

Emma's Path through Plural Marriage



Emma Hale was undoubtedly aware of Joseph Smith's spiritual gifts when they eloped in 1827. Yet she probably could not have then foreseen the tensions that his ecclesiastical teachings would eventually affect on their relationship. It would have been impossible to anticipate that one day he would reportedly tell her that an angel of God had commanded him to marry additional wives.

Documenting Emma Smith's personal interactions with polygamy is challenging. In the accounts of Nauvoo pluralists, she acts at times like a radar screen's blip that appears, vanishes, and shows up again in a different place and time. Emma's involvement can be traced first in Kirtland, then later outside of the Nauvoo polygamy circle, and eventually within polygamy's very fold.

Emma and Early Polygamy

Several incidents could have prompted Joseph Smith to consider Old Testament polygamy and how it might relate to the "restoration of all things." It is probable that he knew as early as 1831 that plural marriage could in some circumstances be approved by God. Yet, it does not appear he shared these early thoughts with Emma. Perhaps he did try, only to witness her severe disapproval.

As discussed in the essay on [Fanny Alger](#), Joseph Smith's first plural marriage occurred around the year 1835 in Kirtland, Ohio, with nineteen-year-old Fanny, who worked as a domestic in the Smith home. At some point, Emma discovered the relationship and expelled Fanny from the home, ending the relationship.

Joseph's experience with Emma in Kirtland would have warned him of the need to proceed cautiously in Nauvoo in 1840. Lorenzo Snow recalled that Joseph "hesitated and deferred from time to time" and that he "foresaw the trouble that would follow and sought to turn away from the commandment."¹

Three of Joseph's self-identified plural wives left similar recollections. Eliza R. Snow described Joseph as "afraid to promulgate it."² Helen Mar Kimball said that "Joseph put off the dreaded day as long as he dared."³ Lucy Walker reported that Joseph "had his doubts about it for he debated it in his own mind."⁴

Joseph's Early Nauvoo Sealings

The first clearly identified polygamous marriage in Nauvoo occurred on April 5, 1841, between Joseph Smith and Louisa Beaman, likely without Emma's knowledge.⁵

During the year thereafter, most of Joseph's plural proposals and priesthood marriages were to women with legal husbands. These marriages have been among the most puzzling of all of Joseph Smith's plural relationships.

<i>Woman</i>	<i>Traditional Date</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Legal Husband</i>
Louisa Beaman	April 5	1841	Sealing	
Sarah Bates	< July		Proposal	Orson Pratt
Lucinda Pendleton	< July			George Harris
Zina Huntington	Oct.		Sealing	Henry B. Jacobs
Presendia Huntington	Dec. 11	1842		Norman Buell
Agnes Moulton Coolbrith	Jan. 6			[widow]
Sarah Granger	early		Proposal	Hiram Kimball
Mary Elizabeth Rollins	Late Feb.			Adam Lightner
Patty Bartlett	March 9		Sealing	David Sessions
Marinda Nancy Johnson	April			Orson Hyde
Nancy Rigdon	April 9		Proposal	

Many of the questions dealing with these strange marriages are answered by recognizing that in Nauvoo, plural marriages (called “sealings”) could be of different durations. Some were for this life and the next (called “time-and-eternity”) and some were just for the next life (called “eternity-only”).

While documentation surrounding these relationships is limited, it appears Joseph’s sealings to legally married women were eternity-only, meaning only applying after death. The women never had two husbands at the same time.

Emma’s Feelings

Decades after leaving Nauvoo, several polygamists reported that Joseph Smith told them that he was commanded by an angel to introduce and practice polygamy.⁶ Mary Elizabeth Rollins recalled him saying the angel visited three times, with the third occurring in “early February” of 1842 during which the angel brandished a sword to dramatically reinforce his message.⁷

The described chronology is puzzling because as shown in the chart above, he had experienced several documented polygamous ceremonies with Louisa Beaman and legally married women previously.



Figure 1: Joseph Commanded by an Angel to Practice Polygamy

It is possible that after the angel’s earlier visits commanding polygamy, Joseph sought to appease his demands by marrying Louisa Beaman in a time-and-eternity polygamous union and then contracting almost exclusively eternity-only plural ceremonies. Those sealings would not have authorized sexual relations during this life and therefore would probably have been less bothersome to Emma.

Joseph reported that the angel was not satisfied. Benjamin F. Johnson, a close friend of Joseph, claimed that he “put it off” and “waited until an Angel with a drawn Sword Stood before him and declared that if he longer delayed fulfilling that Command he would Slay him.”⁸ Erastus Snow contended that the angel accused Smith of “being neglectful in the discharges of his duties” and spoke “of Joseph having to plead on his knees before the Angel for his Life.”⁹

Helen Mar Kimball Whitney asserted: “Had it not been for the fear of His displeasure, Joseph would have shrunk from the undertaking and would have continued silent, as he did for years, until an angel of the Lord threatened to slay him if he did not reveal and establish this celestial principle.”¹⁰

Regardless of the trigger, Joseph Smith changed his pattern of plural marrying in the spring of 1842. On April 9, 1842, he reportedly proposed to a previously unmarried woman in Nauvoo, the first since his sealing to Louisa Beaman over a year earlier. Throughout this period, Emma’s behavior reflected no knowledge of her husband’s plural activities.

When did Emma Learn?

It is impossible to definitively determine when Emma learned of Joseph’s plural marriages. However, many historical clues help to create a possible timeline.

Several authors have written that by March 1842 Emma Smith had learned the celestial marriage doctrines and that she then used her position as Relief Society President to oppose the practice in her speeches in their meetings. This is simply not documentable.

Emma was clearly opposed to John C. Bennett and his “spiritual wifery,” but she, along with a vast majority of Relief Society members, may have possessed no firsthand knowledge of plural marriage throughout 1842.

Comparing a list of the names of women who knew of celestial marriage teachings on May 27, 1842, to a list of names of all the members of that organization on that date (their tenth meeting), shows that most did not know. Only about 20 of 674 Relief Society members can be documented as being personally involved or knowing of polygamy.¹¹

Possibly more women were aware that something was going on or had heard gossip. Nevertheless, Joseph’s celestial marriage teachings were probably not common knowledge at the time of the Relief Society organization or in the months that followed.

At the end of April 1842, just two months before leaving Nauvoo, John C. Bennett evidently approached Emma making accusations against Joseph Smith. An April 29 entry in his diary records: “[It] was made manifest[,] a conspiracy against the peace of his household.”¹² “J.C.B.” is written lightly in the margin by scribe Willard Richards.

Precisely what transpired is unknown, but biographers Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery contend that on April 28, 1842, “Someone apparently told her [Emma] about Joseph’s involvement in plural marriage.”¹³ If Joseph was confronted, he could have truthfully denied any connection with Bennett’s immoralities without divulging teachings of celestial plural marriage. Emma’s biographers agreed: “It appears that Joseph had deflected her [Emma’s] anger by explaining that he had neither sanctioned nor participated in Bennett’s spiritual wife doctrine.”¹⁴

Despite the surrounding ambiguities, some observers have used this April 28, 1842, date as the moment when Emma learned of the actuality of Joseph’s plural teachings.¹⁵



Figure 2: Emma and Joseph Speak before the Nauvoo Relief Society

February 11, 1843, is promoted as another date when Emma may have become aware of Joseph's plurality. On that day Eliza R. Snow abruptly moved out of the Smith home, causing Emma Smith's biographers to speculate: "Emma somehow discovered the liaison between the two, probably in February 1843."¹⁶

However, that very same day Joseph's mother moved in, which he noted in his diary: "Changing the furniture in the house to receive Mother Smith in the family."¹⁷ Since the small, four-room Homestead would have been crowded even without Eliza's presence there, it is uncertain whether Eliza left because of Emma's reported discovery or merely for space considerations.

Besides learning through a single event or encountering polygamy unexpectedly, it is possible that Emma was introduced incrementally of plural marriage teachings: first of eternity-only sealings and later concerning time-and-eternity. Ruth Vose Sayers reportedly mentioned that Emma was present during her sealing, which, according to Andrew Jenson's notes, was, "to the Prophet for eternity," but the dating of the ceremony is unclear, being either February or May of 1843.¹⁸

Emma Participates in Four Plural Marriages

The only solid dating for when Emma undeniably knew of Joseph's plural marriage teachings is May of 1843. That month, Emma Smith participated in Joseph's marriages to four plural brides, Eliza and Emily Partridge and Sarah and Maria Lawrence.¹⁹ The exact dating of Joseph's sealings to the Lawrence sisters is unknown, but was undoubtedly chronologically close to the Partridge marriages.



Figure 3: Emily Partridge Young

Emma's efforts to accept plural marriage doubtless required a huge paradigm shift in her feelings and beliefs. Even greater difficulties loomed on the other side of the ceremonies when she was obligated to share her husband.

The night after Emma Smith gave Emily Partridge to Joseph as a plural wife, Emily shared a room with the Prophet.²⁰ This dynamic of polygamy — sharing a husband physically — is probably the most difficult aspect for both the first wife and the plural wife to face, especially the first time.

Emily Partridge testified concerning Emma's immediate reaction: "She [Emma] consented to [the marriage] at the time ... [then] she was bitter after that. ... After the next day you might say that she was bitter."²¹ Emily also noted that Emma never again allowed her husband to spend the night with Emily: "No sir, never after that [first night]. She turned against us after that. ... Emma knew that we were married to him, but she never allowed us to live with him."²²

Doubtless these were unimaginably difficult times for Emma who struggled with her personal distaste for the sexual implications of plural marriage and her sincere desires to support her husband. Within weeks, the strain would stretch them almost to the breaking point.



Figure 4: The Nauvoo Mansion

Revelation on Celestial and Plural Marriage

In July 1843, tensions reached a new high for both Joseph and Emma. In an attempt to encourage her acceptance of plural marriage, Hyrum Smith requested on the 12th that Joseph write down a revelation on the subject that he would present to her. William Clayton recorded in his diary on that date:

This A.M, I wrote a Revelation consisting of 10 pages on the order of the priesthood, showing the designs in Moses, Abraham, David and Solomon having many wives and concubines &c. After it was wrote Presidents Joseph and Hyrum presented it and read it to E[mma] who said she did not believe a word of it and appeared very rebellious.²³

Another account relates that Hyrum presented the revelation to her alone, and when he returned, Joseph quietly remarked, “I told you, you did not know Emma as well as I did.”²⁴

The original manuscript of the revelation was soon destroyed, but a copy had been made by Joseph C. Kingsbury.²⁵ The provenance of the Kingsbury copy is well documented.²⁶ Newel K. Whitney kept the copy until March of 1847 when Brigham Young took possession, publishing it in 1852.²⁷

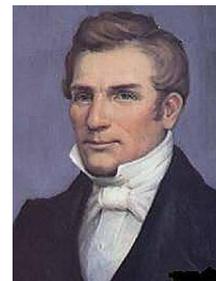


Figure 5: Hyrum Smith

While the revelation failed to generate Emma’s active support, it appears to have brought a smoldering crisis to flame. The very next day, she and Joseph took serious counsel together with some sort of agreement being negotiated. It had at least two parts. First, it appears to have required Joseph Smith to obtain Emma’s permission before marrying any new plural wives.

Evidently the second part of the agreement was designed to assure that if anything happen to Joseph or their marriage, Emma would be financially supported. William Clayton recorded that only hours after Emma rejected Hyrum and the revelation, “Joseph told me to deed all the unencumbered lots to E[mma] and the children. He appears much troubled about E[mma].”²⁸

Richard L. Bushman cites Clayton’s description about Joseph and Emma’s emotional “agreement,” which had both of them in tears. He then commented: “They were in impossible positions: Joseph caught between his revelation and his wife, Emma between a practice she detested and belief in her husband. The agreement represented some kind of compromise.”²⁹

The Aftermath

The relationships between Emma, Joseph, and his plural wives during the final ten months of his life are poorly documented. A few clues suggest that although plurality was expanding on the underground in Nauvoo, still many city dwellers and church members were uninformed or simply confused about what they had heard. George A. Smith remembered: “In 1843 the law on celestial marriage was written, but not published, and was known only to perhaps one or two hundred persons.”³⁰

Even close neighbors were unaware of Joseph’s plural wives. Mary Ralph recalled forty years later in 1883: “I lived in Nauvoo, Illinois, close to the house of Joseph Smith, just across the road, some time. ... I was well acquainted with the two Partridge girls and the two Walker girls and their two brothers, William and Lorin Walker; they were orphans, and all lived in the family of Joseph Smith; but I never knew they were any of them his wives.”³¹

Benjamin F. Johnson later asserted that during these final months, several of Joseph’s plural wives lived in the Nauvoo Mansion: “I do know that at his Mansion home was living Maria and Sarah Lawrence and one of Cornelius P. Lott’s daughters as his plural wives with the full knowledge of his wife, Emma, of their married relations to him.”³²



Figure 6: Emma Smith

Despite the commotion they were then experiencing, Emma became pregnant with David Hyrum Smith approximately February 10, 1844. By that time, Joseph had reportedly been sealed to over two dozen other women, but during the last eight months of the Joseph’s life, his marriage to Emma resembled, publicly at least, that of monogamists in Nauvoo. According to a later report, “when one of his [plural] wives spoke to him [Joseph] in a manner complaining of Emma, he turned to her and said, ‘If you desire my love, you must never speak evil of Emma.’”³³

When on June 23rd Joseph hid from Illinois lawmen, it was Emma to whom he turned for advice rather than someone else.³⁴ The next day as he left Nauvoo, he requested that she accompany him.

Because of the needs of their children, Emma was unable to comply, but she reportedly requested a blessing from him. Harried for time, he told her to “write out the best blessing [she] could think of and he would sign the same on his return.”³⁵

The text of the blessing, as it survives in later typescript form, included Emma's wish: "I desire with all my heart to honor and respect my husband as my head, ever to live in his confidence and by acting in unison with him retain the place which God has given me by his side."³⁶

Immediately after Joseph's death, family friend John P. Greene reported seeing Emma "weeping and wailing bitterly, in a loud and unrestrained voice, her face covered with her hands." He remarked, "this affliction would be to her a crown of life." She allegedly replied: "My husband was my crown."³⁷

Emma died in 1879. According to their son Alexander, her final words, spoken as her last breath were "Joseph Joseph ... yes, yes, I am coming."³⁸

Emma's Unique Path through Plural Marriage

While many women in Nauvoo and later in Utah reported plural marriage as a challenge, Emma's marital relationship to the prophet, seer, and revelator who presented the practice as a commandment to church members made her path somewhat unique.

Emma needed much faith. Faith to believe polygamy came from God and not Joseph's desires. Faith to believe that God had commanded Joseph to marry plural wives without informing her. Faith to accept the written revelation (D&C 132) as divinely inspired rather than her husband's attempt to manipulate her. Faith to work through the natural reactive emotions of jealousy and suspicion. Together, these trials could have easily precipitated a crisis of faith for her — faith in her husband, faith in her God, or perhaps both.



Figure 7: Emma and Joseph Smith

Aroet L. Hale gave this assessment:

I will write a few words/ about Sister Emma Smith The Wife of the Prophet Joseph. A grate meny of the Saints in theas days think that the Prophet Wife Emmer Hale Smith was a bad woman that she tride to poison the Prophet Their never was a more dutiful woman than Emma Smith was to her Husband till after the Prophet had made publick the revelation on secelestial marriage & begun to take to himselfe other wives This proved a grate trial to her. How menny women is their in our day. After 30 or 40 years of teachin that it dose not try to the hartskore [heart's core]

The Prophet Joseph said that she was a good woman & that he would save her if he had to go into the Bowels of Hell to get her. Emma would & did go before Judges Rulers and Govenors to plead for her Husband She would have lade her life down for him I have though[t] cence I became a man that if Emma had, had the right cours taken with her she would have been taken with her she would have com to these valleys She pased through grate trials & tribulations loosing her Dear Husband the Prophet and other things was more than she could stand.³⁹

Doubtless, Emma Smith's polygamy-related trials were great. However, she remained true to her husband throughout her life and never denied that he was the Prophet.

To continue this brief narrative of the unfolding of the practice of polygamy in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, proceed to the section on [Does Exaltation Require Polygamy?](#)

Endnotes:

1. Lorenzo Snow, quoted by Eliza R. Snow, in *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Company, 1884).

2. Eliza R. Snow, quoted in J. J. J., "Two Prophets' Widows: A Visit to the Relicts of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, August 18, 1887, 6/E.
3. Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzap, eds., *A Woman's View: Helen Mar Whitney's Reminiscences of Early Church History* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1997), 142.
4. Lucy Walker, deposition, *Church of Christ in Missouri v. Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*. 70 F. 179 (8th Cir. 1895), respondent's testimony (part 3), p. 474, question 600.
5. Joseph B Noble, Affidavit, Joseph F. Smith Affidavit Book 1:38, 4:38; printed in Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," *Historical Record* 6 (July 1887): 221.
6. See Brian C. Hales, "Encouraging Joseph Smith to Practice Plural Marriage: The Accounts of the Angel with a Drawn Sword," *Mormon Historical Studies* vol. 11, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 23–39.
7. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner to Emmeline B. Wells, summer 1905, MS 282, Church History Library.
8. Benjamin F. Johnson, *My Life's Review* 1st ed. (Independence, MO: Zion's Printing & Publishing Co., 1947; repr., Mesa, AZ: 21st Century Printing, 1992), 95–96.
9. Erastus Snow, quoted in A. Karl Larson and Katherine Miles Larson, *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, 2 vols. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1980), 2:611, June 17, 1883.
10. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1884), 53.
11. See Brian C. Hales, "He Had No Other Wife but Me": Emma Hale Smith and Mormon Polygamy," *JWHA Journal*, spring 2017, forthcoming
12. Dean C. Jessee, ed. *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Volume 2, Journal, 1832–1842* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 379.
13. Linda King Newell, and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1984), 114.
14. Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 114.
15. For example, see Bruno, "Keeping a Secret," 173–74.
16. Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 134.
17. Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 303.
18. Andrew Jenson Papers, document #5.
19. Emily Dow Partridge Young, "Incidents in the Life of a Mormon Girl," undated manuscript, CHL, Ms 5220, 186.
20. Emily Dow Partridge Young, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent's Testimony, part 3, pages 363-64, questions 310-13.

21. Emily Dow Partridge Young, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent's Testimony, part 3, pages 365–66, questions 346-51.
22. Emily Dow Partridge Young, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent's Testimony, part 3, pages 366, 384, questions 363, 747.
23. George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle*, 110.
24. William Clayton Statement, 1874, Ms 3423, folder 1, images 30–36, Church History Library.
25. Joseph C. Kingsbury, Affidavit dated May 22, 1886, MS 3423, Church History Library
26. See discussion in Lyndon W. Cook, *Joseph C. Kingsbury* (Provo, UT: Grandin Book Co., 1985), 79.
27. See Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, *Woman's Exponent* 14, no. 4 (July 15, 1885): 30–31.
28. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 110.
29. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 496.
30. *Journal of Discourses*, 14:213, August 13, 1871.
31. Ellen E. Dickinson, *New Light on Mormonism* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1885), 218.
32. Benjamin F. Johnson, "More Testimony," Letter dated March 9, 1904, *Deseret Evening News*, April 12, 1904.
33. Lucy M. Wright, "Emma Hale Smith," *Woman's Exponent* 30 (December 15, 1901), 59.
34. William Clayton, *The Nauvoo Diaries of William Clayton, 1842–1846, Abridged* (Salt Lake City: privately printed, 2010), 53.
35. Quoted in Raymond T. Bailey, "Emma Hale: Wife of the Prophet Joseph Smith," master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1952, 112–13.
36. Ibid.
37. B. W. Richmond's statement, quoted in "The Prophet's Death!" *Deseret News Weekly*, December 8, 1875, 11; reprint from the Chicago Times.
38. Alexander Hale Smith, *Zion's Ensign*, December 31, 1903. The "Joseph" in the original account could also be interpreted as a reference to Joseph Smith III.
39. Aroet L. Hale, *Reminiscence* (ca. 1882); MS 1509, 30-31; LDS CHL.