogether.\(^{763}\)

Though Brigham Young scored a significant victory at the August 8 meeting, he had not completely consolidated power. William Marks still had claims to authority should he choose to assert them. He had been given the Second Anointing before Brigham Young and he could make a good case that the authority of the Twelve was not greater than that of the Nauvoo High Council. In addition, Sidney Rigdon, did not concede and remained in Nauvoo hoping to win support. He met with followers and even ordained some to offices.\(^{764}\) He was surely vexed by the thought that his claims might have been upheld by the saints had a vote happened before Brigham Young returned. For his part, Brigham Young lost no time in confidently seizing the reins of power by renewing the second anointing and polygamy, the “secret things” that had given him and

\(^{761}\) As quoted in Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo, Kingdom on the Mississippi*, p. 317.


\(^{763}\) Ibid.

\(^{764}\) *HC*, 7:266-69.
the Twelve the authority and confidence to seize the reins of the church. A week after the succession meeting, he re-instituted the second anointing ceremony, which had not been performed in six months, for polygamist George Miller, the man who considered Young such a blunderbuss in speaking, and his first wife.\footnote{Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 170.} On 2 September he affirmed his intentions regarding polygamy by marrying his friend Heber C. Kimball to another plural wife.\footnote{Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, p. 109.}

On the very day the fullness of the priesthood ceremony was performed for George Miller, Emma Smith had an angry exchange with William Clayton that sheds light on the role polygamy played in church affairs as Brigham Young was consolidating the power of the Twelve. The Smith family property and finances had become hopelessly tangled with the affairs of the church, and, as Joseph Smith’s clerk, Clayton was involved in the process of trying to untangle these interests. Hoping to get things settled, Emma summoned Clayton to speak with her about her financial affairs. Emma feared that she and her children would not receive their due inheritance and was still very distrustful of the Twelve over the secret introduction of polygamy. Before and after the meeting, Clayton discussed it with Brigham Young.

After some tense exchanges over finances, Emma told Clayton that “it was secret things which had cost Joseph and Hyrum their lives” and further added, “I prophecy that it will cost you and the Twelve your lives as it has done them...We had no secrets that we must keep back from the public.” Clayton reported that Emma “was determined to have everything settled now” about both polygamy and her finances. Clayton responded, in
accordance with the policy of the Twelve, that “there were many things which I was unwilling the world should know anything about and should not lend my hand to ruin the church.” The conversation reveals that those who were privy to the secret things understood that they were a threat to the church. Quinn has estimated that 95% of the church did not know for certain about secret things, especially polygamy; should they be informed before they were prepared by the endowment and other ordinances to accept it, the church could experience great losses in membership.

Emma was in a terrible quandary. Her efforts, and those of the Laws and Fosters, had not, in the face of continued denials, succeeded in convincing most church members that leaders were practicing polygamy. She had lost much of her public clout with the demise of Relief Society and the death of her husband, and she was becoming deeply alienated from the Twelve, yet she was somewhat dependent on them to untangle church finances and determine how much property she retained. She could see by Brigham Young’s momentum in consolidating power that the pro-polygamy faction was rapidly gaining ground. When Clayton, her main contact with the Twelve, implied that secrets would still be kept and polygamy would continue, she was understandably distraught. She would not continue with the main body of the church if it retained polygamy. She would not subject her children to this.

As Clayton’s conversation with Emma Smith indicates, those supporting polygamy understood perfectly by then that it could not be revealed to the world, but also

---

768 Quinn, Mormon Hierarchy, p. 170. He arrived at this number by assuming that for every polygamous marriage there were three people, friends or family who were not personally involved with polygamy who were privy to the secret.
769 Ibid.
that they were somewhat immune from accusations about it because rumors had been circulating for so long that people either believed them and didn’t care or had not witnessed enough evidence to believe the gossip. Polygamy’s strongest opponents, like the Laws and Fosters and members of the Nauvoo High Council who opposed it, had left the city. Emma Smith may have liked to leave with her children, but she was tied to Nauvoo by property and business interests.

After the August 8 meeting and vote of confidence, Brigham Young had considerable momentum behind him in his effort to convince all levels of leadership in Nauvoo that they should carry on the plans of Joseph Smith—a precursor to convincing them to support polygamy. On August 27 he “met with officers of the Nauvoo Legion in council; six of the apostles were present. The council decided that they would carry out all the views of the martyred Prophet; the brethren felt very spirited on the subject.” It is hard to imagine that this vague reference could mean anything but polygamy. Continuing the endowment and the second anointing would not be controversial; only polygamy would be likely to rouse the brethren to a spirited defense of “all the views” of Joseph Smith, at least those who knew about it. Others could be convinced of the importance of polygamy, however, if they could be brought to believe that it had been instituted by Joseph Smith. On 31 August, Brigham Young consolidated his leadership even further by being made lieutenant-general of the Nauvoo Legion.

Young also met with other church quorums, including the high priests and seventies, and then published a notice in the Times and Seasons that invited all members

---

770 HC, 7:264.
771 HC, p. 265.
who were abroad “in obedience to the commandments of the Lord, to gather to Nauvoo with their means to help build up the city, and complete the temple.” He cautioned them to “Beware of speculations about the Prophet! Believe no tales on the subject: Time will tell who are the friends of Joseph Smith, who laid down his life for his brethren. We have no new commandments, but beseech the brethren to honor and obey the old ones.” 772 Such statements reassured the saints that Young was making no drastic changes and at the same time upheld the things, known and secret, that Joseph Smith had begun. The admonition to obey the old commandments would even reassure those who might be worried about rumors of polygamy without actually repudiating it. In fact, to those in-the-know, polygamy was an old commandment. With great confidence and energy, Brigham Young thus organized the church and consolidated the power of the Twelve.

Sidney Rigdon stayed in Nauvoo after the August mass meeting and managed to convince some people to follow him. He also—without authority in the minds of the Twelve—began to call followers to church offices and give them ordinances. John C. Bennett even appeared in town with a document that he claimed was a revelation given him by Joseph Smith in 1841, designating Rigdon as successor and himself as second in command. The verbose style of the writing was vintage Bennett, and no one, even Rigdon, was convinced. 773 In early September the Twelve had had enough. They had won the vote of the people and controlled the ecclesiastical machinery. 774 They tried to convince Rigdon to support them, but he had been their superior for too many years and

772 HC, 7:267.
774 Flanders, 317.
could not bring himself to do so.\textsuperscript{775} They first disfellowshipped him, then tried him for his membership and voted in favor of excommunication.\textsuperscript{776}

The minutes of Rigdon’s trial were printed in the \textit{Times and Seasons}, which allowed the case against him and for the authority of the Twelve to be made to all Nauvoo residents. His biographer has argued that the trial was a farce, but nevertheless has acknowledged, along with Rigdon’s own son, that Young was a far better choice for leading the church than Rigdon would have been.\textsuperscript{777} After the trial, he returned to Pittsburgh, consolidated his control of local church members there, and began to publish \textit{The Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate}, which attacked the Twelve as apostates because they practiced polygamy.\textsuperscript{778}

\textbf{The Case for Authority—And Polygamy}

Though the Rigdon succession episode had been difficult and painful, it served to force questions about legitimate authority and succession into the open, and allowed the Twelve to effectively make their argument. Beyond ordinances and authority, their claims were bolstered by other factors. First Joseph Smith had gradually given them a larger role than the Nauvoo High Council, even beyond their jurisdiction in the mission field, and hence they had a higher profile in Nauvoo. Second, it made sense to have the Twelve serve the people they had converted while on missions. Their missionary converts gave them a large base of supportive followers. Third, those investigating the church, and converts who arrived in Nauvoo, were unaccustomed to Mormon terms and designations. The authority of Twelve Apostles was familiar to Bible-reading converts.

\textsuperscript{775} Van Wagoner, \textit{Sidney Rigdon}, p. 352.
\textsuperscript{776} \textit{HC} 7:268.
\textsuperscript{778} Ibid., 367-8.
whereas the strange sounding “High Council” was not, and might even bring to mind the discredited Pharisees of the New Testament. Since virtually all the people who moved to Nauvoo were converts, it is not too surprising that they already regarded the Twelve as next in authority to Joseph Smith when they arrived and continued to do so when they became residents of Zion. Beyond these reasons, however, the Twelve’s involvement with the endowment, the second anointing and polygamy were the most powerful factors in their favor in their own minds and, ultimately, the minds of their followers.

A few days after the threat from Rigdon was successfully neutralized, Brigham Young and his friend, fellow member of the Twelve, Heber C. Kimball, began secretly marrying all the “widows” of Joseph Smith. They married the women for time only; in the eternities the women, and the children they bore with their new husbands, belonged to Joseph, in the style of Old Testament levirate marriages.779 Marrying these women accomplished several purposes. It signaled in no uncertain terms Brigham Young’s stance on polygamy. He had already signaled this in other ways, particularly by performing a marriage for Heber Kimball, but marrying the Smith widows sent the signal to almost the entire subset of Nauvoo polygamists. It also helped assure that the women would be loyal to Young and the Twelve in consolidating their power and that they would transmit that loyalty to their friends and associates who were inducted into secret Nauvoo. In essence, Young was consolidating his power simultaneously in both public and secret Nauvoo through these marriages.

The possible challenges to Young and the Twelve were not entirely neutralized, however. William Marks was still head of the Nauvoo High Council, and two other quorums, the Quorum of the Seventy and the High Priests, were potential challengers. Young did not yet meet with the Quorum of Fifty. As a political body, they were not considered a possibility for leadership of the church. In late September, Young neutralized any possibility of challenge from the Seventy Quorum by changing the shape of the quorum when he ordained “the sixty-three subordinate members of the First Quorum of Seventy as presidents of nine local quorums of seventy. This vacated the Seventy’s first quorum, which the 1835 revelation said was ‘equal in authority’ with the Quorum of the Twelve.”\footnote{Quinn, \textit{Mormon Hierarchy}, p. 174.} Later, at the October conference, Brigham Young would elevate more than 400 men to the office of Seventy, which removed them from the jurisdiction of the Nauvoo High Council and placed them under the jurisdiction of the Twelve, to whom they also owed their promotion. As Quinn put it “this was the way in which Young overwhelmed by sheer numbers the revealed equality of authority which the high council at Nauvoo shared with the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 175.}

At the October general church conference, Young presided for the first time and told the saints “If you don’t know whose right it is to give revelations, I will tell you. It is I.”\footnote{\textit{HC}, 7:288.} Heber Kimball reiterated at the conference that “We have got to carry out Joseph’s measures and you have got to assist us.” The entire church voted “that we as a church endeavor to carry out the principles and measures heretofore adopted and laid down by

\footnote{Quinn, \textit{Mormon Hierarchy}, p. 174.} \footnote{Ibid., p. 175.} \footnote{\textit{HC}, 7:288.}
Joseph Smith.” Michael Quinn has observed that “the vote was unanimous even though the general church membership knew little or nothing about the secret “principles” to which Kimball was actually referring.”

This way of proceeding took advantage of the lessons learned by Joseph Smith in his efforts to introduce polygamy into the church. Brigham Young and Heber Kimball understood how it worked because it had worked on them. Neither had wanted to accept polygamy, but they did so because they became convinced that Joseph Smith introduced it because he was commanded to by God. At this juncture they needed to solidify the line of authority that led from them to Joseph Smith to God himself without scaring anyone else away by pushing polygamy too precipitously. Once they had convinced the people in no uncertain terms of the validity of their authority and given it time to settle in, they could begin to gradually draw more people into secret Nauvoo as Joseph Smith had done. At that point, they could use a convincing argument when introducing the principle to others privately. They could honestly say that they had experienced doubt themselves but had trusted in Joseph Smith and taken more wives, and then they could testify that the unions they had created were successful. In the future they would experience numerous divorces, but neither had been divorced by any of their wives yet. In the meantime, they emphasized at the conference that the Twelve could give the people the endowment that they so desired, but “you cannot obtain these things until that house [the Temple] is built.”

---

783 HC, 7:300.
784 Quinn, Mormon Hierarchy, p. 174.
785 HC, 7:300.
The Twelve did not have jurisdiction over high priests, but at the same
conference, Young selected 85 high priests to preside over branches in the mission field,
making them “directly answerable to the Twelve.” A few months later he called more
high priests as missionaries, again, placing them under the jurisdiction of the Twelve. At
the October conference he also released William Marks as president of the Nauvoo High
Council. Later in the fall, Young threatened to discipline Marks unless he signed a
statement repudiating Rigdon and supporting the Twelve. Marks signed the statement,
which was published in the newspaper, but after the humiliations he had suffered, left the
city shortly thereafter.

Young then began to signal his support for plural wives by admitting them to the
Quorum of the Anointed. Only 7.6% of the people admitted to the quorum by Joseph
Smith had been plural wives; by contrast, 57.1% of those admitted by Brigham Young in
the first six months he headed the body were plural wives. This was a powerful way of
giving the women institutional support. To complete the process of transfer of power,
Young finally met with the Quorum of the Fifty in February 1845. Many unsupportive
members had been dropped and the rest sustained Young. He then commissioned them
to continue the task they had been given by Joseph Smith; they were to begin the process
of preparing the saints to move to the American west. With the reorganization of the
Council of Fifty, Brigham Young had completed the process of reorienting the church

786 Quinn, Mormon Hierarchy, p. 174.
787 Ibid., pp. 176-7.
788 Ibid.
789 Ibid.
790 Ibid.
toward the leadership of the Twelve and had done so while further embedding polygamy in the church institutional structure.

**The Blood of Martyrs—The Case For Polygamy is Strengthened**

John Fullmer articulated the state of affairs in a September 1844 letter to his uncle, also John Fullmer. Most of the letter explained the circumstances of Joseph Smith’s death, which John was in a good position to do. He informed his uncle that he was able to report on events because he had been with Joseph Smith through most of the ordeal. In fact, he had smuggled a gun in to the men so that they could defend themselves, though it proved unequal to the task. He narrowly escaped sharing their fate, “I had the honor to be with him by permission during his whole imprisonment and the fact of being subpoenaed to attend his trial caused me to return home a few hours before the fatal tragedy, to get a change of raiment, and but for this, I would, a hundred chances to one, shared the fate that he did.” John assessed the state of the church and Nauvoo just a little more than a month after Brigham Young and the Twelve had gained the support of the saints.

Perhaps you may think that because our leaders are gone we are the same as broken up, but let me tell you that this is altogether a mistake. Although their death has caused two or three to lead off with such as would follow them (one of these is Sidney Rigdon) yet I declare to you that there is no reason to be discouraged in the least. For to our joy, the prophet succeeded before his death in completely organizing the church, conferring keys, authority and enduements upon the apostles and others, so that the work can go on as well as when he alone was propelling it; and better, because there are more now to push it, each holding all the power which he held in the priestly office. We are rushing our temple ahead, faster since his death than before. In it, all who shall be found worthy, have promised their enduement.791

---

As John’s letter indicates, Smith’s death quite possibly strengthened the case for continuance of polygamy among initiated followers. John’s assertion that Joseph Smith “our prophet” had completely organized the church before his death indicates the thinking that allowed polygamy to be accepted by members. Clearly for John, what Joseph Smith had left in the capable hands of the apostles was a completed story that included keys, authority and enduements. When it was made known that part of that story was polygamy as practiced by Joseph Smith, this too would be fit into the narrative, especially in light of the role polygamy played in salvation and exaltation as delineated in the revelation on polygamy.

John’s firm belief in the narrative was only strengthened by the manner of the Smith brothers’ deaths because they were immediately hailed as martyrs. The actions of a martyr’s life tend to become elevated in the minds of adherents. Once they were identified as martyrs, people were unlikely to interpret Joseph and Hyrum Smith’s polygamy as lust-driven. It was thus easier for people to accept the broad picture of the polygamy and salvation narrative in light of the martyrdom, especially since the men were no longer physically there to remind people of their human failings.

John’s letter captures the sense of energy, purpose, and even the relief that members felt in the wake of Brigham Young’s elevation to power. The people felt “joy” at discovering that the endowment had been given to a few people and could be passed on to the rest of the saints. Joseph Smith had frequently preached publicly on the importance of these ordinances, but had told the people that the temple must be completed before they could be administered. Since the ordinances had to be passed from those who had received them to those who had not, members understood after the Smiths died why a
few people had been given the ordinances secretly outside the temple, and were comforted to learn that the ordinances they had anticipated had not died with Joseph Smith.

Mormons had few resources and knew they would need all the capital they could muster to equip themselves for the journey west, but it nevertheless soon became clear that though completing the temple was a great expense for the impoverished saints, it was a spiritual and psychological necessity. Brigham Young explicitly used the saints’ desire to receive their endowments to unite them. On August 18, 1844, shortly after he received the vote of the people to lead the church, he admonished them, “I discover a disposition in the sheep to scatter, now the shepherd is taken away. I do not say that it will never be right for this people to go from here…but I do say wait until you are counseled to do so…stay here in Nauvoo, and build the Temple and get your endowments, do not scatter; “united we stand, divided we fall.”

Brigham Young’s position as a leader was strengthened both by his insistence on completing the temple and by identifying the Smiths as martyrs. If Joseph and Hyrum had sealed their authority with their blood and Young and the Twelve were perceived as legitimate inheritors of that authority, inheritors who were continuing the theological narrative for which the Smiths had died, they were in a very strong position to shape the church in numerous ways if they could convince people that what they advocated was part of Joseph Smith’s theological narrative. A poem written by William W. Phelps, which later became a hymn, was published in the *Times and Seasons* in August 1844,

---

793 *HC* 7:254-55, 258. Also see Buerger, p. 70-71.
only weeks after Joseph Smith’s death, and shows how he was regarded by believers in the wake of his assassination.

**Praise to the Man**

Praise to the Man who communed with Jehovah!
Jesus anointed that Prophet and Seer.
Blessed to open the last dispensation,
Kings shall extol him, and nations revere.

**Chorus**

Hail to the Prophet, ascended to heaven!
Traitors and tyrants now fight him in vain.
Mingling with Gods, he can plan for his brethren;
Death cannot conquer the hero again.

Praise to his memory, he died as a martyr;
Honored and blest be his ever great name!
Long shall his blood, which was shed by assassins,
Stain Illinois while the earth lauds his fame.

Great is his glory and endless his priesthood.
Ever and ever the keys he will hold.
Faithful and true, he will enter his kingdom,
Crowned in the midst of the prophets of old.

Sacrifice brings forth the blessings of heaven;
Earth must atone for the blood of that man.
Wake up the world for the conflict of justice,
Millions shall know “Brother Joseph” again.\(^{794}\)

The words “stain Illinois” from verse two were changed in the 1920’s to “plead unto heaven,” but otherwise *Praise to the Man* is still sung by Mormon congregations to the stately tune of ‘Scotland the Brave.’ The song not only shows Joseph Smith’s central

\(^{794}\) *Times and Seasons*, 1 Aug, 1844
religious role in the minds of his followers, but also hints at the theology that led to polygamy. The first verse concerns Joseph Smith’s status as the man opening “the last dispensation,” a reference to a Biblical interpretation that divides religious history into successive chronological phases associated with new covenants between God and man. In Mormon thinking, Joseph Smith was the one chosen to usher in the final dispensation before the return of Jesus Christ and the millennium; and to delineate what those covenants would be.\(^\text{795}\) For some adherents, polygamy worked itself into the dispensational narrative as a practice that was necessary at the beginning of each dispensation.

The second verse asserts that martyrdom cemented Joseph Smith’s place in religious history—the earth would laud his fame—followed by the third verse, which illustrates why Brigham Young’s claims to priesthood keys resonated so strongly with the saints. The keys had been inherited from the prophets of old and connected Mormons with all of religious history (in other words, all dispensations) and the “restoration of all things.” It was this thinking that undergirded polygamy; it was the stories of the Old Testament prophets that led Joseph Smith to wonder about the religious uses of polygamy and God’s sanction of it. Verse three also encapsulates the Mormon understanding of heaven as a place where the prophets of each dispensation would be exalted together in a special position relative to the people who had lived in their time, again connecting all of them together in one overarching religious narrative.

The song concludes with the assurance in the fourth verse that the blessings of heaven would follow the horror of Joseph and Hyrum Smith’s deaths; there would be

conflict, but eventually “Brother Joseph” would again take his rightful place as a resurrected being revered by millions. The very name “Brother Joseph” indicates the familial nature of Mormonism, which was strengthened by polygamy. By associating with prophets of old, God and Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith even helped create a familial connection between the saints and these exalted beings. *Praise to the Man* thus reiterated much of the doctrine undergirding polygamy while underscoring Joseph Smith’s status as a martyr and the reverence he was accorded by most of the saints in Nauvoo after his death, but also bolstered Brigham Young’s claims with its talk of keys. The martyr theme was reiterated in the church wide conference held in April 1845. At the beginning of the proceedings, Brigham Young arose to ask that the saints raise their hands in support of the proposition that “Joseph Smith lived and died as a Prophet, Seer and Revelator to this church.” W. W. Phelps seconded the proposition and added “he lived according to his profession, and died a martyr to the truth.” The motion carried unanimously.\(^{796}\)

The April 1845 all-church conference brought a surprise announcement from Brigham Young, who startled the congregation by declaring on April 6, the 15\(^{th}\) anniversary of the founding of the church, “know ye not that the Millenium has commenced?\(^{797}\)” Church doctrine had previously posited that the millennium would begin with the second coming of Christ and the destruction of the wicked.\(^{798}\) Quinn has argued that the declaration was meant to prepare the congregation to sustain Young as

---

\(^{796}\) *HC*, 7:391-2.

\(^{797}\) Brigham Young Sermon, April 6, 1845, *Times and Seasons* (July 1, 1845): 956.

church president the next day.\textsuperscript{799} If the millennium had commenced—and it seemed to
Mormons reasonable that the death of their prophet was a dramatic enough event to
trigger it—then they needed a strong and undisputed leader to guide them through the
difficult days ahead. The thought that the millennium was already underway also primed
the saints to expect that the dramatic and unusual would be required of them and made
them more amenable to the idea of polygamy and a reexamination of marriage as an
institution. Brigham Young even added a new twist when he promoted polygamy—he
asked people to examine their own personal marriages to determine if they qualified as
eternal unions, with the proviso that if they did not, their marriages would be dissolved
and they could marry more compatible companions.\textsuperscript{800}

Since Smith was regarded as a martyr and had advocated polygamy, his followers
that had embraced his theological narrative and the new ordinances were unlikely to
condemn it, but convincing them to participate was another matter. Leonard Arrington
and Davis Bitton have written that Brigham Young had a “willingness, even a
compulsion, to organize and \textit{do}, to take Smith’s plans and visions, even roughshod, and
drive people to get things completed.” He was to use his unique talents to lead “the
church through a phase of consolidation, organizational strengthening, doctrinal
clarification, and coming to grips with practical problems.”\textsuperscript{801} One of those practical
problems was polygamy. By the time Joseph Smith died, polygamy was an important
discipline to the initiated, but it was not generally known nor was it very extensively

\textsuperscript{799} Quinn, \textit{Mormon Hierarchy}, p. 178.
173-4.
\textsuperscript{801} Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, \textit{The Mormon Experience}, University of Illinois Press, Chicago
and Urbana, 1992, pp. 85-86.
practiced. Only 33 men and just over 100 women had entered polygamy by that fateful day in June, 1844, most of them high level church leaders and their relations.  

Given the theology behind polygamy and its connection to the endowment, Brigham Young and other church leaders were committed to the practice for a host of reasons beyond their own participation, and a rapid increase in plural marriages after Joseph Smith’s death proved it.  

But Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball and other leaders were also practical men who understood that if polygamy were to survive and become a foundational institution of the church as the revelation on polygamy clearly intended, it would have to spread extensively among church members—it could not remain a practice for a few elite. They could not practice openly in Nauvoo, however, and as they began consolidating their plan to migrate west, the desire to live in polygamy was an important part of their longing for self-determination.  

The revelation on polygamy and the introduction of the endowment by their prophet had awakened in many members the desire to enter the form of marriage that would ensure their salvation in the highest kingdom of heaven. Joseph Smith had hoped that through gradual introduction polygamy would gain acceptance as it became embedded in the church, allowing it to be eventually introduced publicly as a flourishing and successful form of marriage. Though polygamy led directly to Smith’s tragic death, after his death, this is more or less what happened. Gossip and rumor allowed people to slowly become accustomed to the idea for they observed that the social world did not collapse around them. Over time the most dynamic and successful Mormons began to

---

802 Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy. The very useful charts on pages 311-322 provided the above statistics.
803 Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, 405-407.
804 Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy: A History, p. 82.
805 Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, p. 402.
enter polygamy. The theological narrative supported polygamy, and the leadership encouraged it through institutional support that was real, if secret. As more and more elite people contracted plural marriages and begot children in polygamy, the practice became embedded in Mormon self-understanding. Polygamy then began to move beyond the most elite circle of hierarchy to ordinary members. Just as the spread of polygamy had been facilitated by key people in the community like Elizabeth Durfee, Patty Sessions, William Clayton, Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball when Joseph Smith was alive, after his death it was further disseminated through the efforts of people like John D. Lee.

**Polygamy Moves Beyond Top Leadership**

John D. Lee, whose later life was haunted by the horrors of his participation in the Mountain Meadows Massacre, was, in his youth, a talented and charismatic man who had had great success as a missionary and who enjoyed high respect among the people.\(^{806}\) He entered polygamy in the spring of 1845, and subsequently played a key role in bringing other people into the practice.\(^{807}\) An excellent diarist and memoirist, Lee’s writings are particularly enlightening about the implementation of polygamy among the main body of the saints and the beginnings of the all-important process of institutionalization—establishing mores and social conventions that would facilitate practice. Lee was a high-level leader of a sort because he was a member of the Council of Fifty. Since this was a secret position, it did not necessarily give Lee leader status among ordinary people,

---


807 Ibid., p. 66.
though it was obvious that the hierarchy trusted him. Nevertheless, like Patty Sessions, John D. Lee was a man of the people who became a dedicated Mormon and played an important role in the legitimation of polygamy. His intense belief in Mormonism allowed him to accept polygamy and overcome tremendous difficulties to live it.

Born in Kaskaskia, Illinois in 1812, John Doyle Lee was orphaned by the age of 3 and raised by an abusive aunt; he left the household at age 16 to fend for himself. By 1833 he had married Aggatha Ann Woolsey, and five years later, already well established and in their own home with little children to raise, they encountered Mormonism and joined the church during the Missouri persecutions. The Lees were forced out of Missouri during the winter exodus of 1839. With the rest of the saints, they fled to his home state, Illinois, where they settled in Nauvoo. From Nauvoo, Lee embarked on a series of highly successful missions, in which he converted many prosperous people, some of whom gave him money to take back to Nauvoo. But John D. Lee’s missions netted more than converts and dollars; he also baptized many of his future wives. Through all of these events, Mormonism became a deeply ingrained part of John D. Lee’s identity, an identity that was only reinforced when he entered polygamy, for in becoming part of this strange practice, he and other polygamists made themselves unacceptable to the rest of U.S. society.

808 Ibid., p. 73.
809 The title of Juanita Brooks’ biography of Lee captures this quality—John Doyle Lee: Zealot, Pioneer Builder, Scapegoat. Her excellent work fully justifies including the word zealot in the title.
810 John D. Lee’s life is exceptionally well documented. He was a dedicated diarist and he wrote his life history at the end of his life while awaiting execution for the Mountain Meadows Massacre. All information for this section is taken from Lee’s Mormonism Unveiled, the Brooks biography and what diaries are available.
John D. Lee and people like him were especially important for the implementation of polygamy because in addition to his unwavering loyalty and belief, he was a hard-working and effective doer—a natural leader. By comparison with a thinker like John Fullmer, Lee was a man to jump in with both feet and carry others with him. By the time John Fullmer entered polygamy with Olive Amanda Smith in January of 1846, John D. Lee had married 10 women, beginning with one of his converts, Nancy Bean, whom he married on February 5, 1845.811

Though at this point polygamous doings were too secret to include in his diary, Lee described his initiation into polygamy in his memoirs. “In the Winter of 1845 meetings were held all over the city of Nauvoo, and the spirit of Elijah was taught in the different families as a foundation to the order of celestial marriage” he wrote. Diarist Hosea Stout has identified these meetings as very small and composed of a select group. Only those who had demonstrated zeal and allegiance to the church were included. Lee identified the doctrine taught in the meetings as not just geared to promotion of polygamy, but in a broader sense people were taught the doctrine that undergirded the Mormon approach to families and connection, Joseph Smith’s family-centered salvation. The “spirit of Elijah” Lee referred to involved “turning the hearts of the children to the fathers.”812 In other words, it referred to the formation of legalistic bonds between not just husbands and wives but also between parents and children into the eternities. In Lee’s words, “the man to stand by his wife and the woman to cleave unto her husband,

812 Joseph Smith claimed that when he was visited by the Angel Moroni, who told him about the Book of Mormon plates, Moroni quoted to him this scriptural reference, originally found in Malachi. It has always been an important scriptural foundation for Mormon social organization and connection between generations.
and the children to be adopted to the parents. I was one of the ones who entered into covenants to stand by my family, to cleave to them through time and eternity.\textsuperscript{813}

Lee’s language in describing this phenomenon shows that he regarded the connections as engendered in much broader terms than the relationships that would be established between men and women in polygamous marriages. In essence, the connectedness that Richard Bushman has described as Joseph Smith’s “lusting after kin” was the larger communal goal of the push that included adoption and plural marriage. The saints had recognized the fundamental nature of Joseph Smith’s vision and were eager to implement it. Lee wrote, “This doctrine extends much further. All persons are required to be adopted to some of the leading men of the Church. In this, however, they have the right of choice, thus forming the links of the chain of the priesthood back to the father, Adam, and so on to the second coming of the Messiah.”\textsuperscript{814} It was at this time that John D. Lee also became the second adopted son of Brigham Young.\textsuperscript{815}

Both polygamy and adoption, though encouraged, were considered privileges. Lee wrote that “The ordinance of celestial marriage was extensively practiced by men and women who had covenanted to live together, and a few men had dispensations granted them to enter into plural marriages, which were taught to be the stepping stone to celestial exaltation.” Not surprisingly given the reward, Lee noted “These inducements caused every true believer to exert himself to attain that exalted position, both men and women. In many cases the women would do the sparking through the assistance of the

\textsuperscript{813} John D. Lee, \textit{Mormonism Unveiled}, p. 173.
\textsuperscript{814} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{815} Brooks, p. 73.
first wife.‖ Lee’s assessment indicates that, at least among the carefully selected people chosen to be introduced to celestial marriage, there was enthusiasm for the idea, though the church was understandably cautious about allowing polygamy to escalate too quickly given what had happened to their prophet and his brother. The period seems to have been a tipping point for polygamy, however--the point at which the general population of Mormons ceased to oppose polygamy and began to embrace it. Certainly the number of people who entered polygamy would escalate as the time of departure from Nauvoo neared and the temple was completed, but the practice was still kept secret, perhaps in large part due to bad relations with surrounding communities.\

The completion of the temple, the endowments given there and the polygamous marriages there performed were in fact absolutely vital to keeping alive the charismatic authority of Joseph Smith. Later events on the trail west that were reported in Lee’s diary show that doubts about polygamy persisted among the uninitiated, but at this point increasing numbers of saints were finally ready to enthusiastically embrace the notion of a new order of family connections. In addition to his great harvest of wives, Lee also adopted “sons” of his own, a remarkable circumstance in light of the fact that many high level church leaders were never able to convince people to enter their “family.”\n
Beyond these new family connections, Lee identified winter of 1845 as a time when people examined their marriages to determine if they really wanted to be sealed to spend eternity with the person to whom they had been married. This was apparently an issue for some people because Lee wrote “Others refused to enter into these obligations,\

816 Lee, Mormonism Unveiled, p. 173.
817 Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, pp. 405-407.
818 Buerger, They Mysteries of Godliness, pp. 69-71.
819 Brooks, p. 73.
but agreed to separate from each other, dividing their substance, and mutually dissolving their former relations on friendly terms. Some have mutually agreed to exchange wives and have been sealed to each other as husband and wife by virtue and authority of the holy priesthood. One of Brigham’s brothers, Lorenzo Young, now a Bishop, made an exchange of wives with Mr. Decker.\footnote{John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled*, pp. 173-174.} The saints were taught that, since their former vows had for the most part not been solemnized by the church, they were not legitimate. And since mutual affection was considered essential to the new eternal connections, they were free to separate if they mutually agreed. In essence, the marriage upheaval that included swapping partners was a facet of the church push to control marriage, revamp marriage relations, and convince people that new ways of regarding marriage—like polygamy—were legitimate. The understanding of fornication set forth by Udney Hay Jacob in *The Peace Maker* was probably at play here.\footnote{Udney Hay Jacob, *The Peace Maker*, J. Smith, printer, Nauvoo, IL, 1842. Available online.} If a couple’s affections were alienated from one another, it would be considered proper for them to separate.

John D. Lee and other faithful and energetic doers like him were in the thick of implementing the new thinking about marriage and assisting its practice. His role was important because, even with enthusiastic support for polygamy among the initiated, the practicalities of secret practice could be daunting. And when there were practical obstacles to be overcome, John D. Lee was the man of the hour. He was in a good position to influence the community and to help convince the rank and file that polygamy was legitimate. He had variously served as a police officer, a bodyguard to Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, a carpenter, a businessman, and a clerk at the temple. In these
capacities he was seen in and around the city at all times of day and night. He also had reasons to have meetings with people in various private homes without arousing suspicion. His success as a missionary had given him many friends and contacts and high status among the people. Lee had close contacts with church leaders, and, especially in the capacity of body guard, facilitated their polygamous liaisons. He would often accompany his adopted father, Brigham Young, to the homes of his wives and stand guard during nighttime conjugal visits. In addition, he used his contacts to help Brigham Young gain at least one wife, Emeline Free, the sister of Louisa Free, one of Lee’s wives who later divorced him. Lee described the situation in his memoirs

> My third wife, Louisa, is now the first wife of Daniel H. Wells. She was then [1845] a young lady, gentle and beautiful, and we never had an angry word while she lived with me. She and her sister Emeline were both under promise to be sealed to me. One day Brigham Young saw Emeline and fell in love with her. He asked me to resign my claims in his favor, which I did, though it caused a great struggle in my mind to do so, for I loved her dearly. I made known to Emeline Brigham’s wish, and even went to her father’s house several times and used my influence with her to induce her to become a member of Brigham’s family. The two girls did not want to be separated from each other; however, they both met at my house at an appointed time and Emeline was sealed to Brigham and Louisa was sealed to me.822

Emeline became the favorite wife of Brigham Young until she was displaced in 1863 by the woman who remained Brigham’s favored wife until his death in 1877, Harriet Amelia Folsom.823

Evidence of polygamous activities in Nauvoo are very difficult to uncover even after Joseph Smith’s death because, despite the fact that Lee was a faithful diarist all

822 Ibid.
during this period, polygamy still had to be kept secret, especially since Mormons had seen the terrible repercussions of the push to make it public. Most diarists consequently mentioned polygamy only obliquely, William Clayton being the notable exception. John D. Lee’s biographer, Juanita Brooks, has helped recreate polygamous activity in Nauvoo, however, by skillfully cross referencing Lee’s diary with other Nauvoo diaries to come up with a more complete picture. “From the diary of Hosea Stout we learn that Lee was indoctrinating others into the new principle for Stout mentions discussions on ‘Eternal Exaltation’ and other spiritual matters.” Stout wrote in his Nauvoo diary on May 8, 1845 about being “sent for by brother Lee, who wanted to see me.”

Brooks surmised that Stout was wanted as a witness to Lee’s double marriage to Rachel Andora Woolsey and her mother, Abigail Sheffer Woolsey, (the latter in a caretaking capacity only, according to Lee.) The very next day, Stout himself took a second wife and recorded that “Myself and wife Lucretia Fisher went to Brother John D. Lee’s to a social meeting.” The Stout family Bible identifies this as the date of his first plural marriage.

Stout’s second plural marriage was reported in a similarly oblique manner, which illustrates the secrecy that still prevailed in Nauvoo in spite of the accelerated pace of plural marriages. Concealing the truth in personal diaries was a protection against both internal and external discovery. Information about polygamy had the potential to do great damage if revealed too hastily inside the church and would be fuel for the anti-Mormon fires if seized by outsiders. Attacks on Mormon homes occurred in outlying

---

825 Ibid.
826 Ibid., 66-9.
areas. It was safest to keep the secret even in private diaries. The men no doubt also enjoyed the cloak-and-dagger quality of hiding their secret marriages.

Brooks’ historical sleuthing gives a sense of the comings and goings and marrying and giving in marriage that characterized John D. Lee’s and Hosea Stout’s lives in Nauvoo, and identifies Lee as an important facilitator in spreading the practice of polygamy. It was through men like John D. Lee that polygamy became more and more integrated into Mormon culture as knowledge of polygamy and its practice began to filter down to the rank and file. When it had infiltrated that level of society deeply enough, it would eventually become the ideal of marriage in Mormon culture—at least publicly.

If polygamy was becoming accepted in Nauvoo, however, it did nothing to improve relations with Nauvoo’s neighbors, which continued to deteriorate after Joseph Smith’s death, though there were quiet stretches. Annette Hampshire has argued that though anti-Mormons had hoped that killing Joseph and Hyrum Smith would lead to a collapse of the church or a reassertion of non-Mormon control of the judicial system in Hancock County, the murders did not further these goals at all. “The conflict instead escalated because violence had become explicitly legitimate in anti-Mormon rhetoric” yet did not facilitate a solution or even a partial solution. “827 In other words, tensions remained because many of the major bases of animosity had not been removed and anti-Mormons had begun to think that vigilante violence against Mormons was necessary and justified.

By contrast, Mormons did not react to the violence, as was perhaps expected, by unleashing the power of the Nauvoo Legion on those who had killed their prophet chiefly

827 Hampshire, Mormonism in Conflict, p. 215.
because they understood that such action would only lead to death and destruction for their own people. They were willing to bide their time because their religious beliefs gave them confidence that in the end they would prevail. Consequently they continued to encourage converts to move to Nauvoo and redoubled efforts to complete the temple. Gentiles, as Mormons called non-members, were surely confused by the continued work on the temple. Though there were hints from some quarters that Mormons were thinking about moving west, why would they expend so much energy and capital on a building they planned to abandon?

In fact, though Mormons continued to explore the possibility of moving west, they apparently still hoped they could salvage their Zion in Illinois. The Council of Fifty sent a letter in April of 1845 to Lyman Wight, who was investigating the possibility of a settlement in Texas, urging him to return because “We are prospering both temporally and spiritually…Immigration continues…several hundred have arrived this spring…There were many thousands present at our conference this month. All of our business was performed with utmost peace and union and not a dissenting voice…Tithings come in for the Temple more liberally than ever before….There is no prospect of any mob at present, and all things bid fair for peace and prosperity.”

All of this led to repeated complaints about Mormons to the governor and legislature, which resulted in a terrible blow to Mormons in January of 1845—the Illinois legislature repealed the Nauvoo Charter in an effort to curtail Mormon independence. Since they had

---

828 Ibid., 228-9.
829 Flanders, Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi, pp. 321-2
830 As quoted in Flanders, Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi, p. 322.
no longer had legal status, thereafter city governance and protection was organized through the church and the Nauvoo Legion continued on an extra-legal basis.831

Mormons may have hoped that they could continue in Nauvoo and behaved as though they would, but they gradually became convinced that their days were numbered in Illinois.832 On May 24, 1845, when the capstone of the temple was laid in a ceremony held at 6:00 a.m., the Twelve and other church leaders were in hiding from various legal proceedings against them and had to sneak out to the ceremony at an early hour. Brigham Young told the assembled saints. “I pray the almighty in the name of Jesus to defend us in this place and sustain us until the Temple is finished and we have all got our endowments.”833 The inside of the temple still had to be completed so that ordinances could be performed there, but before its completion, a group of anti-Mormons met in Quincy to discuss what should happen to Mormons. They adopted the following resolution:

Resolved: That it is the settled and deliberate conviction of this convention that it is now too late to attempt the settlement of the difficulties in Hancock county upon any other basis than that of the removal of the Mormons from the state; and we therefore accept and respectfully recommend to the people of the surrounding counties to accept the proposition made by the Mormons to remove from the state next spring, and to wait with patience the time appointed for removal.834

Brigham Young responded with a request for assistance in selling homes and farms and

832 Ibid., 124.
833 HC, 7:417-418.
Church leadership soon settled on the Rocky Mountains as the destination. Mormons promised that as soon as the water ran in the spring of 1846, they would pull up stakes and leave Illinois.  

**The Nauvoo Temple and Polygamy**

When the temple was completed enough to open late in December 1845, it operated continuously 24 hours a day as people received endowments and were sealed. Plural marriages accounted for a significant amount of the activity at the temple. Though polygamy had existed for nearly 5 years by this time, it had grown slowly. But in late 1845 and early 1846, due to the completion of the temple and the saints’ eagerness to gain promised blessings, numbers began to snowball. In 1845, 36 men entered polygamy with 50 women, but in addition, existing polygamists took 34 more wives. The snowball became an avalanche early in January and February 1846, when 113 new polygamists joined the fray with 185 women, including reluctant polygamists like John S. Fullmer. An additional 103 women married existing polygamists. By the time the saints left Nauvoo early in 1846, nearly 200 men and over 500 women were participating in polygamy.

**Conclusion**

As it had profoundly influenced the development of the Mormon theological narrative while Joseph Smith was alive, polygamy also profoundly influenced the succession crisis that followed his death. Brigham Young and the Twelve were most thoroughly imbued with the manner and substance of the Joseph Smith’s family-centered

---

836 *HC*, 7:541-583.
837 Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, pp. 311-322.
838 Ibid.
salvation narrative, which included temple endowments, sealings and polygamy—the keys of the kingdom—and they were chosen to lead the saints. They led with great confidence because they had been given the endowment, the second anointing and polygamy by Joseph Smith. The interpretation of Smith’s death as martyrdom in turn helped to establish polygamy as divinely instituted. The saints’ desire for the endowment and the blessings of the temple galvanized them and gave them enthusiasm to carry on the work, and in addition helped many of them accept polygamy as part of the overall theological narrative during the year-and-a-half that they remained in Nauvoo after Smith’s death.

The endowments received and the marriages and plural marriages that were solemnized in the few short months that the Nauvoo Temple operated further embedded polygamy in Mormon social organization and self-understanding. Though this joyous period seemed like a culmination of the religious vision they had embraced, it was in fact just the beginning, because once Mormons were away from people who could interfere with their marriages, they had to learn how to live in polygamy. The theological narrative they had embraced had to be combined with a more practical narrative that would allow polygamy to work in the day-to-day realities of life and relationships between men and women. In other words, they had to develop customs and mores, rules and regulations that would help them navigate the difficult waters of plural marriage. It was to be a painful process that began as the saints crossed the plains from Nauvoo to Salt Lake City over the course of the next few years, 1846-48.
Chapter Seven:

Living Openly in Polygamy: Customs and Mores Develop, 1846 and Beyond

Though the Mormon theological narrative had developed to allow some Mormons to accept polygamy during the Nauvoo years, Mormons did not face the full reality of living it while they remained there—secret practice had shielded them from this. Moreover, during their last months in Hancock County, all efforts were focused on finishing the temple, obtaining their endowments and sealings, preparing to go west and resisting the attacks of anti-Mormons. The details of polygamous practice necessarily took a back seat to these more pressing concerns. This remained true after the saints left Nauvoo, but they were nevertheless able to relax their vigilance regarding polygamy because they were not living permanently among suspicious outsiders who scrutinized their every move. On the trail west, plural marriage was still technically a secret, but an open secret among church members.

During the journey, Mormons began to face the problems that polygamy engendered. They had a theological narrative that supported polygamy, and they had faith that they would be able to solve the challenges of their new marriage system, but since polygamy had decidedly not arisen over a long period of time from practical necessity, members lacked experience and tradition to guide them in their new social relations. They had to learn by trial and error. In the process, they had to develop norms and mores that would allow them to begin to institutionalize polygamy. Few anticipated how painful this process would be. The diaries of John D. Lee and Patty Sessions show

---

839 Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy: A History, p. 82.
how two families negotiated the treacherous polygamous waters, and in the process
helped develop a practical narrative that interacted with the theological one to allow
polygamy to eventually more or less flourish in Utah.

The process of developing norms and mores during this period has not been
extensively explored in part because the literature on polygamy tends to concentrate on
its introduction in Nauvoo or its more thorough development in Utah, but also because
polygamy was more or less put on the back burner during the migration years. At the
time and in Mormon historiography, the migration story looms so large as to almost
overwhelm everything else. Mormons had to concentrate all of their scant resources on
moving themselves across the plains. The task seemed impossible, but through
communal effort and at great sacrifice they accomplished it. The westward migration
has consequently become a central and overweening part of the Mormon foundation
story. Today a women’s organization, Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, flourishes, though
membership is granted only to descendants of Mormons who crossed the plains before
the advent of the railroad. But though it was downplayed during the migration, polygamy
continued to develop of necessity because polygamous families had been formed. It was
therefore necessary to begin to work out the social realities of an extraordinarily complex
form of marriage during the westward journey.

John D. Lee’s diary is especially effective for showing how the community dealt
with the difficulties arising from polygamy during this period because he had ten wives

---

840 Richard E. Bennett, Mormons at the Missouri: Winter Quarters, 1846-1852, University of Oklahoma
Press, Norman, 1987, pp. 32-33. Bennett makes the point that the earliest saints to leave Nauvoo were so
determined to migrate that they left without the proper preparation. Many consequently depended on
communal good will and working as day laborers in order to make their way across Iowa, which meant that
progress was very slow.
when he left Nauvoo, gained more on the journey and was extraordinarily close to Brigham Young. 841 Young’s own sons were not yet grown, but Lee had been adopted as a son by Brigham Young and enjoyed all the confidence that a son could hope to have from a blood father. Lee took this relationship so seriously—and this is not surprising from a man who had never known his own father—that he called Brigham Young “father” in his diary and sometimes even augmented his own name with the surname Young. 842 Brigham Young sent many other men off on various missions, but tended to keep Lee close to him and gave him the most important and sensitive assignments. Lee was consequently able to consult with Young about the perplexing situations that arose with his numerous wives and as a result his diary illuminates not only his own troubles in polygamy, but the attitudes and expectations of the church hierarchy during this early phase. Lee was exactly the sort of young, virile, capable and yet obedient man that Young and other leaders would have regarded as best suited to practice polygamy successfully. 843 Ironically, however, it is in his unsuccessful, sometimes spectacularly unsuccessful, plural marriages that the process of institutionalization is best observed.

Similarly, Patty Sessions is a particularly good subject for the study of the incipient institutionalization of polygamy not only because she kept a fine diary and was intimately acquainted with male and female leaders and members through her midwifery work, but because she experienced so many facets of polygamy herself. She was, as we have seen, a kind of arbiter of social mores in her midwife role and a firm believer in

---

841 Brooks, John D. Lee, p. 378. Brooks here includes a very useful table that shows when Lee married his wives and how long each one stuck with him.
842 Ibid., 73, 84.
843 Charles Kelly, editor, Journals of John D. Lee, 1846-7, 1859, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, p. 60. Lee recorded in his diary that Brigham Young expressed that “I had done more for him than any other man in this Kingdom.”
Mormonism and polygamy, but she nevertheless struggled with sharing her husband with a younger woman during the migration and in early Utah. When her first husband died and she remarried, for a time monogamously, she had to once again adapt to polygamy when her second husband took another wife. The changes in her reactions to these experiences over time illustrate the growth of manners and mores that facilitated polygamy as Patty’s life progressed. In addition, her son Peregrine was one of the more successful and prolific polygamists in Utah. The family is well-placed to show how polygamy grew and changed during the migration and in the early Utah years.

John D. Lee’s and Patty Sessions’ diaries are detailed and complete for some periods, and are extensively used by scholars, but the depths have not been plumbed, particularly with regard to the development of social mores and attitudes toward polygamy. The development of such intangibles is notoriously difficult to document and follow, but these two sources, though commonly used, are particularly well-suited to the between-the-lines reading that yields information on such matters. Before their words can be examined, however, it is important to establish the background within which the incipient institutionalization of polygamy transpired.

**Polygamy on the Trail: Mormon Leaders Defend Yet Seek to Limit the Practice**

The Mormon people began leaving Nauvoo in February of 1846, assisted by a freak cold snap that froze the Mississippi river solid so they could take their wagons across. By May, 12,000 saints had crossed the river and were making their way across Iowa under miserable conditions that included cold and snow, then rain and mud. Only
about 600 saints remained in Nauvoo. In addition to these dire conditions, Mormons had to deal with the complications of leaving behind temporary settlements and fields of crops to assist the saints who followed. In July, the journey was interrupted by a visit from Captain James Allen of the United States Army, who recruited 500 men to march to Mexico to help with the Mexican War. Mormons could ill afford the loss of manpower, and many were very bitter that, though they had received no help from the U.S. government in defending themselves against persecution, they were expected to serve in the military. This opportunity had actually been courted by church leaders, however, as a way to acquire some badly needed funds and at the same time gain transport for some of their people to the west at the expense of the army. The men were expected to contribute part of their pay to the migration effort and they were also given a clothing allowance that was more than was needed to outfit the men.

Brigham Young and the saints gained another advantage from the Mormon Battalion; they were able to negotiate with Washington and the Potawatami and Omaha tribes to spend winter 1846-7 on Indian lands. By September the saints had temporarily settled on both sides of the Missouri River, near an old fort built by the army.

---

845 Brooks, p. 90.
847 Ibid., pp. 225-34.
848 Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri*, pp. 58-9. Bennett has shown that the settlement on Indian lands was a decidedly mixed blessing that, between the tribes and Washington, required all of Young’s diplomatic skills. Young told members not to proselytize among the Indians at this juncture and not to attempt to marry any Indian women polygamously, though Joseph Smith had once suggested this was one reason for introducing polygamy. The problems that could arise from these activities made it crucial that at this time Mormons simply try to live peacefully with the Indians until they could move on. Even among the saints, Young tried to downplay ordinances and polygamy in the interests of focusing on the move. Bennett, p. 91.
at a place called Council Bluffs. The largest encampment, on the western side of the Missouri, was called Winter Quarters and included Brigham Young and John D. Lee. The name was descriptive—it was intended to serve as a temporary settlement where Mormons could spend the winter before embarking for the west the next spring, though they planned to settle the site for at least two years in order to leave infrastructure for Mormon migrants who would follow. Here John D. Lee and his wives would attempt to live polygamy.

Two general principles were especially important in guiding the process of institutionalizing polygamy—the principles of sacrifice for the Kingdom of God and patriarchy. Day-to-day practice of plural marriage was nevertheless a trial-and-error process not necessarily driven from above. Since polygamy was still technically secret, church leaders did not sermonize on how it should be implemented as they would later in Utah. Moreover, the migration meant that people were strung along the trail for several years and not gathering regularly to listen as a group to sermons from their leaders. The initial implementation of polygamy into Mormon society as a viable marriage form was consequently something that happened without a great deal of hierarchical oversight. It happened in the process of living individual polygamous lives. And there were many questions to resolve—about living arrangements, financial and emotional support, parental responsibilities, inheritance and divorce. These and a thousand other issues had to be worked out in the new social order so that norms and mores could form that would

---

849 Bennett, Mormons at the Missouri, pp. 68-70.
850 Ibid., pp. 70-73.
regulate polygamy, give it some sort of public support, and, it was hoped, make it easier to practice.

Increasing polygamy, however, was in no way a focus during the migration, and for good reason. Richard E. Bennett has observed, “Never in the sixteen-year history of the church was their physical situation more tenuous, their economy more fragile, and their very survival more in question than in the fall of 1846….Their survival depended on a high degree of social bonding, an economic order in which the private interests of the individual were made distinctly secondary to the welfare of the whole.”¹⁸⁵¹ Many people had left Nauvoo unprepared and in a hurry and were forced to rely on the unity and communal support of the church to help them across Iowa.¹⁸⁵² In such dire circumstances, they could ill-afford the division and disruption that polygamy had fomented in Nauvoo.

Brigham Young specified that polygamous marriages would not be performed on the trail west, though he made exceptions for his some people, particularly his “son,” John D. Lee. When he married Lee to his young sister-in-law, Emoline Woolsey, in Winter Quarters, on December 21, 1846, Lee wrote, “About 6 eve. Pres. B. Young by permission, not according to law, as the sealing ordinances were stopped when the Endowment stopped in the Temple...solemnized the right of matrimony between Emoline and myself. Charged the family to lock these things up in our breast and there let them remain.”¹⁸⁵³ In spite of granting such exceptions, the temporary no-new-polygamy policy

¹⁸⁵¹ Bennett, p. 112
¹⁸⁵² Ibid., pp. 32, 84. Bennett has observed that communal interdependence worked both ways—it could extract goods and wealth from the better-off for the good of all, but made people less concerned than they otherwise might have been about taking the necessary steps to prepare for the trip.
¹⁸⁵³ Kelly, Journals of John D. Lee, 1846-47 p. 43.
served to keep Young from being inundated with requests to approve or perform plural marriages during the migration.

Existing polygamy was, however, an important part of the communal ethos in some ways. It was, after all, a form of group marriage that encouraged communal thinking. By entering it, people had alienated themselves from the rest of the country and tied themselves securely to Mormonism—nowhere else would they be accepted. Beyond this, they had to use their social energies to keep more than just a husband or a wife happy; they had to consider the good of a group even within their marriages. In short, they had to be more outwardly directed than in a traditional nuclear family. Though many people were not part of polygamous marriages at this time, most church leaders were, and they set the tone for the church. Ironically, however, even though polygamy fostered communal thinking in some ways, in other ways it was still a great distraction that caused endless gossip and speculation and created unease in the community.

Brigham Young addressed some of the fears about polygamy that circulated in Winter Quarters at a private “family” meeting that Lee attended as an adopted son on 16 February, 1847. He took substantial notes about the meeting, where Young lamented that polygamy had “caused considerable uneasiness and trouble” because no one knew who was married and who wasn’t and some even believed “it is all from the devil.” Some men complained that they were “afraid to go on a mission for fear some man will be sealed to my wife.” He worried that “Many have suffered jealousies to arise which afflicted their minds…for fear that the Lord loved some other person more than he did them.” He declared that “such foolishness ought not to be cherished among a wise and prudent people.”
Young defended polygamy, arguing that it was necessary because wickedness had prevented many men from fulfilling the commandment to multiply and replenish the earth. They had “rendered themselves unworthy to raise up seed unto the Lord...Hence you see the propriety of the Lord calling upon men who bears the priesthood to take to themselves wives from among the daughters of men and raise up a righteous seed unto him that he might fulfill the measure of their creation and hasten the consummation of his purpose in righteousness in this dispensation.”

Women were less prone to wickedness and hence the few righteous men had to be husbands to a larger number of righteous women, so that a new God-fearing generation could be raised. Young made this argument to his “family” in private, but the fears of the people and their distrust of the leadership over polygamy had to be addressed as well, because hostility to polygamy within the church remained widespread. An incident reported by Lee illustrates the uneasiness and rebellion caused by polygamy at Winter Quarters, and shows how it could cause dissention that could potentially derail other plans.

The rebellion arose when Brigham Young wanted to collect money to build a mill at Winter Quarters so that people would be relieved from the burden of having to grind all of their grains with hand mills. According to Lee, a prosperous man, Brother Neff, declared that his money “should not go to support the whores of the 12.” Such outspoken rebellion could have been very damaging, except that Brigham Young told John Neff that “he should feel the hand of the Lord upon him and his family for his hard and foolish sayings.” Shortly thereafter, Brother Neff’s son became very sick and died, which

\[854\] Ibid. p. 79.
\[855\] Lee diary, p. 108.
brought the father to repentance. Brigham Young preached the funeral sermon, and Brother Neff was forthcoming with the requested funds.\footnote{John Neff was one of a handful of relatively wealthy men who helped bankroll big projects like the mill. Such men were a great help to the mostly impoverished saints. This example notwithstanding, Richard Bennett in Mormons at the Missouri has shown that Brigham Young understood that such men could be alienated if too much was demanded of them and so tried not to put too much of the burden of the migration on their shoulders. He was nevertheless apparently willing to occasionally use prophesying and guilt to gain their support of important projects like the mill (and polygamy.) Neff eventually purchased the mill from Brigham Young outright. Bennett, p. 115.} The incident illustrates, however, the thoughts that must have been entertained in the face of rumors about polygamy, especially when many converts had come to America with no idea that of such unusual marriage practices existed. On the trail west, then, polygamy was in the strange position of being at one and the same time a practice that in some ways established new kinship connections and tied people to Mormonism, but in other ways fomented uncertainty and gossip. Brigham Young attempted to maximize the cohesion and minimize the chaos by severely limiting the new marriages contracted, chiding the people to be “sensible” about the new practices and occasionally using guilt and prophecy to bring people into line.

**The Struggle to Make Polygamy Work: The Case of John D. Lee**

People at Winter Quarters and other temporary Mormon settlements quickly became accustomed to observing polygamists, however, through watching families like the complex and convoluted one of John D. Lee. To the 10 wives he had when he arrived at Winter Quarters, he added 4 more while there.\footnote{Brooks, p. 378.} Lee’s wives came from two main sources—the family of his first wife, Aggatha Ann Woolsey, and his missionary contacts. He married three sisters from Aggatha Ann’s family and, nominally, her mother. Lee did what he could to accommodate all these wives and children, while also
attempting to help and protect a great many more people who were his adopted “children.” At the same time, he was expected to be an obedient “son” to Brigham Young. All told, he had a great many people to counsel, manage, and please. Because of Lee’s extraordinarily close relationship to Brigham Young, he had an important source of support and counsel, which he recorded in his diary. It is thus possible to gain a sense of how Young thought polygamy should be practiced. Moreover, by closely examining Lee’s marital and family difficulties, it becomes possible to see how polygamous social practices developed during this early formative period, as the Mormons made their way west.

Lee’s familial relationships with his wives and adopted children were difficult and draining. The challenges of providing for so many people meant that living arrangements were very fluid. Sometimes wives lived with the bulk of the family and sometimes they didn’t. They came in and out of the group of wives for various reasons. It is hard to know how many establishments Lee presided over, but at one particularly cold point in the winter of 1846, he recorded keeping four fires going. He lamented on December 10, 1846 that “Half my time has been used since my return [from Santa Fe] in hearing and counseling.” For an energetic young man who liked to be doing, this was painful. No one had spent years observing the workings of relationships involving polygamy and adult adoption. No one knew the rules. He was supposed to be the wise counselor, but struggled to find answers to the problems that arose. This made his relationships with his many wives especially difficult.

858 Ibid., p. 73.
859 Kelly, Lee Diary, p. 97.
860 Ibid., p. 33.
Lee’s first plural wife, Nancy Bean, married him on February 5, 1845 after living in his family for several months. 861 She was the mother of their daughter, Cordelia. Nancy apparently went back and forth between her parents and the Lee household, because on November 25, 1846, Lee mentioned that Brother Bean brought Nancy home. 862 Two months later, however, while on a visit to her parents, she wrote Lee a letter

counselling me to take care of my family, having reference to herself, who was only on a visit to her father’s. I was not pleased with the spirit of the letter knowing that she had no right or cause to do so. I presented the letter to Father [Brigham Young] who was of the same mind and counselled me to treat her letter with silent contempt and by so doing she and her father and mother will find that something is meant. Practice of this, said he, and she will soon learn to attend to her own business and do as I should say. 863

Lee followed this advice, and a few weeks later, when family members had occasion to visit him on business, he made a point of not inquiring about her. “Soon, I expect to hear from her,” he wrote. 864 It is not surprising that Nancy would expect more from her polygamous marriage. She had not observed such marriages in her life and church leaders had offered little guidance. So far her marriage had given her a child and bits and pieces of a husband. She would naturally wonder what the future held for herself and her daughter.

That the two men counseled together about how to react to this letter shows that they were themselves trying to understand what marriage meant in the new polygamous

861 Brooks, p. 66.
863 Ibid., p. 59.
864 Ibid., p. 67.
system. Had anyone asked them ten years earlier what a husband should do to take care of his wife and family, they would have had a ready answer—a lifetime of observation and practice had taught them proper social practice for honorable men toward their wives.

When Nancy began to ask what sort of support she could expect in her polygamous marriage, however, there were no understood narratives through which they could explain how Lee was fulfilling his duties in the marriage and how Nancy should fulfill hers. Apparently Lee thought that he had been doing his part, however, because he asserted that Nancy had no “right or cause” to complain. Use of the word “right” also suggests that they regarded her complaint as an unjust challenge to patriarchal authority, which they were coming to understand might be stretched thin in a marriage system that placed one man at the center of so many people in domestic relationships. “Silent contempt” intended to show Nancy and her parents that “something was meant” also indicates that Lee did not wish to have a long discussion with Nancy about her concerns. They no doubt hoped that the displeasure expressed by ignoring her would reestablish authority and convince her to trust that Lee would do what was right without further question.

It is interesting that Brigham Young brought Nancy’s parents into the picture. Even though the 19th century was moving away from parental involvement in marriage and marriage choice, polygamy moved parents back to the center of marriage decisions, especially since many young women entered at very young ages, often as teenagers.865

Sometimes such marriages were more or less arranged by parents.\textsuperscript{866} Since polygamy served to strengthen community connectedness by exponentially increasing the number of people to whom one was tied by marriage, more community and parental involvement upholding marriage became necessary, even as the personal bonds between a couple within marriage became weaker. For young women raised at a time when parental authority in marriage decisions had become far less important than personal choice and romantic love between a man and a woman, polygamy was very confusing. Instead of relying on her husband, a woman had to turn to parental support, because the reality of one man struggling to support multiple families was tenuous at best. Parents, other relatives and community would be needed as a support system for women trying their best to care for themselves and their children in an era when women had limited revenue producing options. Young wives nevertheless expected a strong emotional attachment to their husbands in marriage and were often disappointed.

If John D. Lee and Brigham Young hoped that the silent treatment would silence Nancy Bean Lee, they were to be disappointed. Still with her parents, a month or so later, Nancy wrote Lee another letter

stating that she had not forgotten that in the moment of passion that I was the man to whom she was to look for salvation spiritually or temporally and that she would like a word from me to know what my feelings are, what she might depend on. I read the letter to Pres. B. Young. His counsel was to tell her that inasmuch as she claimed salvation at my hands that she must come to me and place herself under my guidance and control and protection and respect the priesthood and my standing as a savior and if she does this she will

\textsuperscript{866} Smith, \textit{Nauvoo Polygamy}, pp. 241-322.
have the sanction, blessings and protection of a savior but on no other consideration whatsoever.  

The talk of saviors and salvation here is quite striking; Lee referred directly to the family salvation narrative that Joseph Smith had established, which tied connection to God in the eternities to polygamy and priesthood lines of authority. Nancy apparently understood that she was dependent on Lee’s priesthood for her salvation, as Lee was dependent on Jesus Christ.  If Brigham Young and John D. Lee had been uncertain about how to respond when Nancy demanded clarification before, they became willing to more forcefully assert patriarchal authority when she raised the issue of salvation.

Since Nancy was insistent about getting answers, Young and Lee again faced the perplexing problem of trying to enforce female subordination in a marriage system that severely limited the mutual dependency that had reinforced male/female roles and tied men and women together in monogamy. In essence, the theology sought to replace the weakened ties of interdependence between men and women with an intense spiritual connection; men needed extra wives to ensure their expanded kingdom in the world to come and women needed men to ensure their salvation.  Still, they found that in the absence of day-to-day temporal interdependency, the spiritual tie proved difficult to establish.  In essence, Nancy was telling her husband that though she understood the theology, in the meantime she missed the physical and emotional support that wives had traditionally expected.  She simply wanted to know, do you love me? And practically, what financial resources can our child and I depend upon? In other words, she attempted to superimpose her monogamous understanding of marriage on a polygamous marriage

867 Kelly, Lee Diary., p. 114.
that was not adequately meeting her needs. Brigham Young and John D. Lee seemed to believe that if Nancy would only subordinate her needs, heed their patriarchal authority, take the leap of faith and trust that John would take care of her and Cordelia, all would be well.

Young and Lee had probably hoped that priesthood authority would simplify and streamline human relationships in polygamy so that the messiness of relations between the sexes would be made more orderly and comprehensible. Certainly Udney Hay Jacob’s *The Peace Maker* had suggested that polygamy would set things right in family relationships by reinforcing patriarchal authority.\(^{868}\) Young and Lee probably expected that polygamy would play out as Jacob had suggested—that polygamy would reinforce and strengthen patriarchy by subordinating women and muting their sexual hold on husbands. Beyond this, the church itself was organized in a hierarchical manner according to the level of priesthood a man possessed, and the hierarchy was gradually becoming firmer as the church moved toward full institutionalization. Why shouldn’t families be similarly organized?

Young and Lee were practical men; they knew that women could not expect the kind of support from husbands in polygamy that they might receive in monogamy. Still, they believed that polygamy was God’s way, that they were God’s servants, that the way to live in polygamy would be shown to them, or perhaps had been laid out by Jacob with the approval of Joseph Smith, and that priesthood authority would play an important part in the establishment and practice of polygamy. They did not appreciate Nancy’s constant questioning, which complicated and challenged their assumptions.

\(^{868}\) Udney Hay Jacob, *The Peace Maker*. 
A few days after receiving Nancy’s second letter, Lee adopted a hard line in his response “in which I set forth the law and covenant of the priesthood to her,”869 His response did not answer Nancy’s concerns about everyday living—procuring housing, clothing and food for herself and her child, nor did it address John’s feelings toward her. Lee hinted that if Nancy returned to his household, she could count on being cared for, but she had already had some experience with this arrangement and apparently was not satisfied with the results. Perhaps she hoped for a household of her own as a monogamous woman would have expected. She no doubt understood that if all of the numerous wives of John D. Lee had numerous children, numerous households would be necessary, and she could not see how Lee could manage the feat of supporting so many people.

Aside from having no other response to give, it is not hard to understand why Brigham Young would encourage an authoritarian response to Nancy’s practical questions. Authority is, of course, an important part of all belief systems and governments, but both men would surely be aware in normal times that evoking authority so baldly was hardly the best response in domestic situations. No doubt both men believed strongly in patriarchal authority, but in monogamous marriages of the period, this authority would normally be assumed by both men and women. In this case, however, Brigham Young was in the midst of institutionalizing Mormonism, of codifying Mormon theology, solidifying the hierarchy, keeping Joseph Smith’s charismatic authority alive, and, at the same time, trying to move thousands of people across the vast American plains with scant resources. He dealt with complaints daily and no doubt

869 Kelly, Lee Diary, p. 117.
longed for a world where authority was secure and underlings listened and obeyed. He himself had always bowed to Joseph Smith’s authority, and John D. Lee bowed to his. He likely believed that such unquestioning obedience should also be required in the new polygamous and adoptive relationships that were being established. Both men later came to see that reality proved far more complex than a strictly authoritarian approach would allow in polygamy. At this juncture, however, with Mormon culture, theology and their entire population in flux, an inflexible authoritarian approach may have seemed not only prudent, but necessary. Nancy and John, meanwhile, were more or less talking past one another.

The need for polygamous women to frequently, if not usually, act without the counsel of an absent husband made strict hierarchical patriarchy all but impossible to maintain in plural marriages--something Mormons were beginning to understand. Nancy was forced to consider practical questions in the face of illness and necessity, but since John had become fixated on enforcing his authority and control over her, she could make no headway in getting answers to her concerns. On March 17, 1847, illness prompted Nancy to send word to John, again by her father

that Nancy and her babe were both sick with a swelling in the throat. also wished to know whether I would pay for their board or not, and whether I intend to take her home or what she may depend on. (Answer) When I hire her board then I will pay for it, and that I have written a letter to her in which I have told her what she may depend upon. That when she considers what her interest is and where her dependence lies and does what justice requires of her then she may come to me and I will take care of her and nourish her and until then she need not expect anything from me.
Lee probably spoke more truly than he knew about this encounter when he concluded that Nancy’s father “returned but little better satisfied than when he came.” The situation seemed hopeless. Nancy wanted to know what she could expect before fully committing herself and John wanted full commitment before providing what she expected, a remote possibility anyway in light of his many dependents. A few weeks later Nancy had apparently decided to yield, and wrote again, requesting that John remove her to his home. She returned in late March 1847, and seemed to fit herself into the family. In July, however, her father spoke with Lee about his daughter returning to live with her parents and traveling west with them “for what help and company she would be to her mother.”

Relations between John and Nancy continued to deteriorate and ultimately ended in divorce. At Winter Quarters in March, 1848 she came to him with her friend, Lee’s third wife Louisa Free, and asked him for a cow, perhaps to provide milk for their daughter. He responded sharply, telling her that “when... any of his women left him that he would Milk his own cows, but that He had a writing of releasement for her at Dr. W. Richards office, for which he had Payed $1.00. She replied that it was well for she had no Money to pay for untying knots. J.D. Lee Said that it was to late now [to] multiply words.” Nancy’s jab about having no money to pay for ending their marriage was a pointed reminder to Lee that he had not provided for her. His jab to her about her constant complaints was his final thrust in the battle between them about the terms of

---

870 Ibid., p 122.
871 Ibid., p. 134.
872 Ibid., p. 193.
their marriage. In the end, a polygamous marriage to John D. Lee was all too uncertain for Nancy Bean.

With the knot untied, Nancy and little Cordelia abandoned John D. Lee and went west with her parents. There she married Zechariah Decker, a returned member of the Mormon Battalion, and gave her tiny daughter her new husband’s name. Nancy never told Cordelia about her true parentage. In 1937, at the age of 91, Cordelia Decker Mortensen read John D. Lee’s original journal and learned that he was her father.\(^{874}\) The casual nature of the divorce between Nancy and John is interesting in light of the vows they had taken in Nauvoo, where they were sealed in the Nauvoo temple for eternity. Curiously, men and women often entered polygamy more casually—often with little courtship or even acquaintance—than they had previously entered monogamy, even though they regarded the term of the polygamous alliance as stretching into eternity instead of just until death. In spite of the intended eternal connection of sealings, Mormons’ leniency about granting divorce served as a safety valve for women throughout the polygamous period.\(^ {875}\) Indeed, divorce amounted to a practical necessity within polygamous families. Of the first seven presidents of the church, all polygamists, only the last, Heber J. Grant, was never divorced.\(^ {876}\)

Interestingly, the grounds for divorce were the ones suggested by Udney Hay Jacob in *The Peace Maker*—the alienation of a woman’s affections from her husband.\(^ {877}\) Divorce was an acknowledgement that the ideals of faith and theology were not always


\(^{876}\) Information on the marriages of these early Mormon leaders available online and in individual biographies.

\(^{877}\) Daynes, p. 143.
congruent with the realities of earthly life, but faith nevertheless continued to play a crucial role in the polygamous marriages that succeeded. People who believed they were living according to God’s law by entering polygamy often proved willing to endure a great deal rather than end their polygamous marriage and thus jeopardize their place in God’s Kingdom, either on earth or in heaven.

After his divorce from Nancy Bean, Lee continued to have a difficult time managing his multiple wives. His favorite wife, at least judging from his fond journal entries about her, was his third, Nancy Bean’s friend, Louisa Free. The couple had a small son, John Brigham, who was born in Nauvoo. Far from having an adversarial relationship, the two shared some of the intimacy and affection for one another that would be expected in a monogamous relationship. Though Louisa and her child lived with her parents, Lee expressed great concern when Louisa was sick with “black leg,” a malady related to malnutrition common in Winter Quarters. He frequently reported the state of her health in his journal and recorded making medication for her and moving her to a special room where he could look after her himself. Nancy recovered, and then in turn ministered to him when he was gravely ill on February 4, 1847. “About dark, Louisa came in to see and comfort me.” he wrote, “She lay and embraced me in her arms near 2 hours.” The next day he was still very sick. “About 9 I was washed in saleratus and water from head to foot, afterward in spirits, then anointed in like manner by Louisa and Rachel (as I told them) preparatory to my buriel. They were both very kind and attentive to me. In the eve. I felt some better.”

---

878 Probably the effects of scurvy.
879 Kelly, Journals of John D. Lee, 1846-7, p. 65.
In spite of the tender scenes between them and Lee’s obvious love for Louisa, he did not feel secure in her love. In late March of 1847, while in bed together, she recounted a dream to him which he interpreted to mean that she would eventually leave him. He confessed to her that “My heart is pained when I think on the future.” Lee’s words proved to be prophetic. Nearly a year after Nancy Bean broke with Lee, Louisa, whether acceding to her parents’ wishes or her own, determined that she and her son would leave John and go west with them. Lee parted with Louisa and her parents on good terms, and wrote in his journal that when they parted, “Mrs. Free and all confessed their Foiables & Said I [k]no[w] that I have had hard feelings & used an influence wrongfully against you, but now we wish you well with all our Harts.” Apparently Mrs. Free had not been impressed with John’s treatment of Louisa, but she forgave him when he relinquished his claims over his wife and son. John’s, and perhaps Louisa’s, feelings were more complicated. At this point, Lee had begun to keep a semi-official journal record and was referring to himself in the third person in all his entries. He wrote that during the parting scene with the Free family he

Took his little Son Heber John & Kissed him. Louisa, his Mother, felt deeply the sting of Dis-obedience in leaving the House of her Husband & asked him what was her chance in the future. He replied to her that her flight was Manifested to him more than one year previous to her Exit & what he told her then was [what] he should Say Now. About 10 J.D. Lee left the House. Louisa followed him to the gate insisting him to come often & see his Son at least, though his affections may be for ever gone forever.  

880 Ibid., p. 140.
Louisa’s story indicates the importance of parents in polygamous relationships. The affecting scene at the gate and the regretful way Lee narrated the story shows that, even when two people wished to stay married, other factors could divide them. In this case, the story of John and Louisa, who divorced in 1849, shows the importance of parents in determining the fate of polygamous marriages. Unlike her friend Nancy, however, Louisa apparently did not feel bitter towards Lee. In Utah, she married a prominent man, Daniel H. Wells, whose first wife had never joined the church and had divorced him. Their son died at a young age.

It is possible that the conflict between Nancy Bean and John affected his relationship with Louisa, for gossip had a powerful effect on polygamous relationships. Lee was learning the hard lesson that, in polygamy, relationships were not discreet—wives would talk, and what happened between himself and one wife might affect his relationship with another wife, like it or not. In polygamy gossip had the added dimension of allowing wives, women with intimate knowledge about the same man, to ally together against a husband; if a man could not satisfy all his wives, he was vulnerable to their collective judgments against him. In essence, this kind of intra-familial gossip developed as a form of social control in polygamy, and not just between wives—it also extended to the women’s families. For instance, the disapprobation felt by Mrs. Free toward Lee was no doubt discussed with Nancy’s parents, for all were residents of Winter Quarters. Especially in the initial years of polygamy, it is not surprising that parents would compare their own lifetime of love and support in marriage and judge their daughters to be shortchanged in polygamy. Gossip thus proved to be a powerful element in polygamy as in other aspects of life.
The extreme youth of many wives increased the importance of parents and other relations. John D. Lee’s fourth wife, Sarah Caroline Williams, whom he had baptized at age 10, was only 14 when he married her. In his confessions, Lee reported that Sarah had attended the sealing of Lee and Louisa Free, and stood up after the ceremony demanding to marry him also. 882 Oddly, though polygamy was highly patriarchal, women’s initiative in selecting a husband was quite common. This practice would serve to increase the odds of success in polygamy, because if a woman chose her one husband for herself, she would be more likely to remain in the marriage. Men could always exercise choice by marrying more wives. Probably because of her extreme youth, Sarah did not live with Lee as a wife until they reached Utah; in the intervening years she lived with her Aunt, Marcia Allen. Lee recorded visiting the Allen family during his stay in Winter Quarters, but his young wife did not merit a mention—an indication of her lack of status with Lee. 883 In later years, another young woman, Mary Ann Williams, an orphan, lived in the family home and was sealed to Lee at the age of only twelve years, with the understanding that they would not live together conjugally until she was older. In the meantime, she fell in love with Lee’s son, Alma, and was released from her “marriage” to the father, married the son, and had 7 children with him. 884

One of the problems that complicated Lee’s relations with his wives in Winter Quarters was his continual pursuit of more wives. Since, as we have seen, some of his wives were already concerned about the scanty attention and provisions he gave them, his

883 Kelly, Lee Journals, p. 45. This was a Christmas visit that involved a lecture from Lee about hard sayings toward the Twelve. It is probable that Lee did not begin having conjugal relations with Sarah until they arrived in Utah. Her first child was born in 1852. Brooks, p. 380.
884 Alma was named after an important male character in the Book of Mormon.
pursuit of other women surely served to hasten the deterioration of relationships with women like Nancy Bean and Louisa Free. Besides marrying his young sister-in-law, Emoline Woolsey, in December 1846, he courted two sisters, Mary and Lavina Young, that winter. In addition, an older woman, Nancy Gibbons Armstrong, courted him. One of Lee’s converts, Nancy Armstrong had left her husband in Tennessee and wanted to attach herself to a family in the new order. Lee married these three women on the same day, February 27, 1847. The triple wedding was followed by a feast and some entertainment, but then Lee joined the men for conversation, “Passed 2 hours in conversation principally upon the journey to the mountains.” After more conversation about procuring turkeys, geese, ducks, peafowls, guinea hens, dung hill fowls and other animals, Lee “accompanied them [the men] home at 11:00 and presented them $7.50 in gold.” The money was likely Lee’s way of thanking church leaders for allowing him to take more wives in spite of the moratorium on new plural marriages during the migration. Given his late discussion with the men, however, Lee was apparently not overly anxious to face a wedding night that involved three brides.

Nancy Armstrong’s case is particularly interesting. Her belief in Mormonism had prompted her to leave her husband in Tennessee and travel west with the family of her sister Margaret, the wife of prominent church member, Abraham O. Smoot. Everyone expected him to marry Nancy, but Lee claimed that Smoot mistreated her by taking her money with no intention of paying her back. She consequently refused to marry him. Nevertheless, in her new culture and religion, her salvation in heaven and her

885 Kelly, Lee Journals, p. 103-4
886 Ibid.
887 Lee, Mormonism Unveiled, p. 206.
well-being on earth depended on connections, which she gained by marrying John D. Lee polygamously. After their marriage, she told Lee that “she was perfectly willing to have me manage all her affairs as I thought proper, that she and all she had was at my command, all she asked was an interest in the family.” Though 13 years older than Lee, she and her husband apparently had a full marital relationship, because Lee reported that after this conversation, “Nancy tarried till morning.” If they had not done so before, presumably the couple then consummated their marriage.

Nancy Armstrong’s desire to be connected to the Lee family illustrates the power of polygamy to give single women a sense of connectedness not only to a large number of people through family, but to the larger church body as well. At age 48, Nancy’s concerns and needs were different than the needs of her younger sister wives. Some of the younger wives had children with Lee, and all of them hoped to have children who would provide a powerful connection to the community and their husband. Nancy Armstrong, on the other hand, felt the need to form connections for herself—to gain a family. In fact, Lee wrote that she became involved with his family through his wife Rachel, who was instrumental in bringing her into the family. In an unusual move, after she proposed to Lee, she proposed to his other wives as well. As time progressed, women like Nancy would form the backbone of successful polygamous families—women who valued larger family connection and the larger community of belief above an intimate, exclusive husband-wife relationship. As principles surrounding polygamous culture emerged in Utah, romantic love and exclusive marital intimacy were discouraged

888 Ibid., p. 206.
889 Ibid.
as selfish; the values that motivated Nancy Armstrong were applauded and encouraged. Though Nancy did not live to go west, Lee later wrote of her in his Confessions, “She was a true, affectionate woman. My whole family respected her.”\textsuperscript{890} If she gained a husband, family, respect, and salvation in the prevailing belief system, perhaps her polygamous marriage did serve Nancy Armstrong well.

Nancy nearly gained a sister wife much like herself when John D. Lee pursued a friend of hers, another older woman, Carolyn Gilliam. He had met Carolyn on his mission in Tennessee, where, in the summer of 1846, she still lived with her husband, Isham Gilliam. Lee sent his friend, Levi Stewart, to Tennessee to convince Carolyn Gilliam to come to Summer Quarters to marry him. Mormons would not have considered this behavior unethical since Isham Gilliam was not a church member and Carolyn was. In essence, the church did not recognize their marriage as valid.\textsuperscript{891} Stewart succeeded in bringing her on the pretext of visiting her friend, Nancy Armstrong.\textsuperscript{892} Interestingly, Lee referred to her in his journal by her maiden name, C. C. Saunders, a way of erasing Isham Gilliam. The courtship with Lee proceeded very well until her husband arrived to convince her to return to Tennessee. Carolyn returned to Tennessee with her husband, but not before letting John know that she was “much concerned about her future fate,” presumably her eternal salvation. She “requested J.D. Lee to remember her in a future day.”\textsuperscript{893} That future day never came for Carolyn Gilliam and John D. Lee.

\textsuperscript{890} John D. Lee, \textit{Mormonism Unveiled}, p. 206-207.
\textsuperscript{891} For information on the Gilliam situation, see Kelly, \textit{Journals of John D. Lee}, pp. 174-187.
\textsuperscript{893} Kelly, \textit{Journals of John D. Lee}, p. 187. 10 July, 1847.
Lee reported in his diaries that prospective wife Carolyn Gilliam and the other new wives gave him clothing and other gifts. In a sense, they appear to have been courting him. Such attention from new and prospective wives no doubt made the complaints and demands of women like Nancy Bean all the more annoying to Lee. For their part, Lee’s wives must have wondered why he would go to such extraordinary lengths to secure Carolyn Gilliam. They surely understood that he could ill afford the time and expense of the pursuit, and they themselves could not afford to ply their husband with gifts in order to gain his favor, because they had no access to funds. It is not hard to imagine the jealousies and dissatisfaction that would arise in these circumstances.

Nancy Armstrong’s and Carolyn Gilliam’s cases illustrate the contracted nature of courtship in polygamy. In both cases, marriage proceeded without extended courtship or any courtship. Presumably Levi Stewart informed Carolyn Gilliam that Lee hoped to marry her when convincing her to come to Summer Quarters. Throughout the polygamous period, marriages were frequently contracted on small acquaintance. In a way this is not surprising—there is after all something undignified about married men playing the doting lover over and over again. On the other hand, since the practical purpose of courtship was to help couples determine compatibility, how were men and women to make decisions about marriage without it? In thickly connected, face-to-face Mormon culture, community reputation—the opinion of friends, family and parents about a man or woman’s character—could fill some of the gap, but it could not really create affection or prevent personality clashes.
Lee’s dismal success at retaining his wives indicate that he trusted too much in the holding power of the promises made by and to his wives when they were sealed to him. The mundane reality of marriage, even in polygamy, was that in courtship and marriage, there was no substitute for time and attention. Men gradually came to see that if they were to be successful in polygamy, they had to find ways to establish, if not always intimate, at least supportive familial relationships, both between husbands and wives and between wives. This could best be accomplished through having at least some sort of courtship and then, after marriage, by allowing sufficient time between marriages to fit a woman into the social fabric of the family before adding a new wife—to give each wife a honeymoon period, so to speak.

Lee, however, continued to hope that authority and obedience could organize and control his dependents and serve as an effective connecting glue. While this worked with some of his wives, however, it drove others away. Polly Ann Workman, Lee’s eighth wife, offended Lee by going off to visit someone against his will, probably her brother in Mt. Pisgah, another temporary Mormon settlement on the trail west. When a Brother Kimble brought her to Winter Quarters in November, 1846, and demanded five dollars of Lee for the trouble, he responded, “I told [him] to look to her for his pay as she went off contrary to my council and I did [not] employ him to bring her but would give him $5 to take her back.” Polly must have heard this exchange or heard about it and been stung. Though she joined the family at Winter Quarters, she did not live up to Lee’s standards of a model wife. By 10 February 1847, matters had come to a head. As Lee wrote

---

894 Ibid., p. 27.
At about 8 I sat down and had some conversation with Polly Ann, who at the Cold Springs in the month of July last, contrary to my feelings, went to Pizgah. I at that time told her the consequences of such measures, still she persisted in going, and after a severe chastisement of sickness of 4 months she returned home where she has been till the present, at times verry turbulent and unruly and arbitrary, using unbecoming words to the family. I frequently advised her to refrain and be mild, until I found it useless to entreat further. I at length told her that she never had observed the conditions of her obligations in the Temple and had been heard to say that she intended to make a perfect hell for me and that my happiness should consist in misery, while she was permitted to remain connected to my family.895

Lee demanded that Polly Ann leave a coverlid to cover the expenses she had brought on him and suggested that she go live with her brother, who would pay her a dollar per week to keep house for him. Apparently there was an accounting of individual expenses in the family that would likely not have occurred in a monogamous marriage, where money and property would have been regarded as jointly owned. According to Lee, Polly expressed contrition the next day, telling him that “she hoped that her further course of conduct would be sufficient to redress my injured feeling; that she was determined though banished from my presence and society to redeem herself should years of solitude be required to effect it, and so far as counsel was concerned she wanted none but mine.”896 Polly’s abrupt turnaround is interesting; perhaps her earlier defiance had been simply designed to elicit some evidence that Lee cared about her at all, or perhaps the unhappy prospect of being reduced to her brother’s housekeeper distressed her enough to swallow her pride. Her repentance was not enough, however, and Lee sent her away.

895 Ibid., pp. 69-70
896 Ibid.
Similarly, Lee rejected Emeline Woolsey, sister to Lee’s first wife Aggatha and his sixth wife, Rachel, for making an independent choice about her movements. Neither Emeline nor Polly Workman had children with Lee, and both married other men, raised families with them, and neither went to Utah. 897 One can imagine that the young women would not understand why their husband, who was busy looking after so many wives and children, should be so intent on controlling their movements. Years later, Lee remembered his harsh treatment of them and wrote

I have been a proud, vain man, and in my younger days I thought I was perfection... I then expected perfection in all women. I know now that I was foolish in looking for that in anything human. I have, for the slightest offenses, turned away good meaning young women that had been sealed to me and refused to hear their excuses, but sent them away heartbroken. In this I did wrong. I have regretted the same in sorrow for many years...Should my history ever fall into the hands of Emeline Woolsey or Polly Ann Workman, I wish them to know that, with my last breath, I ask God to pardon me for the wrong I did them, when I drove them from me, poor young girls as they were. 898

Lee had a lot of time to think about the wrongs of his life when he penned these words in 1877; he was in prison facing death for his part in the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre. His own humiliations in the intervening years no doubt made him more sympathetic to the plight of his young wives and the perils of his former hubris. In the early days of the church he had reveled in heady millenarian expectations that the kingdom of God could be established on earth as the saints were perfected. He seemed ideally placed to embody that perfection and expected as much from his family.

897 Lee, Mormonism Unveiled, p. 207.
898 Ibid.
Polygamy itself was supposed to be a higher form of marriage that would aid in perfecting the saints by strengthening patriarchal authority to weed out the unworthy in order to shape and hone the church. The giddy expectations of the beginning, charismatic phase of Mormonism received a severe blow within the church and within Lee at Mountain Meadows.

Lee had more success in exacting obedience from his wives than his adopted children, however. The fact of the matter was that grown men were even less amenable to having another man dictate to them concerning their lives and movements than were women in polygamy. The principle of adoption met a speedy end. In the summer of 1847, Lee was dispatched by Brigham Young with some of his adopted family and other men to a likely patch of land near Winter Quarters, dubbed Summer Quarters, to raise crops for the migrating saints. Disputes developed over land, labor and even attention toward Lee’s wives, which led to fierce quarrels between Lee and some of the men in the group, including his adopted “sons.” Lee badly beat up a man named Kennedy—in part over his attentions to Emeline Woolsey—and was called before the Winter Quarters High Council. The result of the investigation, was recorded by Lee’s friend, Hosea Stout, who noted that the council decided that since “most of [Lee’s] wives & adopted sons were dissatisfied with him & I believe it was so managed to let all go free who chose when 2 wives [Abigail Woolsey, mother to Lee’s wives Aggatha Ann and Rachel and erstwhile wife Emeline, and Martha Berry] and almost all of his adopted children stepped out.” Both wives returned to Lee within a week

899 Brooks, John D. Lee, p. 121.
Adoption was essentially finished, however. Lee’s biographer, Juanita Brooks, has observed

The names of the adopted children who left are not given, but the fact that all were set free was a death blow to the whole system of adoption. It meant that there was no tie more binding than personal desire...It was as well, for most of the other leaders had not entered into the plan, and they felt that it gave an undue economic advantage to those who had adopted sons. Polygamy they could accept, because each who was worthy could secure additional wives as he was able or as the women approached him and asked for admission into his family, but adoption, ideally carried out, would give the “father” a decided financial advantage.

As Brooks has correctly noted, abandoning adoption proved easier than abandoning polygamy. The ties created by polygamy were marriage ties, after all, though they had proven to be fragile for many couples. They were nevertheless ties that in many cases included the connecting link of children and created strong emotional bonds, if not exactly the kind of love bonds expected in monogamous marriage. In addition, though polygamy frequently created jealousy between women, and perhaps sometimes between men who desired the same woman, it did not generally give men an economic advantage—quite the contrary. Beyond all this, polygamy was connected to Mormon understanding of eternal family ties, salvation and Joseph Smith’s prophetic mission. In short, it was far more entangled with Mormon theology than was the practice of adoption.

The fearsome toll that the spring and summer of 1847 took on Lee’s family extended to his first wife, Aggatha Ann Woolsey, the woman Lee still referred to as “my wife,” though he called all of his other wives by their names. Aggatha Ann faced

---

901 Brooks, John Doyle Lee, p. 122.
tremendous pressure to accept the new social order. She had been married to John since 1833 and borne him seven children, of whom four were still living. Just two years before, John had been her husband and father to only her children. As his burdens became heavier and heavier, so did hers, because she had less and less help and attention from him, though her work load increased. She had known his love before it was divided among so many. With so many children and the deep ties of nearly 14 years of marriage to John, she had to watch her husband marry woman after woman; sometimes without advance knowledge.

There is some evidence that Lee tried to ameliorate Aggatha Ann’s frustrations. In August, 1846, while traveling to Winter Quarters, Lee removed Nancy Bean and Louisa Free, his two wives with children, from his wagons to travel with one of his adopted sons. It is likely that he did this because Aggatha Ann was pregnant and jealous of these women. A week later she gave birth to their son, Heber John. This removal may have helped temporarily, but her troubles continued to fester. On Saturday, April 11, 1847, Aggatha Ann snapped. Lee wrote that she became highly offended at me and abused by hard speeches not only me but the remainder of the family. After requesting her to desist several times she railed out the more. I then told her that she should feel the hand of the Lord in chastisement for her speeches. She said she did not care how soon and that I should atone for what I had done. About 3 minutes afterward she was taken with the most ecritiating sickness at heart which well nigh caused her to yield up the ghost. When she was thus taken the whole family became alarmed....She soon became almost frantic, tumbling and rolling first from the bed then to the floor and when I saw that her spirit was right, I called A. D. Young, took a bottle of oil that had been consecrated in the Temple of the Lord at Nauvoo, anointed her and rebuked the spirit she had

---

802 Ibid., p. 92. Information on this incident taken from the George Laub diary.
given up too, and prayed the Lord to stay his hand, and instantly she was relieved and fell asleep.\textsuperscript{903}

Aggatha Ann was not by nature a hysterical person. She had negotiated the persecutions in Missouri without such a breakdown. Her nervous fit suggests the enormous pressure she had endured in the two years since her husband entered polygamy. It was a warning to all men that whatever their spiritual convictions, women could not be endlessly pushed. If polygamy were to become a viable social system, it could not ignore the needs of the women whose cooperation was necessary for it to proceed and succeed.

There is a reason that Lee’s biographer, Juanita Brooks, called Lee a zealot. He did nothing by halves, as his practice of polygamy between 1845 and 1847 illustrates. But his foray into polygamy was not very successful: of his 14 wives married in Nauvoo and Winter Quarters, the two older women died, six left Lee and married other men (including three who were mothers of his children) and of the remaining six, one left him later and five stuck with him until he or they died.\textsuperscript{904} Lee was certainly less successful in polygamy than some other men, but he was by no means unique. Certainly he had more wives than most polygamists, however, the majority of whom had only two wives.

It is hard to say how many of John D. Lee’s failed polygamous marriages might have survived had there been customs, mores and a polygamous narrative by which they could live and establish the marriages. There is evidence that at least some of these marriages failed because Lee could not tell his wives what they could “rely upon” in polygamy. In addition, Lee’s hope that an authoritarian approach to polygamy might

\textsuperscript{904} Brooks, 378-384, Kelly, 11-12.
simplify family relations proved illusory. As he found, expectations and attachments proved overly complicated to lend themselves readily to a strictly hierarchical form of management. The fact that polygamy spread men’s authority so thin also seriously undermined patriarchal authority.

Lee’s later regret that he had expected complete obedience and perfection from Polly Ann Workman and Emeline Woolsey shows that over the course of this life he had learned the limits of hierarchy, patriarchy and perfectionist schemes in general. He also learned what everyone had to learn who lived in polygamy—that people need rules and regulations, mores and they need to know what to expect— in order to fashion their familial relationships in ways that would allow them to live together in peace and harmony, whether in monogamy or polygamy. In short, they need institutions in order to live their lives coherently. At this point, polygamy was institutionally weak—untried, untested, and not even publicly acknowledged. Though John D. Lee and some of his wives were people of strong faith, this was not always sufficient when other types of support were not available.

These early pioneers of polygamy helped establish the norms and mores that would govern the lives of Mormon men and women who later entered polygamy. John himself was markedly more successful in creating a successful plural marriage with one of his last wives, Emma Batchelder, whom he married, ironically, just after what was truly the disaster of his and many other people’s lives, the Mountain Meadow Massacre.
in September, 1857. His final two wives, however, Terressa Morse Chamberlain and Ann Gordge, divorced him in the wake of his troubles over Mountain Meadows.\footnote{Brooks, John Doyle Lee, pp. 378, 384.}

A Woman’s Perspective: Polygamy in the Sessions Family

In contrast to John D. Lee, midwife Patty Sessions’ diary gives a detailed picture of the trials of early polygamy from a woman’s perspective. Patty was no spring chicken when she began the trek west—she was then 51-- but she survived until the beginning of the end of polygamy, 1892, when the Manifesto had been issued and polygamy was in decline.\footnote{Patty Sessions was born 4 February, 1895. See Donna Toland Smart, Mormon Midwife: The 1846-1888 Diaries of Patty Bartlett Sessions, Utah State University Press, Logan, Utah, 1997, p. 2.} She consequently witnessed the whole arc of polygamous practice in Mormonism. Her experience shows how polygamy moved toward institutionalization on the trail west and in Utah. It also reveals how new social and political conditions in Utah required constant changes and adjustments. The Sessions family also shows not only how polygamous expectations and mores developed, but how one family adjusted to celestial marriage amid shifting conditions. In addition, it sheds light on how relations between women worked in polygamy, and how the faith of participants influenced their dedication to their marriages.

Patty Bartlett married David Sessions in 1812 at the age of 17 in Newry, Maine.\footnote{Ibid., p. 6.} Quick and intuitive, she learned midwifery from observing her mother-in-law, Rachel Sessions.\footnote{Ibid., 6-7. The story is that one day her mother-in-law could not travel fast enough to a difficult delivery and the younger Patty managed to reach the mother-in- travail much more quickly, though she was inexperienced. By the time her mother-in-law arrived, the baby was safely delivered and the mother resting comfortably.} David was also a hard worker, and together they built a tidy and
prosperous farm for themselves in Newry, near Bethel, Maine.\footnote{909} In 1833, when Patty was 38 years old, she heard the gospel preached by two Mormon missionaries. In the words of her son Perrigrine, “And as soon as my Mother herd she believed but my Father thinking it was best to wait and examine a little longer and she feeling that she aught to waite untill he was willing and was not baptised untill the next July 1834 when he gave his consent.”\footnote{910} Patty’s reluctance to join her lot with Mormons without David offers insight into the marriage; though Patty believed in Mormonism, she did not want anything to come between her and her husband. Within a year, David and their children, Perrigrine, Sylvia and David, had joined the church.\footnote{911} Leaving behind a great many friends and family, and the graves of four children, they joined the Mormons, first in Missouri and then in Nauvoo.\footnote{912}

Given Patty’s reluctance to join the church without her husband’s permission, it seems odd that she would then enter plural marriage with Joseph Smith. In light of her earlier concern for her marriage, her entry into polyandry with Joseph Smith was likely driven by powerful faith and promises of eternal life that extended to Patty, David, and their children. David left no record of his feelings about Patty’s marriage to Joseph, but they must have been complicated. Even if Patty did not engage in sexual relations with her polyandrous husband, Mormon doctrine would assign her children (and David’s) to

\footnote{909} Ibid., p. 10.  
\footnote{911} Donna Toland Smart, Exemplary Elder: The Life and Missionary Diaries of Perrigrine Sessions, 1814-1893, p. 25. Perrigrine wrote that his mother “remained alone in the church almost one year before any of the rest of us joined the church.”  
\footnote{912} Ibid., pp. 23-4. Perrigrine recounts the tragic stories of the deaths of his siblings in his memoirs.
Joseph Smith in the next life. David was possibly also assigned to Joseph Smith in a sort of adoption capacity, but he would have no kingdom of his own in the next world. Nevertheless, in this life, Patty was his and continued to live with her legal husband.

Under the circumstances it is not surprising that David would want to marry polygamously and have children for his own kingdom. Patty would not have been in a position to object given her own polyandrous marriage and promotion of polygamy in Nauvoo. Consequently, she surely approved David’s polygamous marriage to 32 year old Rosilla Cowan in October, 1845. Rosilla was possibly a kinswoman of Horace Cowan, one of the missionaries instrumental in converting the Sessions family in Maine. Rosilla received her temple endowment and was sealed to David in the Nauvoo temple on January 1, 1846. Existing records do not tell where Rosilla lived in Nauvoo after her marriage to David, but given the secrecy that prevailed during the entire Nauvoo period, it seems likely that she remained where she had been living. It is therefore unlikely that Patty and Rosilla lived together in the same household during the few months they remained in Nauvoo after the marriage.

Patty and David were able to get an outfit together to leave Nauvoo with almost the first group to head west. They crossed the Mississippi River on February 12, 1846. The traveling was miserable for two no-longer-young people; Patty was 51 and David was 56. On April 12, Patty complained “two months to day since I left my home I have been in the cold in the snow and rain with out a tent but now we are blockaded with

---

915 Smart (editor) *Exemplary Elder*, p. 24.  
917 Smart, *Mormon Midwife*, pp. 23-4, 32.  
918 Ibid.
mud and no feed for teams but brows I never felt so bad as now but I am not discouraged."\textsuperscript{919} As they continued to struggle across Iowa through adverse conditions, Patty was a key figure in the migrating community, for as a midwife, she traveled miles back and forth on the trail delivering babies.

In the meantime, Rosilla Cowan Sessions had stayed back in Nauvoo. David had apparently arranged for her to travel with the family of his son, Perrigrine, when they left Nauvoo later in the spring.\textsuperscript{920} Rosilla and Patty exchanged letters during this time, which indicates that a more or less cordial relationship had been established between them before the older couple left in February.\textsuperscript{921} Patty did not lack for female companionship, however. One of the delights of her life had always been her female friendships, an aspect of Relief Society that she particularly enjoyed. On the trail she frequently rejoiced at visits from women who had been Relief Society members with her, and she remained lifelong friends with several women who had also been plural wives of Joseph Smith. Both on the trail and in Utah she frequently reported visits from these friends and noted that they “had a good time.” These words usually accompanied a description of a spiritual manifestation of some sort. The women often gave each other blessings, and sometimes one spoke in tongues while another interpreted.

In June of 1846, Perrigrine’s family, with Rosilla in tow, caught up with David and Patty on the trail in Iowa.\textsuperscript{922} Both Patty and Rosilla seem to have begun their life together on the trail as David’s plural wives in good faith. Rosilla had kindly used some of her meager packing space to bring items to Patty from her daughter, Sylvia, who was

\textsuperscript{919} \textit{Mormon Midwife}, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{920} Ibid., pp. 24-5.
\textsuperscript{921} Ibid., p. 38. Patty recorded in her diary that she wrote a letter to Rosilla.
\textsuperscript{922} Ibid., p. 56.
still in Nauvoo.\footnote{Ibid.} For herself, Rosilla had brought along a tea set, and Patty reported approvingly in her diary that Rosilla sold the tea set for two dollars and then contributed the money to help purchase 200 pounds of flour for family use.\footnote{Ibid., p. 57.}

One has to wonder why Rosilla would sell a tea set she had brought all the way from Nauvoo. Though a tea set would be something of a luxury item for the traveling saints, they would not always be traveling. Presumably she hoped to use it when she established her own household later on. At any rate, that Rosilla contributed the money to help pay for family provisions suggests that at that point she felt some obligation to do her share in supporting the family. That Patty reported Rosilla’s contribution in her diary shows that she noticed Rosilla’s efforts. The tea set incident indicates a potential source of conflict between the women, however, in their disparate ability to contribute to family welfare. Midwife Patty had a profession. She kept accounts in her diary, and between February and early November 1846, she delivered 34 babies for a fee of $2.00 each.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 32-67.} By contrast, once Rosilla had sold her tea set and given her $2.00 for flour, she had nothing more to give. Patty had always been, and would always be, a substantial financial asset to the family.

It is easy to imagine that the first few weeks of living together in their polygamous arrangement would be a time of setting boundaries, establishing routines, and staking out territory. As the capable and established first and older wife, Patty was accustomed to being in charge of her household and likely assumed that she would continue to organize domestic activities. Rosilla, in other words, would have to fit
herself into Patty’s household. Patty’s main distress at the situation was conveyed in three words that frequently appear in her diary from this period: “I slept alone.” She would surely have expected David to share Rosilla’s bed, but after sleeping by her husband’s side for 34 years, the situation was very difficult to accept, especially since Rosilla was so much younger and presumably more sexually attractive.

Rosilla, however, was not so very young. She was 32, and no doubt ready to set up her own household and develop a relationship with her husband.926 She would not want to feel like a daughter or a servant, obligated to accede to Patty’s authority, but she would have no idea how to go about being anything else. Neither she nor Patty had ever observed others make the thorny transition from monogamous to polygamous marriage first-hand. Secret practice in Nauvoo had assured this. In such an atmosphere, it was easy for Rosilla to become readily offended over everyday incidents, like work requests she might interpret as orders. Beyond this, Patty was a well-loved and respected figure in the community with many friends. It is not surprising that Rosilla would feel intimidated and have difficulty finding a niche for herself in the family and community alongside Patty, especially since her main confidante was Patty’s husband.

As with the Lee family, Patty, Rosilla and David were more or less at sea in their new relationship to one another. They all had expectations and assumptions about marriage that they had acquired over their lifetimes of observing and living. What they could expect in polygamy was not entirely different from those expectations, but it was substantially different. They were in the uncomfortable position of needing to solve the problems of polygamy without the kind of experience and cultural knowledge that would

926 Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy, 619. Smith lists Rosilla’s birth date as 8 November, 1814.
allow them to do so. Like the women, David had had no opportunity to observe a
transition to polygamy first hand, and he found himself suddenly expected to please two
women with different expectations. It is not surprising that at this stressful time he took
the part of the woman who was willing to complain to him, especially since the
complainant was the newcomer who needed support and reassurance, and whom he was
trying to make comfortable and happy as his new bride. By contrast, he knew Patty very
well indeed, and presumably felt more comfortable confronting her with problems.

On the July 9, 1846, only two weeks after Rosilla’s arrival, David confronted
Patty with unknown complaints. Patty felt blindsided by the attack, and in her diary she
reported intense and uncharacteristic emotional distress for several days.

Thursday [July] 9- I have slept but little [blotted out: Mr. Sessions has said many
hard things to me.] I feel as though my heart would break I cannot eat....I see
many warm hearted friends yet I feel as though my heart would burst with grief.
Friday 10- sorrow of heart has made me sick I lay in the wagon all the
forenoon have many more hard things said to me but the lord supports
me...
Saturday 11- ^I [blotted out: slept alone]^ eat my breakfast but I am so
full of grief that there is no room for food and I soon threw it up I can
only say I feel bad [blotted out: lay alone part of the night
Sunday 12- I feel some better he has promised to treat me well [several
entries stricken out and ink changes color: I lay alone]927

Though Rosilla is not mentioned by name in any of these entries, the breakdown
in relations between the two women in the period that followed points to a nightmarish
polygamous life in one household (or wagonhold as was the case.) Patty had likely
assumed that, though there would be annoyances and difficulties in polygamous life,
families would be able to maintain internal civility. She probably hoped that she and

927 Smart, Mormon Midwife, p. 58. The symbol ^ indicates where Patty wrote above the line or inserted
words in her diary.
Rosilla could nurture their individual relationships with their mutual husband without impinging on one another and that they could develop a cordial relationship between the two of them. The absence of any critical reference to Rosilla in her diary for more than two months after her arrival suggests that Patty made a valiant attempt to maintain this ideal. Even when David attacked her, Patty resisted pinning the problem on Rosilla for a long time, but she was greatly disturbed nevertheless.

That David would lash out at her when she had little inkling that she was causing offense was galling enough to Patty, but what probably troubled her most was the realization that she could lose David altogether. Rosilla was young and able to bear children and not sealed to another man. Though Patty was sealed to Joseph Smith, she had not experienced a real marriage with him. David was her husband of 34 years. They had raised children together. She had deep ties to him, and in spite of this, he was taking the part of the interloper and sharing her bed while Patty slept alone. She was surely afraid, and rightly so, that this first dispute in polygamous life was a harbinger of things to come.

After a few days of the exhausting impasse, David and Patty apparently talked things out as they had surely learned to do over the course of their long marriage, and Patty felt better. By the end of July, however, she was commenting that “I have seen many a lonesome hour Mr Sessions has found some fault with me and we are here alone almost.” At this point, the Sessions family was traveling with only three families and Patty reported that “I do want to see the rest of our co [company] so much I am quite
Though she mentioned the activities of “the girls,” presumably Perrigrine’s wives and Rosilla, Patty was troubled and missed the support her friends would have provided during this trying time. She continued to feel lonely, especially when David took Rosilla across the river to pick grapes and left her on the other side to return to the wagons for a lonely afternoon by herself.929

Patty Sessions had an amazing constitution. She lived to be 97 years old and was rarely sick.930 Yet during the difficult transition to polygamous marriage, she succumbed to one of the most serious illnesses of her life. Three weeks after the river incident she wrote about her desperate illness in the intervening time, “many thought I was dying and the news went out that I was dead but the saints held on to me by faith and prair...I had the best care took of me and friends from almost every part of the camp to visit me and to set up with me and I feel thankfull to God that I got in to the camp for I think I must have died had I been any where else but with the main body of the church.”931

In other words, Patty believed that if she had still been in the company of only her family and two other wagons, she would not have survived. Whether this meant that they would not have given her adequate care or that it was the concerted faith of the saints that saved her, it is clear from her loneliness before her illness that Patty did not feel comfortable with just her family and the inhabitants of the few other wagons. At this point, her family was not a source of healing and comfort to her but quite the opposite. She attributed her recovery solely to her friends and people outside her family who could be her confidantes in place of her husband. By September 9, 1846, shortly after her

928 *Mormon Midwife*, July 31, 1846, p. 60.
929 Ibid., p. 60.
930 Ibid., 397. Patty Sessions died 14 December, 1892.
931 Ibid., 2 September, 1846, p. 61.
illness and two-and-a-half months after Rosilla’s arrival, Patty had reached her wits end.

At this point, Patty was finally critical of Rosilla.

I feel bad again he has been and talked with Rosilla and she filed his ears full and when he came to my bed I was also quite chled he was gone so long and I was so cold I had been crying he began to talk hard to me before he got into bed and thretens me very hard of leaving me Oh m^a^y the Lord open his eyes and show him where he is deceived by lisening to her false tales...Rosilla went away told nobody where she was going.

Patty had realized by this time that she and Rosilla were engaged in a battle for David’s heart and mind. The war was not pretty--first one and then the other would win skirmishes as the likelihood that the three of them could ever co-exist in a polygamous marriage became more and more remote. That David threatened to leave Patty suggests that Rosilla may have been trying to convince him to go away with her. He was probably tempted, but he was surely also bound by strong ties to Patty and their children and grandchildren. Rosilla, however, could not live comfortably with the family and resorted by turns to running away and coming back, refusing to eat with the family, refusing to help with the work, and in general making everyone miserable. David talked with Rosilla. Patty and David talked with her. But in spite of all the talk, Patty reported that “she will not hear to either of us nor receive any counsel from him but persists in her own way.”

David continued to be confused. On October 3, he took Patty’s saleratus, a naturally occurring leavening agent, gave it to Rosilla, and “told her to lock it up from me and keep it ^he also abused me very much^ for she had told him many things that were

---

932 Ibid. 8 September, 1846.
933 Ibid., 25 September, 1846.
untrue and when he found out the truth he took ^the most of it^ back again and gave it to me."³⁹³⁴ After this pretty pass, the three once again tried to talk out their differences, but the result was only that Rosilla essentially went on strike, refusing to do any work or eat with the family. Patty reported that "^she^ is able to walk many miles but says she will not work. I heard her tell him she was able to do all our work and knew it would be better for her to do it but she had said she would not work and she would not."³⁹³⁵ After this childish behavior on Rosilla’s part, David started to take Patty’s side and tried to convince Rosilla to help with the work. When Rosilla abused his mother, Perrigrine even got involved and told Rosilla to “hold her tongue or he would roll the wagon away with her in it.”³⁹³⁶

The wrangling over work continued, but Rosilla had not given up on David. On the November 5, 1846 Patty wrote that “he has lain with her three nights she has told him many falsehoods and is trying to have him take her to Nauvoo and then to Maine and leave me for good I have not spoke to her to day yet she says I have quarrel^ed^ with her all day I go to bed know not what to do”³⁹³⁷ David tried to get Patty to “find provition for her [Rosilla]to live somewhere else” but Patty told him “I could do it but I thought it was hard as old as I was to maintain her without work.”³⁹³⁸

The misery of the Sessions family continued through the month of November with Rosilla disappearing and reappearing only to pick fights with Patty, which sometimes brought Perrigrine again into the fray. In a last desperate hope that separation

³⁹³⁴ Ibid., 3 October, 1846, p. 62.
³⁹³⁵ Ibid., 11 October, 1846, p 63.
³⁹³⁶ Ibid., 21 October, 1846, p. 64.
³⁹³⁷ Ibid.
³⁹³⁸ Ibid., 8 November, 1846, p. 66.
would improve matters, they all finally agreed that Rosilla would live across the river. Things were still desperate, however, because David talked about leaving Patty. Finally, on November 27, Patty reported that “Rosilla came back ^here^ sais she is going back to the Mississipi river she left word for Mr Sessions to come over and see her.” The next day “he went over at night and staid with her...did not speak to me when he came home.” The situation could not continue and was soon resolved. On December 3, 1846, Patty reported in her diary without further comment “Rosilla started for Nauvoo.” Patty Sessions had her husband back. Her first ordeal with polygamy was over. The misery of these three people trying to practice polygamy without ever having observed how problems in such marriages might be worked out is instructive, however. Part of the problem was surely that they had no paradigm by which to establish their polygamous marriage. They had observed very few people work through the problems that they faced and their relationships became a hopeless muddle. No one knew what to expect and what everyone else expected.

Beyond having little direction in the form of established patterns and mores to help them with their problems, they were apparently not all fully committed to the doctrine of polygamy. Patty, always faithful, seems to have been more committed than David or Rosilla, as her reluctance to criticize Rosilla in the face of egregious offenses shows. Nevertheless, the personalities and position in life of Patty and Rosilla were incompatible—the young bride and the experienced wife were bound to clash. In the end monogamy was the fallback position for all of them. Rosilla especially was quick to

---

939 Ibid., 27-30 November, 1846, p. 67.
940 Ibid.
revert to her monogamous expectations for marriage and just as quick in trying to convince David to run away with her to practice monogamy, and David considered doing so.

In fact, Rosilla was not suited to polygamy and her future was with monogamy. She returned to Nauvoo, married monogamously and raised a family. Patty and David did not give up on the polygamous ideal, however. When they reached the Salt Lake Valley, David, nearly 60, again took a young wife, nineteen year old Harriet Teeples Wixom, in January 1850. Again, he began to treat Patty rudely, and she frequently complained in her diary, “I feel bad.” The similarity of the pattern is so pronounced that one is tempted to speculate that in both instances David felt guilty about entering polygamy and dealt with these feelings by lashing out at Patty. Again, he spent more time with Harriet than Patty. Again, Patty made careful note in her diary when her husband visited her and what labor he performed on her behalf.

This second plural marriage proved to be less troublesome for both David and Patty than the first, however. One factor was probably that Harriet’s extreme youth made her more amenable to being mothered by Patty than Rosilla had been. Harriet also seems to have been a more amiable person, and beyond this, she did not have the option of returning to monogamous society since she lived in polygamous Utah. Patty succeeded in convincing Harriet to move into her house—a gain for Patty since she disliked living alone. This arrangement also allowed her, thrifty housewife that she was, to save the expense of maintaining another household. In addition, when they all lived together, she

941 Smart, Exemplary Elder, p. 165. When Perrigrine traveled East as a missionary in 1852, he met Rosilla in Council Bluffs, Nebraska, where she had married a man by the name of “Baley.”
942 Smart, Mormon Midwife, pp. 139-40.
could keep an eye on David and Harriet and remain a vital part of the family, rather than being left alone and forgotten. David divided his time between the Patty’s Salt Lake home and his farm near his son Perrigrine’s, north of Salt Lake City.

Though in 1850 polygamy was not yet publicly acknowledged, it was openly practiced in Utah, and customs and mores had begun to emerge that helped people deal with the stresses the practice engendered. Certainly the relationship between Patty and Harriet was far more cordial than the nightmare with Rosilla. Harriet helped with the work and Patty helped care for Harriet’s young son by a short-lived previous polygamous marriage. Since Harriet had been part of a plural marriage before, it was unlikely she would try to lure David away to monogamy. The age question must have seemed very strange to everyone, however, because even Harriet’s mother was considerably younger than Patty and David, and Harriet was about the age of Patty’s older grandchildren. Nevertheless, Patty, Harriet and David managed to live in tolerable peace. Still, the arrangement was short-lived, for in August, 1850, eight months after he married Harriet, David began to experience severe health problems. Patty nursed him through his final illness. Harriet was pregnant with his child.

Patty’s treatment of Harriet after David’s death indicates the customs Mormons were developing to deal with the social upheaval that polygamy occasioned—for example the frequency of May-September marriages that left “May” and her children without support when “September” died, as he often did. Patty expected Harriet to continue to live with her, and seemed somewhat offended when Harriet moved back to live with her mother. Nevertheless, Patty and Perrigrine settled $150 per year on Harriet, and Patty

\[943\] Ibid., 150.
delivered Harriet and David’s child, a boy named David, in December of that year.\textsuperscript{944} The baby died in 1851, but Patty still kept ties with Harriet, who remarried and sometimes stayed with Patty when she was in the city. In 1858, at a time of stress for Harriet’s family, Patty took her six-year-old daughter, Alzina, to raise for three years.\textsuperscript{945} In short, she still considered Harriet family. Though Harriet was sealed to David and Patty was not, it was Patty who saw to it that a headstone was raised over David’s grave.\textsuperscript{946}

When David Sessions died, Patty was 55 years old and probably hoped polygamy was in her past. In December 1851 she married 61 year old John Parry, director of the fledgling Tabernacle Choir. “I feel to thank the Lord that I have someone to cut my wood for me,” she wrote.\textsuperscript{947} For a little more than two years John Parry was there to cut Patty’s wood, but in March of 1854 she reported that Mr. Parry (Patty always referred to her husbands in this formal way) “saw Brigham.” The next day she elaborated, “told me what he said I felt bad that he did not tell me before Oh Lord help me to do right he is to have a woman sealed to him next Sunday and this is the first I knew about and he has known about it a long time and denied it to me”\textsuperscript{948} That he did not confide information so important to their marriage forewarned Patty that she would not fare well in the new arrangement.

\textsuperscript{944} Ibid., pp. 150-154.
\textsuperscript{945} Ibid., When Alzina returned to live with her parents in October 1861, Patty wrote, “Harriet has gone home. Alzina has gone with her I have clothed her well she has enough to last her more than one year I have kept her almost three years she is now almost nine years old now but I do not want her any longer. 
\textsuperscript{946} Ibid., p. 286. Patty convinced her second husband, John Parry, to carve her first husband’s grave stone.
\textsuperscript{947} Ibid., 14 December, 1841
\textsuperscript{948} Ibid., 29 March, 1854, p. 202.
Patty must have felt a sense of déjà vu all over again. Again, her husband was to marry a young woman. Again the woman was named Harriet (a different Harriet, however.) Again the young woman moved into Patty’s house, and, like Rosilla, proved unable to accommodate herself to Patty’s housewifely patterns. Interestingly, the new Harriet was 32, the young-but-not-so young age Rosilla had been when she married David Sessions. Fortunately, John was not a man to treat Patty rudely, but before long Harriet made it clear to him that she would not live in the same household with Patty. Instead, she moved to the house John had occupied before he married Patty. John carried a bedstead from Patty’s house to Harriet’s, and once again, spent more time with the young wife than the old.\footnote{Ibid., p. 205.} Patty again recorded in her diary the increasingly rare occasions when her husband graced her with his presence. She again complained of loneliness and found herself hiring men to cut her wood and do the heavy work she could not perform in her aging condition. Again she was eventually called upon to deliver the children of her husband’s other wife, and again, John came to Patty’s house when he was sick and needed nursing.\footnote{Ibid., p. 221.} Again, Patty was expected to share the increasing wealth she had gained from her profession with her husband’s other family.

Whether by default or because Harriet demanded it, John gradually came to regard Harriet’s home as his home, so that sometimes when he visited Patty she would write in her diary upon his departure that he had gone home. In essence, Harriet created a very exclusionary form of polygamy, and who could blame her? She soon had many small children, including a set of twins. She needed the assistance of their father. John
Parry was hers most of the time, but he provided some assistance to Patty and received substantial financial support from her. When he was sick, he had an excellent nurse at his disposal.

Though in many ways the plural marriages experienced by Patty with her two husbands were similar down to the age of the bride at marriage, the differences in Patty’s reactions to the transitions involving Rosilla and Harriet Parry are instructive. Two important factors, of course, are that the family was not in transit when John Parry married Harriet and John and Patty had not been married many years nor produced children together. But things were also easier for Patty the third time around because by then social expectations and cultural assumptions had grown up that regulated the practice of polygamy. Solutions had been worked out through lived experience and there were thus social expectations about what should be done to solve problems that arose. People had realized, for example, that two households were sometimes essential, and that this step should be taken very quickly if conflict arose and it became clear that a combined household would lead to dissolution of one of the marriages.²⁵¹ Though Patty made her plea for a combined household—probably because she hoped to save money and feared loneliness—both John and Harriet refused. Harriet surely understood that if they all lived together, Patty would run the household, due to her age, experience and economic clout.

For her part, though Patty expressed regret when John secretly courted Harriet and contracted to marry her, she had become somewhat resigned to the lot of older wives by then. She had also come to accept the familial nature of the arrangement, which

meant that she would help to support her husband’s second family. Recall that when David had suggested that she make some provision for Rosilla at the height of their conflict, she responded that it seemed rather hard for him to expect her to support an idle person at her age. In Utah, this kind of aid was apparently expected, because she and Perrigrine made provision for David’s second plural wife, Harriet, after he died. When John married his Harriet, Patty gave substantial financial assistance to them and received little help in return in spite of her even more advanced age. Beyond financial assistance, Patty, whose hands were never still, made clothing, wove cloth and knitted items for John and his second family. She shared the fruit from her orchard with them—fruit that she often stayed home to guard when it was ripening in the fall.952 Generally, when John came by to do some work, Patty sent him home with provisions.

Patty Bartlett Sessions never complained directly about polygamy, nor for that matter wrote much about it at all. It is possible, however, to glean some of her true feelings about the principle from her diary. Most tellingly, one particular phrase appears almost exclusively when she was dealing with her husband’s procurement of a new young wife—“Oh Lord, help me to do right.”953 Patty was a faithful woman, as evidenced by her son’s recollections, “as soon as Mother heard [the Mormon elders] she believed.”954 She believed all her life. Polygamy proved to be a terrible trial to her, but she believed it was right. Her faith, however, was the only means by which she could endure it, because for her polygamy invariably meant conflict, loneliness and added

952 Smart, Mormon Midwife, p. 220.
954 Smart, Exemplary Elder, p. 25.
financial burdens. The greatest loss for Patty, however, was that of companionship and intimacy.

After David died and before she married John Parry, she had a new adobe house built for herself. When she moved into her new home, she wrote in her diary, “Oh if my husband was with me as he was once how happy I could be but I must now be as happy as I can.”\textsuperscript{955} From the time David married Rosilla in 1846, however, Patty’s happiness in the company of either of her husbands was tenuous. Though there were periods when she had her husband to herself, she could not trust that it would last.

In essence, Patty’s experience in polygamy bears out the argument that older women had the least to gain from polygamy, which in the end was a system that put a primacy on begetting children.\textsuperscript{956} Older women did not fit comfortably into this picture. Sexual mores even developed which designated intercourse as solely for the purpose of propagation, so that sexual relations during pregnancy and nursing were forbidden and regarded as likely to sap life energy from the mother and child. Little was said about sexual relations with post-menopausal women, but presumably there was small need for this when young and fertile women were available.\textsuperscript{957} Polygamy thus became a highly pragmatic form of marriage that was not overly concerned about ensuring companionship for older wives or even fathers who would live to see their children grown. Bringing those children into the world was the important thing. Nature had already decreed that mothers would not be too terribly old when children were born, and they were expected

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{955}] Smart, \textit{Mormon Midwife}, 4 December 1850, p. 153.
\item[\textsuperscript{956}] Daynes’, \textit{More Wives Than One}. In her study of one Utah community, Manti, Daynes studied all plural marriages contracted in Manti and found that women who were widowed or divorced when they were past child-bearing age were unlikely to marry again. Church leaders specifically stated that, as with the ancient patriarchs, one of the chief purposes of polygamy was raising up a “righteous seed.”
\item[\textsuperscript{957}] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
to do the lion’s share of child rearing. Women like Patty nevertheless served as valuable support for polygamy. Her labor, money, and household were all resources for her husbands’ polygamous wives. Though she gained far less from the arrangements, she did gain respect and appreciation—from the community if not from the plural wives.

Scholars have not focused extensively on the position of older women in polygamy, but some work nevertheless sheds light on the subject. Kathryn Daynes has shown in her study of one Utah town, Manti, that divorce was less common among first wives than plural wives. In her study, nearly 18% of plural wives were divorced, compared to 16% of first wives.958 This figure might indicate that the position of first wives was more satisfactory, or it might suggest that older wives had less incentive to seek divorce.

Daynes has also shown that if women were beyond childbearing age or approaching it when they were divorced, they were unlikely to remarry. Younger, fertile women almost always remarried. Daynes has argued that the high incidence of remarriage for fertile women was a way of maximizing reproduction.959 If older women wanted to be married at all, however, they needed to eschew divorce and keep the husband, or part of a husband, they had. Patty Sessions’ remarriage to John Parry in her fifties was unusual, and it is clear from her writings that she desired a husband for companionship and household help. Her desires were trumped by fertility, however, as they would be for most older women whose husbands were inclined to enter polygamy.

Women who entered polygamy in their youth with men much older than themselves, like

959 Ibid., pp. 168-70.
John Parry’s polygamous wife Harriet, were liable to become widows when relatively young. John Parry died in 1868, after being married to Harriet for 14 years. Harriet was 46 years old at that time, but she was still raising young children. Her oldest children, twin boys, were born in August 1855, and were only 13 years of age when their father died. She faced a long widowhood and the challenge of raising her children without a father. Anecdotal evidence suggests that widowed and divorced older women who could not support themselves usually relied on their children for support.

Women nevertheless gained a dense network of interconnected family—and hence community—in polygamy. This thick web of connections surely helped atone to some degree for the absence of fathers and husbands in many homes. After John Parry married Harriet and moved out, Patty even reported in her diary that though she was frequently alone, she was happy. And, in part because of polygamy, she had a prodigious family and many visitors. From her three children who survived childhood, she had over 65 grandchildren, mostly the children of her son Perrigrine, husband of eight wives and father of 55 children. These daughters-in-law and grandchildren frequently visited Patty and sometimes boarded with her. Beyond this immediate family, Patty also had a vast network of friends and more distant kin, including two of the women with whom she had shared a husband.

Perhaps most satisfying to her, Patty was part of the network of influential women who had cut their teeth in the Nauvoo Relief Society. She often visited with these friends, most of whom were in polygamous marriages. They supported one another and

---

960 Smart, *Mormon Midwife*, p. 346. John Parry died in 1868 after being married to Harriet for 14 years, since 1854. Harriet was 46 years old at that time, but she was still raising young children. Her oldest children, twin boys, were born in August of 1855 and were only 13 years of age when their father died.

961 Smart, *Exemplary Elder*, p. 333.
found fulfillment in furthering various charitable causes in Utah. They had not lost the spirit of their organization even if they had lost the organization itself. It was not entirely lost, however. In the earliest days in Utah, Relief Society existed sporadically in independent organizations scattered about the territory. Patty Sessions was president of one such Relief Society in the Salt Lake 16th Ward in the 1850s.\footnote{Smart, \textit{Mormon Midwife}, p. 212.} In 1866, however, Brigham Young called Eliza R. Snow to reorganize Relief Society for the entire church.\footnote{Derr, Cannon, Beecher, \textit{Women of Covenant}, p. 86.} Patty was not an officer in this organization, but she nevertheless maintained influence in the female circles of the church because of her medical knowledge and her close friendships with Eliza R. Snow and other influential women.\footnote{See Maureen Ursenbach Beecher “The “Leading Sisters”: A Female Hierarchy in 19th century Mormon Society. \textit{JMH}, v. 9, 1982, 25-39. Beecher explores the formation and scope of Mormon female leadership in the 19th century, arguing that the leadership that formed in Nauvoo Relief Society became the basis for women leaders for the rest of the century. Many had kinship ties to male leaders, but friendship ties were important as well. Other qualities like spirituality and faithfulness played a part as well. Beecher has pointed out that hewing to unified belief, including in polygamy, was essential.}  

In the end, Patty’s care in old age came from her son Perrigrine’s polygamous connections. When she turned 70 years old, though John Parry was still alive, it was Perrigrine who decided that his mother was too old to live alone. He moved one of his wives, Elizabeth Birdenow, into Patty’s home to live with her.\footnote{Smart, \textit{Mormon Midwife}, p. 324. Patty wrote on 27 March, 1865, “PG moved her ^Elizabeth^ down to live here with me he is not willing that I should live alone any longer.”} The two women lived together for the 27 remaining years of Patty’s life. If polygamy took away the close companionship of a husband, it also gave Patty a quiverful of grandchildren and someone to nurse her through her old age. 

In Patty’s mind, polygamy also gave her valuable eternal connections. Two passages from her diary give a sense of how she saw herself and her place in the
eternities. One passage refers to a blessing given her by her female friends and former Relief Society companions on the way to the Salt Lake Valley. The two women, Sisters Young and Whitney, laid their hands on Patty’s head and predicted that she would live to see a temple built where she would once again meet Joseph Smith, her eternal husband, who would bring with him her children who had died in childhood. He would also bring to her countless people she had brought into the world through her work as a midwife, and they would honor her. “Many would be brought unto me saying your hands were the first that handled me.” The mothers of these people would also “rise up and bless her.” Upon receiving this blessing, “my heart was fillid with joy and rejoicing.”

Whatever her trials in polygamy, she saw herself as eternally joined to Joseph Smith in a polygamous relationship that was also connected to her identity as a midwife--a giver of life.

Patty, like many diarists, was fond of taking stock every now and again in her diary. These occasions indicate what she regarded as important and essential in her life story. In 1860, when she was 65 years old, she listed the type of information often found in family Bibles–her birthdate and David’s, the names of their parents and their marriage date, the dates when she and David had been baptized into the Mormon church, and the date they received their endowments. She then listed the dates that David was sealed to Rosilla Cowan and Harriet Teeples, the date she was sealed to Joseph Smith and the date she was married to John Parry for time. This was Patty’s record of eternal ordinances for herself and David. There is no mention of their children aside from

---

966 Sessions and Smart, *Mormon Midwife*, (29 May, 1847) p. 82.
967 Ibid., p. 276
Patty’s designation of her daughter Sylvia as the person who should complete some work for her after her death, when a temple should be completed in Utah.

The passage is interesting because it shows that Patty regarded David’s sealing to Rosilla as still binding even though the polygamous marriage had failed years before. It also shows that Patty, though regarding herself as eternally connected to Joseph Smith in marriage, somehow saw David’s information as inevitably connected to her own. John Parry’s sealing to Harriet is not mentioned. Whatever the official doctrine, David had been her husband for 40 years. He was the biological father of her children. Somehow, she was connected to him in the eternities even if she was not sealed to him. In essence, whatever church doctrine dictated, the realities of lives lived together and failed plural marriages could not erase traditional ways of identifying self and family.

Whereas the Lee and Sessions families both had their challenges in polygamy, Patty and David’s son Perrigrine stands out as an unusually successful polygamist. He seems to have been an extraordinarily amiable and sensible man, who was also relatively prosperous in business, so that he was able to support his families. Compared to John D. Lee, he was also more circumspect about taking wives. His first wife died in Nauvoo, and he then married sisters on the same day, which meant that neither had experienced a period of monogamy. Perrigrine married eight wives, but after he married the Call sisters, the other marriages were spaced so that each wife had time to adjust to the family before another arrived. In addition, he was apparently sensitive to domestic tranquility, so that the wives lived with other wives with whom they were compatible. The women could thus develop deep ties with another person in order to ward off loneliness, and they

968 All information on Perrigrine Sessions taken from Smart, Exemplary Elder.
helped raise one another’s children. Finally, the closeness among Perrigrine’s wives was facilitated by his frequent missions. At these times the women were united in supporting their absent husband, whose absence would preclude jealousy about his living arrangements or attentions. Their survival while he was gone was made easier by pooling the labor of all the wives and children to support one another. Thus, a wide range of factors—the amiable personalities of participants, the timing of marriages, Perrigrine’s success in business and the respect he enjoyed in the community, even his missions—facilitated his family’s success in plural marriage. Beyond this, since many of his wives had observed polygamy from the time they were very young, they knew what to expect from the institution. All of these factors helped assure successful practice of polygamy for Perrigrine and his eight wives.

Perrigrine’s fourth wife, Sarah Crossley, illustrates the nature of his marriages. She had been a member of the Martin handcart company when she crossed the plains to Utah before her marriage. The Martin and Willey companies started too late in the 1856 season and were caught without sufficient food in early winter snows in Wyoming. They were rescued by a party of Mormons from Utah, but many died and all suffered from starvation and frostbite. Sarah was no exception, and she suffered from delicate health all her life. She wrote about her life in polygamy,

Ester, his youngest wife and I lived together in a log house of six rooms. Here I had my family of eleven children and Ester had ten. We loved each other dearer than sister[s]. She cared for me most tenderly doing all the hard work, allowing me to do only the lighter things about the home. For seventeen years we lived together in perfect happiness. Then we were given a nice new home of own, but we parted with
many regrets and we have always remained the dearest of companions.

I was a widow at the age of fifty with my family in comfortable circumstances and loving companionship of all the other wives. There were six of us at this time and we have always been a great blessing to each other.\textsuperscript{969}

Patty Sessions’ life offers an important window into the development of customs and mores that facilitated the practice of polygamy. From her diary and other sources, scholars have been able to draw some conclusions. Jessie Embrey has argued that for the most part, Mormons simply mapped Victorian marriage patterns onto polygamy, particularly regarding division of labor.\textsuperscript{970} In her study, based on diaries, memoirs and interviews, men worked to support their families and divided their goods among their dependents. Women raised children, performed domestic labor and helped support themselves, their own children and the larger family by working in female professions like shop keeping, school teaching, nursing and midwifery. Embry, Kathryn Daynes and many other scholars have found that polygamous women did not have more children than monogamous women, but, of course, polygamous men did. Divorce was more common in polygamous than monogamous marriages according to the studies of numerous scholars.\textsuperscript{971} In addition, Kathryn Daynes has found that polygamy served as an economic equalizer because wealthier men were more likely to enter polygamy than poorer men,

\textsuperscript{969} Smart, \textit{Exemplary Elder}, p. 281.
\textsuperscript{971} Access to divorce records is restricted, however, so it is difficult to acquire accurate statistics about divorce.
and their brides tended to be economically disadvantaged young women—most often immigrants, or young women whose fathers had died or were not in Utah.972

**Conclusion**

While it is true that Mormons were happy enough to generally adhere to a traditional division of labor and to some degree sentimentalize home life, a Victorian marriage system that emphasized the nuclear family as the emotional center of domestic life did not map comfortably onto polygamy. In essence, certain ideals of marriage were impossible to maintain in polygamy. It was impossible, for example, for most men to maintain the intimate relationships with all their wives that many had come to expect as the ideal of companionate marriage grew stronger. The ideal of lifelong emotional interdependence was especially difficult to maintain when new wives and young families constantly divided the husband’s attention. Many men continued to produce young families even as they grew old, and thus used resources that might have helped older children gain an education or land to support their own families. Many polygamists died when their youngest children were still infants. Their role in the lives of children and grandchildren was thus significantly different from that of monogamous fathers who tended to marry women nearer their own age.

In short, though Mormon society adopted some prevailing marriage patterns, and though conventions and mores grew in Mormon society that facilitated and institutionalized the practice of polygamy, the reality was that in many ways polygamy defied patterns and ideals. The challenges of knitting numerous people together on the slender reed of kinship ties that stemmed from multiple marriages to one man were so

---

complex that sometimes people simply did what they had to do to make polygamy work in some fashion.

Though Perrigrine Sessions’ family perhaps exemplifies the ideal, his mother’s experience and those of her other children illustrate the difficulties and vagaries in other polygamous marriages. Though her daughter Sylvia was a plural wife of Joseph Smith and later married Heber C. Kimball, she continued to live with her husband, Windsor Lyon, until he died in Iowa on the journey west. She then surprised her family by marrying a non-Mormon, Ezekiel Clark, in Iowa in 1850. After giving birth to three children in that marriage, she and the children left Clark in Iowa and made their way to Utah, but she did not return to Kimball. Though she was often in the company of a man Patty referred to in her diary as “Williams,” Sylvia never married again. In fact, she never divorced Kimball or Clark. She died in 1882, 11 years before her hardy mother.973

Patty’s other son, David Sessions, never entered polygamy. He married Phoebe Carter Foss in 1852 and fathered 11 children. He was a respected man in the community his brother had founded—Bountiful, Utah-- but he and Phoebe seem to have had an agreement that polygamy was not for them. In fact, one of Perrigrine’s wives, Sarah Ann Bryson, at one point served as household help to David and Phoebe, which would have been a perfect opportunity for David to court her if he had wished. Instead, he was content to let his brother marry Sarah.974 Polygamy was not for everyone.

Joseph Smith’s efforts to institute a new form of marriage and a family-centered salvation narrative was nevertheless successful in many ways. Even people who did not

---

973 Compton, In Sacred Loneliness, pp. 171-204.
974 Smart, Exemplary Elder, The Life and Missionary Diaries of Perrigrine Sessions, p. 289.
practice polygamy gradually changed their thinking about marriage, and social conventions and mores developed to accommodate the new form of marriage.\footnote{Van Wagoner, \textit{Mormon Polygamy: A History}, p. 91. The author argues that “Though polygamous families were always a minority, most Mormons viewed the practice as the model lifestyle.”}

Monogamy persisted in Utah, however, and not only because people like David and Phoebe Sessions rejected it. Demographically there were simply insufficient women for all to practice polygamy. Beyond this, American culture championed monogamy more and more stridently as the century wore on. Utahns, with their love-hate relationship to American culture, were not immune to the appeal of monogamy. For better or worse, they cared about what the rest of America thought of them. Incidence of polygamy in Utah consequently decreased as the federal government pursued a policy of legal obstruction towards Mormons and their unorthodox marriage system.\footnote{Daynes, \textit{More Wives Than One}, pp. 173-4.} Nevertheless, in Utah Mormons made a valiant attempt to create a unique kind of theocratic nation-within-a-nation with polygamy at its center. As a consequence, many Mormons deeply internalized the importance of polygamy and family salvation and were reluctant to give up their ideals after the 1890 and 1904 church Manifestos that were meant to end polygamy.
Epilogue

If Joseph Smith planned to introduce polygamy gradually in tandem with a theological narrative that placed it at the center of the highest level of salvation and exaltation, he largely succeeded, but not during his lifetime. Claudia Bushman has observed that Joseph Smith was a man of great religious intelligence and imagination, but one who generally left the implementation of his ideas to others. His skills and abilities fit perfectly with the highly charged religious atmosphere of the 19th century, and he was consequently able to weave American and Judeo-Christian history into a synthesis that made sense to his adherents as they gradually came to accept his family-centered ideal of salvation and exaltation. But it was not he who institutionalized Mormonism and polygamy; it was Brigham Young and the faithful men and women who moved to Utah.

In Utah the theological narrative continued to evolve and develop. After polygamy was announced to the world in August 1852, Mormons hoped to convince the rest of the nation, by their example and through the arguments supported by their theological narrative, that polygamy was the ideal form of marriage. At that juncture, they observed the turmoil that existed in the United States during the years leading to the Civil War, and believed they would play an important role in restoring the Constitution when the United States imploded. Acceptance of their social system would be a natural corollary to this development. Like the ancient Israelites, however, Mormons believed they had to remain in good standing with God in order to be chosen to play this important role.

---

977 I am indebted to Claudia for this insight, offered during my dissertation defense on April 4, 2011.
role. For this reason, revival and retrenchment were recurring themes in 19th century Utah and polygamy was inevitably a part of these movements.

In 1856-57, a reformation movement was sparked by Jedediah M. Grant, a member of the first presidency, which especially encouraged rebaptism and polygamy. In the 1860s, when it became clear that the railroad would soon link Utah with the rest of the country, Brigham Young encouraged economic independence in Utah, especially the establishment of economic cooperatives. One of the most successful of these was established as a city called Orderville, which boasted a far higher incidence of polygamy than was found in the rest of Utah. During this same period, church-wide Relief Society was revived with Eliza R. Snow, one of Joseph Smiths widows and plural wife to Brigham Young, at the helm. Retrenchment Associations were also initiated to encourage economic self-sufficiency, polygamy, and orthodoxy in general, especially in the younger generation. This attempt to combine religion and economic control led to a schismatic movement, the Godbeites, which also repudiated polygamy. In essence, polygamy was deeply embedded in the religious, economic and political world of 19th century Utah and was always an integral part of the evolving theological narrative.

Ultimately, however, even Mormons began to edit polygamy out of that narrative. As Congress passed increasingly draconian legislation forbidding polygamy in the 1870s and 80s and federal agents were sent to Utah to arrest and imprison polygamists, Mormons defended their marriage system tooth and nail even while young people became less and less likely to enter plural marriages. It was nevertheless difficult to

---

relinquish the theological narrative that included polygamy as the practice faded.
Ironically, though the Mormon people accepted polygamy only with great reluctance when Joseph Smith introduced it, by the time the church leadership determined that plural marriage was unsustainable in the modern world, it had become so internalized for many members that they were reluctant to follow their leaders in accepting a changed narrative about the ideal form of marriage. Younger people not raised in the heyday of polygamy came to regard it as a strange practice, but many older people still retained a firm belief in the superiority of polygamy well into the 20th century.581

Sometime after 1910, well after the Manifestos of 1890 and 1904 that officially ended Mormon polygamy, Olive Amanda Fullmer’s daughter, Olive Bulkley, wrote a reminiscence of her family life in polygamy. Since Olive Bulkley was born in 1856, during her childhood polygamy was freely practiced and promoted within Mormonism. In her young adulthood it was vigorously defended in the face of federal eradication efforts. Her brief memoir illustrates the beliefs and assumptions held by a person reared in Mormon culture at a time when polygamy was officially touted as the ideal form of marriage.

As a result of her upbringing, Olive Bulkley believed deeply in polygamy and the family salvation narrative. She wrote that all three of John Fullmer’s wives, Mamey [Mary Ann], Olive and Sadie (Sarah Ann) “sought to impress us with the fact that that

---

principle was from God.”\textsuperscript{982} It is clear that Olive internalized her belief in polygamy during her childhood because she remembered that she “used to pity other children when they told me their father had one wife. I felt as a child my father was superior to theirs; he set us a fine example of refinement and of spiritual uplift all his life. I honor and love him above all men; and mother, God bless her memory, taught us to honor him.” Interestingly, beyond natural childish pride in her father, Olive felt he was superior because he had more wives. Her words also show that, whatever the differences between Olive Amanda and John, they were not passed on to their children, or at least not to Olive.

For Olive Bulkley, who never experienced polygamy as a wife, its advantages seemed obvious in retrospect. The families helped one another and assured survival in difficult times. When John Fullmer was called on a mission in 1852, her mother gave birth to Olive’s older brother, Heber, the day after her husband left for England. When Olive Amanda was unable to nurse her baby because she had contracted asthma, Mary Ann weaned her own 10-month-old baby, Don Carlos, in order to nurse the son of her sister wife. The women lived together and supported one another during John’s mission, and when he returned, bringing with him Sarah Ann Stevenson, the woman who would become his third wife, all three wives lived in the same house or in close proximity and used their respective talents for the good of the family. Olive Bulkley remembered the division of labor among the wives, “[Mamey] taught us children to read and generally cared for us. Aunt Sadie we called her, did the sewing as she was a tailoress. My mother

\textsuperscript{982} Wells, \textit{John Solomon Fullmer, the Man and His Writings}, pp. 429-30. All quotations from Olive Bulkley in this segment are taken from this source.
was a good cook. She did that. Mamey knew but little of that kind of work….We were at Mamey’s and Aunt Sadie’s as much as we were at home until Father moved Aunt Sadie to Orangeville so the boys could get more land.”

Olive Bulkley remembered only harmony and love in her family, especially among the wives. “Looking back I am surprised at the little difficulty we had, and how well those women got along…. Mother told us many times she loved Mamey…better than her own sister. I never heard them quarrel once in my life.” Olive remembered similar peace and harmony between the children and the wives, “My Mother said not one of the other wives’ children ever gave her an unkind word and I am sure I… never sassd Aunt Sadie or Mamey. That is the why of our always talking when we get together of our wonderful parents; for we do do that and we feel what we say.” Olive similarly remembered her father’s loving attitude toward his wives, “Father was a loving husband; he used to tell us they were his three queens. How I loved him for that.” It was clearly very important to Olive to believe that her father loved all of his wives equally.

In Olive’s memory, even financial hardship did not strain family togetherness. “I cannot explain how we seemed to cling together and loved each other. You recall how I have said I loved Charley, Frank, Sadie and all the rest.\footnote{Charlie, Frank and Sadie were all the children of John Fullmer’s third wife, Sarah Stevenson. They were born in 1859, 1869 and 1873 respectively. They were three of Sarah’s 12 children, all of whom survived to adulthood. Wells, \textit{JSF}, pp. 442-443.} Later when I was 10 years old, Chauncey offered to care for mother entirely. Father had such a young family by Sadie, she having had 12 children in 25 years. Chauncey and Dickens and Heber cared for Mother and we six children but there was no bitterness.” Chauncey was the young son
born to Olive Amanda before she married John Fullmer--the only child in the Fullmer family who was not a blood relative to John Fullmer.

Further biographical information complicates this story, however, and indicates that Olive Bulkeley forgot or was unaware of family conflicts that occurred in her childhood. Family information indicates that Chauncey Cook “left home at age 19 when his stepfather gave him a whipping for something that displeased him.” Olive would have been only six or seven years old when this happened, so it is not surprising that she was not privy to the details. After leaving home, Chauncey took a job as a teamster and became trapped in Montana for the winter. When he returned, he found his pregnant mother living in a dugout and offered to take care of her if she would leave her husband. She refused, but told him he should care for her anyway. He complied by building her a log house and paying a midwife to deliver her baby. He then continued to work as a teamster and probably continued to support his mother as his half-sister Olive remembered, with the help of her two full brothers, Dickens and Heber.

Olive remembered her half-brother and full brothers still supporting her family when she was 10 years old, at which time Chauncey was 23 and Dickens and Heber were 18 and 14 years of age respectively. For these young men, polygamy meant that they had to use their resources to support their father’s family at a time when they would normally be saving money toward their own future or pursuing an education. The family record also shows that when Chauncey, Dickens and Heber married and began supporting their

---

own families, a younger son, Van Osden, took care of his mother and did not marry until after she died.985

The burden these young Fullmer sons shouldered in supporting their mother and siblings presents an interesting contrast to John Fullmer’s life; his parents had not been able to give their children land or other inheritance, but they had given them themselves and the fruits of their own labor. In polygamy, even when a young man had a living father, his labor was often required on behalf of his mother and siblings. Eventually Chauncey married the school teacher sister of his partner in the teamster business, gained some education through her efforts, and raised a family of 8 children to adulthood. When his own children were grown and both his mother and stepfather had died, his bitterness toward John Fullmer softened and he was sealed to his mother and stepfather in January 1911.986 Olive’s claims that there was no bitterness over Chauncey’s support for her mother in his youth may have stemmed from this later period.

Olive also remembered that the families helped one another in time of death. Her mother died in 1885, less than two years after her shared husband. By this time she had moved from Springville, where Mamie lived and John was buried, to Orangeville in Emery County to be near her sister wife, Sadie, and her family. Sadie, along with some of Olive Amanda’s children, nursed her through her final illness and made her burial clothes.987 Olive Bulkley observed that Sadie’s efforts “impressed us who were with Mother with this that she and Mother loved each other as well as Mamey.”

985 Ibid., p. 248.
987 Ibid., p. 163.
Though Olive’s pride in her father and family no doubt reflects a child’s natural bias, it also shows that the polygamous family salvation narrative took root for many people. It is interesting, however, to speculate on Olive Bulkley’s rosy picture of family life in polygamy in light of her mother’s failure to mourn the death of her husband and Chauncey’s experiences. A few lines near the end of Olive Bulkley’s memoir give some clue about her idealization of polygamous life. “In looking back to write this, I have wept many, many times. I feel so utterly alone; no loving faithful husband over there waiting for me, as mother and the other two wives had; and my heart aches. We with our one family could not make the success that father did with his three wives and 31 children.”

Olive never relinquished her belief in the divine origins of polygamy; it was part of her belief in Joseph Smith’s prophetic mission and her understanding of priesthood and authority. Though the church repudiated the practice, she retained the ideology as can be seen from the words that ended her short memoir, “We loved each other. We expect and want to be together as one large family. I know the principle [polygamy] is of God as my parents knew it. I testify to you of it in the name of Christ, Amen.” Olive’s final words reflect the principles by which her parents had lived; they believed that their very salvation and communal afterlife were entwined with a theological narrative that included polygamy. This is why they had accepted polygamy years before, the reason they taught their children that polygamy was of God, and the reason Olive Bulkley retained her belief long after polygamy had been repudiated by the church.

---

988 Ibid.
It is likely that Olive’s disappointment in her own marriage influenced her memories of her childhood in polygamy. Beyond this, however, it seems that John Fullmer and his three wives worked hard to create a wholesome, respectful and faithful environment for the children they raised. Their belief that they were obeying God’s will by living in polygamy helped them to do this. Olive’s positive memories were nevertheless not shared by all of John Fullmer’s children. That the family togetherness Olive depicted was fleeting, intermittent and difficult, if not impossible, to maintain can be surmised when the demographics of the Fullmer family are considered.

John’s first daughter, Lavinia, was born to Mary Ann in 1838, and his youngest child, Leonard, was born to Sarah Ann in 1878. The 40 year gap between his eldest and youngest child speaks volumes about the possibilities for family cohesion. By the time Leonard was born, 40 year old Lavinia had become a grandmother, making John Fullmer a father, grandfather and great-grandfather to babies all at the same time. The family relationships are simply mind-boggling. Leonard was a half-uncle to the children of his half-siblings, who were much older than he, and a great-uncle to children his own age. Moreover, since John Fullmer had 31 children of his own to worry about, it is hard to imagine that he was able to play a significant role as grandfather or great-grandfather to the multitudes of children the third and fourth generations produced. Given the sheer numbers and the vast age ranges of the siblings alone, it is likely that siblings and half-

---

990 See Wells, Peter Fullmer and Susannah Zerfass: Their Ancestry and Their Posterity, Volume 2, p. 145. Lavinia’s oldest child, Joanna Coats or Coates, was born to a short-lived polygamous union. She married Parker Adelbert Childs in 1873 and gave birth to her first child, Adelbert, in 1874. Information on Adelbert the younger found online. Joanna appears to have died after giving birth to three children, sometime before 1880, and her husband then married Agnes Fullmer, the daughter of Joanna’s grandfather John and his third wife, Sarah Ann Stevenson. Agnes was thus Joanna’s half aunt, though she was 5 years younger than her half-niece!
siblings were often barely acquainted, much less able to develop close relationships with one another. Not surprisingly, in families where generations overlapped and became so confusingly convoluted, it was difficult for grandparents to serve as the connecting glue. The Fullmers and other polygamous families may have gained many, many more kinship connections as a result of their polygamous marriage practices, but since they had limited ability to maintain relationships with all these people, one has to wonder if they really benefitted from the increased legions of kin.

Olive’s short memoir indicates how the family relationships worked. She stated that she loved Charlie, Frank and Sadie, all children of the youngest wife, Sarah Ann. Sarah Ann’s oldest child was born in 1857, one year after Olive Bulkley, and apparently Olive grew up with some of the children from the third family, the ones she mentioned knowing and loving as siblings. It is unlikely, however that she was well-acquainted with the older half-siblings born to Mary Ann, who were off living their own lives and having their own children by the time Olive was born. In addition, once Sarah Ann’s family moved to Orangeville, Olive was no longer physically or emotionally close to them. Apparently she remained close to her own full siblings, whom she met on the occasions when they talked about their parents and upbringing, but even then, she did not remain close to their extended families. Olive Bulkley’s full brother, Alonzo, for example, moved to Idaho with his wife, Estelle, early in the 20th century and, though use of the automobile increased the ease of travel at this time, she did not remain close to his family. Her great nephew, Verl Larsen, born in 1921, remembers his grandfather Alonzo
well, but does not remember meeting his Great Aunt Olive or her family, though she did not die until 1940.\footnote{Information taken from an interview with Verl Larsen, father of the author.}

Olive’s ties to her half siblings were even more distant. She stated that she had not seen some of Sarah Ann’s children, Leonard or Theodore, for over 30 years—hardly a close familial relationship, given that they lived in Utah within a 100 mile radius of one another. This is not really surprising. Six of Sarah Ann’s children were less than 14 years of age when their father died. Since John Fullmer lived many miles away and was old and sick while they were young, far from having fond memories of their father and a loving polygamous family, these children were largely raised without a father or close ties to their prodigious family. Olive wrote that she had heard these younger half-siblings had no use for the gospel.\footnote{Wells, \textit{JSF}, p. 430.} Oddly, the realities of patriarchal marriage sometimes meant that fathers were dispensable, which perhaps had implications for the transmission of Mormon culture and belief.

An additional factor that may have influenced the marriages of the second generation in the Fullmer family was that John and Mary Ann’s oldest daughters, Lavinia and Joanna, entered polygamy in the 1850s at 17 and 15 years of age respectively, but each young woman divorced within a few years. Both married again, but Lavinia divorced a second time and then married a third time.\footnote{Wells, \textit{Peter Fullmer and Susanna Zerfas family}, Volume 1, p. 221.} These bad experiences with polygamy happened before Olive Bulkley was born or when she was very young, and do not appear to have influenced her positive opinion of plural marriage, but they may have
made the older generation less likely to encourage younger family members to enter polygamy.

If the older generation encouraged the younger one to forego polygamy, this manifested itself in John and Olive Amanda’s family. In spite of Olive Bulkley’s fond reflections on plural marriage late in life, she and her full siblings were in keeping with the pre-Manifesto (1890) trajectory of marriage in Utah as younger generations made choices about monogamy and polygamy. Even though it was still officially the favored form of marriage before 1890, younger people were editing polygamy out of their lives as the 19th century wore on. John and Olive’s 10 children, born between 1846 and 1867, came of age to marry during the time when polygamy was still encouraged as the highest form of marriage in Mormon culture, 1852-1890, yet none of them entered the practice. Though Olive had been raised to idealize polygamy, her generation was probably the last to do so. The theological narrative was gradually and unsurprisingly amended to be in keeping with mainstream America.994

What is surprising is that during their seven year residence in Nauvoo, Illinois, Joseph Smith and his successors succeeded in introducing polygamy into the Mormon theological narrative against virulent opposition. This feat would have been impossible were it not for three factors. The first important factor was a millenarian world view that had developed in the new American nation, which allowed people to expect and accept unusual religious teachings. Secondly, polygamy was facilitated by a Mormon narrative of Christian restoration that combined with a religious text for the American continent, the Book of Mormon, that made for a particularly American form of religious innovation,

and thirdly by the growth of a family-centered theology of salvation. These favorable factors interacted as polygamy was slowly and secretly introduced in a long, arduous, contingent and scandal-ridden process that succeeded only because these factors fostered firm belief in the minds of people like the Fullmers.
Works Cited


Devery Scott Anderson and Gary James Bergera, Joseph Smith's Quorum of the Anointed, Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 2005.


Daniel Bachman, A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith, Unpublished Master’s Thesis, Purdue University, 1975.


John C. Bennett, History of the Saints, Leland and Whiting, Boston, 1842.


S.H Goodwin, Mormonism and Freemasonry, (published in 1920, available online)


Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest For Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1967.


Udney Hay Jacob, The Peacemaker, J. Smith, printer, Nauvoo, IL, 1842.


Roger D. Launius and John E. Hallwas, Kingdom on the Mississippi Revisited, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1996.


George D. Smith, Nauvoo Polygamy: But We Called It Celestial Marriage, Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 2008.


