

“A CONTINUATION OF THE SEEDS”: JOSEPH SMITH AND SPIRIT BIRTH

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TODAY, AN ACCEPTED DOCTRINE of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints interprets verses in Doctrine and Covenants 132 as references to the birth of spirit offspring by exalted married couples in the celestial kingdom:

And again, verily I say unto you, if a man marry a wife by my word, which is my law, and by the new and everlasting covenant, and it is sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise, by him who is anointed, unto whom I have appointed this power and the keys of this priesthood . . . shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths . . . and they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon their heads, which glory shall be a fulness and *a continuation of the seeds* forever and ever. (D&C 132:19; emphasis mine)

This revelation, dictated in the summer of 1843, came in response to mounting tensions over plural marriage between Joseph Smith and his legal wife, Emma. Apparently, she had threatened divorce and/or exposure of his extra-legal marital unions. So to assuage her concerns, Hyrum Smith, the Prophet’s brother, encouraged him to dictate a revelation to create a document which, he was confident,

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he could use to convince her of restored polygamy's legitimacy. William Clayton recorded in his journal on July 12, 1843: "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."¹ The revelation did not allow Hyrum to accomplish his desires, but it may have contained the first iteration of important doctrines, doctrines that may never have been formally written in the history of this world. Two and a half years earlier, another revelation explained: "For I deign to reveal unto my church things which have been kept *hid from before the foundation of the world*, things that pertain to the dispensation of the fulness of times" (D&C 124:41; emphasis mine). There is no way to know when or how "things which have been kept hid" would be revealed, but it is possible that the teaching of spirit birth would qualify

¹George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 110. See also William Clayton, Letter to Madison M. Scott, November 11, 1871, MS 3423, fd. 1, LDS Church History Library; William Clayton, Statement, 1874, Ms 3423, fd. 1, LDS Church History Library. Joseph C. Kingsbury made a copy of the original shortly thereafter. Kingsbury, Affidavit, May 22, 1886, MS 3423, LDS Church History Library; Joseph Kingsbury, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent's Testimony, Part 3, p. 178, question 19. The Kingsbury holograph transcript is currently housed in the LDS Church History Library, but the Clayton original was burned at Emma's insistence; however, the accounts describing the details of its destruction are contradictory. Orson Pratt, October 7, 1869, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1855–86), 13:193; William Clayton quoted in Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," *Historical Record* 6 (July 1887): 226; Brigham Young, August 9, 1874, *Journal of Discourses*, 17:159; Joseph F. Smith, at Utah Stake quarterly conference, March 3–4, 1883, Utah State Historical Society #64904, p. 271; Isaac Sheen quoted in Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1914), 153; William E. McLellan, M.D., Letter to President Joseph Smith [III], Independence, Missouri, July 1872, original in Community of Christ Library-Archives, copy at LDS Church History Library, MS 9090; Mary B. (Smith) Norman, Idaho Falls, Idaho, to Ina (Smith) Coolbrith, March 27, 1908, original and typescript, Miscellaneous Letters and Papers, P13, f951, Community of Christ Library-Archives.

since research supports that the doctrine does not appear explicitly in any previous teaching, scripture, or revelation. (See below.) Even today, many observers believe that the idea that exalted couples bear spirit offspring in the eternities did not originate with Joseph Smith but was a later addition to the LDS theology.

Today, the Church's official interpretation is that this verse declares that "those who abide in the covenant and are exalted in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom will have spirit children in the eternities."² This explanation underlies the declaration of identity in the 1995 "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," which states: "Each [individual] is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny."³ Clearly, this belief is a central point in the Mormon theology of families and eternal progression.

This article investigates the doctrine of "spirit birth," examining the evidence to help determine whether it was authored by Joseph Smith or whether it arose as a later addition to LDS theology, tracing the known references to it over time but particularly in Mormonism's early years. I begin the discussion by examining the alternate view affirming that spirits are uncreated and not birthed by exalted beings.

AN ALTERNATE VIEW

Few if any scholars today dispute that Joseph Smith taught of eternal marriage. In fact, the idea that matrimony might continue beyond

²*Doctrine and Covenants and Church History: Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999), 110. See also *Gospel Principles*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 275, 277, which served as the 2010–11 study manual for Melchizedek and Relief Society classes, <http://www.lds.org/manual/gospel-principles/chapter-47-exaltation?lang=eng> (accessed May 14, 2012). Earlier (though less official) commentary by influential General Authorities include Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, compiled by Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 2:44, 3:143; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 257; and McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah: The Second Coming of the Son of Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 23.

³"The Family: A Proclamation to the World" (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995), 1.

death was taught by other religious visionaries in the decades prior to Joseph's birth in 1805. Beginning in 1741, inventor and scientist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) professed prophetic gifts, including dreams and visions designed to reform Christian thinking. Among his ideas was a belief that, "since from creation woman is for man and man for woman, thus the one is the other's, and since this love is innate in both, it follows that there are marriages in heaven as well as on earth."⁴ However, Swedenborg's view of heavenly marital relations did not extend to procreation in the hereafter: "Marriages in the heavens differ from the marriages on earth in this, that marriages on earth, in addition to [their other uses], are for the procreation of offspring; but not in the heavens. In place of that procreation there is in the heavens a procreation of good and truth."⁵ It appears that heavenly procreation was at best an uncommon theme, if not openly rebuffed, among religionists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nor is there any evidence that Joseph Smith was influenced by Swedenborg's thought.⁶

Concerning the source of the spirit birth teaching, Mormon scholar Van Hale noted that "one of the cherished doctrines of Mormonism, that spirits are the literal offspring of God, has been taught by virtually all Mormon leaders. The notable exception is probably Joseph Smith, whose direct statements teach a doctrine contrary to that of his closest associates."⁷ Similarly, LDS scholar Blake Ostler dates the earliest spirit birth teachings to the year after the Prophet's death: "The view that man originated when spirit matter was organized into

⁴Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell and the World of Spirits from Things Heard and Seen* (1758; rpt., Boston: Swedenborg Printing Bureau, translation by John G. Ager, 1900), 219; PDF in my possession.

⁵Samuel M. Warren, ed., *A Compendium of the Theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg* (New York: New Church Board of Publication, 1880), 449. However, Swedenborg also taught: "Sexual intercourse is enjoyed in Heaven as on Earth." William White, *Emanuel Swedenborg: His Life and Writings*, 2 vols. (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Company, 1868), 2:360, but such relations do not result in the procreation of infant beings.

⁶D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 174, observes: "Early Mormonism's only convert from Swedenborgianism, presiding bishop Edward Hunter, reported a comment by Smith in 1839 that indicates Smith was familiar with Swedenborgianism, at least by the late 1830s."

⁷Van Hale, "The Origin of the Human Spirit in Early Mormon

an individual through literal spiritual birth seems to have been the only view consistently elucidated from 1845–1905.”⁸ Charles Harrell, author of *“This Is My Doctrine”: The Development of Mormon Theology*, observed:

The belief that man is literally the offspring of God in the spirit . . . does not explicitly appear in the scriptural or other writings and recorded sermons of Joseph Smith. Furthermore it is conspicuously absent from the records of his associates during his lifetime. It appears that during the Prophet’s lifetime the Saints’ thinking conformed to the traditional belief that the fatherhood of God was only figurative and not to be taken literally. . . . While it is interesting that the first recorded teaching of premortal birth did not occur until after Joseph Smith’s death, to suppose that the doctrine entirely originated at that time would be as erroneous as believing that the fully developed doctrine was preached from the early beginning of the Church.⁹

Jonathan Stapley asserts even more strongly that Joseph Smith did not teach of spirit birth. Calling “viviparous spirit birth” a “wildly popular folk belief,” he explains, “Regarding a ‘continuation of the seeds,’ I think Joseph Smith is talking about retaining kinship, as opposed to being separate and single.”¹⁰ In other words, a “continuation of the seeds” is the ability for mortal parents to continue to relate to and preside over their earthly children (their “seed”) in eternity. Those who are unworthy live singly without any family structure in the next life.

Similarly, in his impressive volume, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death*, physician-scholar Samuel Brown dismisses spirit birth out of hand: “[Humans] had no beginning. In the phrase of the Mormon revelation, ‘Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not

Thought,” in *Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, edited by Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 124.

⁸Blake T. Ostler, “The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 68.

⁹Charles R. Harrell, “The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844,” *BYU Studies* 28 (Spring 1988): 88–89.

¹⁰Jonathan Stapley, email to Brian Hales, March 26, 2011; quoted by permission.

created or made, neither indeed can be' [D&C 93:29]."¹¹ According to Brown's interpretation of Joseph Smith's teachings, the preexistent order of heaven does not include Heavenly Parents who give birth to spirit offspring. Instead, the "sacerdotal heaven family"¹² is formed on earth as mortal friendships and relationships are welded permanently in place by priesthood ordinances to form a "cosmic Chain of Belonging."¹³ "Families [in eternity] may continue to expand in the afterlife," Brown explains, "through a kind of sacerdotal adoption rather than through the familial physical processes of conception, gestation, and parturition."¹⁴ This "broad kinship group" comprises "the actual structure of heaven"¹⁵ and the "postmortal glory [of exalted individuals is] derived from the scope of one's location within the family tree."¹⁶ Brown affirms: "To [Joseph] Smith, in a way he never entirely worked out, the family of divinities had no end."¹⁷ By disallowing spirit birth, there is no obvious mechanism by which the "family of divinities" in the Chain of Belonging would achieve the status of having "no end," causing Brown to conclude that Joseph Smith must have "never entirely worked out" the process.¹⁸

Several of Joseph Smith's teachings and revelations seem to sup-

¹¹Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford Press, 2011), 250–51.

¹²*Ibid.*, 151.

¹³*Ibid.*, 229. See also Samuel Brown, "The Early Mormon Chain of Belonging," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 20, 27.

¹⁴Samuel Brown, "Brown Responds" (letter to the editor), *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2012): ix.

¹⁵Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth*, 204.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁷Brown, "The Early Mormon Chain of Belonging," 30; see also Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth*, 273.

¹⁸Brown, "The Early Mormon Chain of Belonging," 26, describes unexalted beings as "neutered angels who would endure salvation" implying perhaps that exalted individuals are not "neutered." (See also D&C 132:16–17.) But without spirit birth, it is unclear how exalted beings would be any different. Brown also quotes W. W. Phelps's funeral sermon for Joseph and Hyrum Smith (p. 32) but does not include Phelps's comments that speak of "multiplying and replenishing new worlds" after the resurrection:

port this interpretation: "The Spirit of Man is not a created being," he preached at some point in 1839 before August 8: "It existed from Eternity & will exist to eternity. Anything created cannot be Eternal."¹⁹ On April 7, 1844, he commented, "God never did have the power to create the spirit of man at all."²⁰ Substantiation for this view appears in the Book of Abraham, which Joseph Smith translated and published in the *Times and Seasons*, March 15, 1842: "If there be two spirits, and one shall be more intelligent than the other, yet these two spirits, notwithstanding one is more intelligent than the other, have no beginning; they existed before, they shall have no end, they shall exist after, for they are gnolaum, or eternal" (Abr. 3:18).²¹ This view posits that premortal spirits are eternally formed (uncreated) therefore, "a continuation of the seeds" has nothing to do with a procreative spirit birth.

A contrasting view is that those references are actually referring to spirit *matter*, which is uncreated and eternal. On two occasions in Nauvoo Joseph Smith spoke of the "eternal duration of matter."²² He also taught:

There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; We cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter. (D&C 131:7–8)

An attempt to assimilate these different teachings posits that,

"The best of saints from many creations, will hold a grand jubilee, of prophets, priests and kings, with their wives, and children, for the purpose of crowning the faithful to enter into the joys of their Lord; prepar[a]tory to their going into eternity to multiply and replenish new worlds." W. W. Phelps, "The Joseph/Hyrum Smith Funeral Sermon," edited by Richard Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, *BYU Studies* 23, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 11–13.

¹⁹Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 9.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 60.

²¹"The Book of Abraham," *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 15, 1842): 720. The Book of Abraham was canonized in 1876.

²²Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 37 (August 30, 1840); 203 (May 17, 1843).

through spirit birth, a portion of uncreated spirit matter (of unknown organization and intelligence) is formed into a living spirit, bestowing upon it greater organization and/or intelligence.

SUPPORT THAT JOSEPH SMITH TAUGHT SPIRIT BIRTH

No explicit and unambiguous public statements from Joseph Smith explaining spirit birth have been located. The question remains whether he taught it privately. The earliest private report that Joseph Smith taught of spirit birth comes from Parley P. Pratt. While writing his autobiography in 1855, he recalled a visit with Joseph Smith in Philadelphia in the winter of 1839–40 during which the Prophet told him that “the result of our endless union [celestial marriage] would be an offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, or the sands of the seashore.”²³ Pratt apparently made no immediate record of this conversation; but if he accurately recalled it, then the Prophet was teaching as early as 1840 that exalted beings would have offspring after the resurrection.

The earliest contemporary account mentioning “spiritual birth” appears in a letter from Lorenzo Snow to an “Elder Walker” on February 14, 1842. Snow was then serving a mission in England, for which he had left Nauvoo on May 20, 1840.²⁴ Elder Walker had “wish[ed] to know and dwell upon big things of the kingdom,” stated Snow, who continued: “Let us indulge our follies at this time and wander a moment into the field of imagination.”²⁵

Some thirteen thousand years ago in Heaven or in Paradise (say) we came into existence or in other words received a spiritual organization according to the laws that govern *spiritual births* in eternity. We

²³Parley P. Pratt Jr., ed., *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt, One of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 297–98, (1985 edition, 259–60).

²⁴Eliza R. Snow, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1884), 46. I have found no correspondence between Lorenzo Snow and Joseph Smith during the two years of this mission in which such a doctrine is discussed.

²⁵Lorenzo Snow, Letter to “Elder Walker,” February 14, 1842, in Lorenzo Snow, Notebook, typescript, 75–76, MS 2737, Box 1, fd. 1, LDS Church History Library; see also Hale, “The Origin of the Human Spirit in Early Mormon Thought,” 119–20.

were there and then (say) born in the express image and likeness of him by whom we received our *spiritual birth* possessing the same faculties & powers but in their infantile state yet susceptible of an elevation equal to that of those possessed by our *Spiritual Father*. But in order to effect this we must needs be planted in a material tabernacle. Accordingly the great machine was set in motion whereby bodies for the immortal sons and daughters of God came into being; Previously redeemed souls sang together. And the sons of God or the spirits awaiting to be perfected shouted with joy in anticipation of one day being like their Father in all things both in relation to becoming the *Father of Spirits* and that of Glorified bodies so that God might be “all in all” so we might be called by his name by spirits yet unborn and thus have an everlasting and *ever increasing kingdom* of our own like unto that of his own.²⁶

While Snow admitted that he was indulging his “imagination” and did not attribute his ideas to Joseph Smith, Snow referred twice to both “spiritual births” and a spiritual father. These ideas either sprang from Snow’s personal speculations or else he was repeating teachings received earlier from someone else. These ideas are remarkably similar to recorded expositions from Brigham Young after the Prophet’s death and are consistent with the Prophet’s private teachings regarding birth after the resurrection (quoted below).

On May 16, 1843, Joseph Smith privately instructed a small group of Latter-day Saints gathered at home of Benjamin F. Johnson and his wife, Melissa LeBaron Johnson, in Ramus, Illinois. William Clayton, who was also in attendance, recorded Joseph’s words:

Except a man and his wife enter into an everlasting covenant and be married for eternity while in this probation by the power and authority of the Holy priesthood they will *cease to increase* when they die (i.e. they will not have any *children in the resurrection*), but those who are married by the power and authority of the priesthood in this life and continue without committing the sin against the Holy Ghost will *continue to increase* and have *children in the celestial glory*. . . . He also said that in the celestial glory there was three heavens or degrees, and in order to obtain the highest a man must enter into this order of the priesthood and if he don’t he can’t obtain it. He may enter into the other but that is

²⁶Lorenzo Snow, Letter to “Elder Walker,” February 14, 1842, underlining Snow’s, italics mine. See also Hale, “The Origin of the Human Spirit in Early Mormon Thought,” 119–20.

the end of his kingdom he cannot have *increase*.²⁷

The accuracy of Clayton's verbatim entry is unknown, but its meaning seems clear. Having "children in the resurrection" is the process through which an exalted couple "increase" their "kingdom." This concept suggests that having "children in the celestial glory" is more than simply the perpetuation in that realm of earthly familial relationships. At the end of the world, the genealogical chain back to Adam and Eve will constitute a static and finite network of kinship ties. It will inherently have an "end." However, having "children in the resurrection" will bring "increase" to a "kingdom"—thus allowing a literal enlargement of the number of "children." The begetting of literal offspring could "increase" the number of inhabitants of that couple's "kingdom" and the potential for "increase" could be infinite and eternal.

About five weeks later on June 23, 1843, Heber C. Kimball penned a prayer in his personal journal: "I Love my dear family, and may it increase more and more, that now [no] power can sepperate us from Each other, that we may dwell to gether through out all Eternity, and thare be in throned [enthroned] on worlds, to propagate [sic] that thare may be *no end to us or our Seeds*."²⁸ Kimball's reference to propagating his "seeds" in eternity seems to reflect the same meaning as having children in the resurrection and extends beyond the interpretation of simply continuing his earthly familial relations. If so, then the likely source of these doctrines is the Prophet himself. If Joseph Smith was willing to privately counsel with William Clayton and the Johnsons weeks previously, then learning that he also shared the instructions with his trusted apostle, Heber C. Kimball, during this period would not be surprising.

On July 16, 1843, just four days after dictating the revelation on eternal marriage, Joseph gave a public discourse in which, according to Franklin D. Richards, he spoke of eternal covenants (e.g., mar-

²⁷George D. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 102; emphasis mine. See also D&C 132:1-4; and Danel W. Bachman, "The Eternity of the Marriage Relationship," in *Riches of Eternity: 12 Fundamental Doctrines from the Doctrine and Covenants*, edited by John Scott and John K. Challis (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books 1993), 195-221.

²⁸Stanley B. Kimball, ed., *On the Potter's Wheel: The Diaries of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books/San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1987), 52; emphasis mine.

riage) and a “multiplication of lives”:

No man can obtain an eternal Blessing unless the contract or covenant be made in view of Eternity[.] All contracts in view of this Life only terminate with this Life. Case of the woman & 7 husbands Luke 20-29 &c Those who keep no eternal Law in this life or make no eternal contract are single & alone in the eternal world (Luke 20-35) and are only made Angels to minister to those who shall be heirs of Salvation never becoming Sons of God having never kept the Law of God ie eternal Law The earthly is the image of the Heavenly shows that [it] is by *the multiplication of Lives* that the eternal worlds are created and occupied that which is born of the flesh is flesh that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.²⁹

If Richards correctly recorded Joseph’s sermon, the Prophet may have been explaining the dissimilarity between the progeny of mortals and exalted beings by differentiating between mortal offspring (“that which is born of the flesh is flesh”) and resurrected offspring (“that which is born of Spirit is Spirit”). He later taught that the function of blood in human beings is performed for resurrected beings by “the Spirit of god flowing in the vains in Sted of blood.”³⁰ Hence, it would seem consistent for resurrected beings to produce “spirit” offspring characterized by a purer spirit essence in their bodies, but inconsistent to produce mortal offspring characterized by blood.

Whether many of the listeners in the Prophet’s audience understood these points is unknown. However, within a few days, Franklin D. Richards, in commenting on this sermon, wrote: “From the above [his notes of the discourse] I deduce that we may make an eternal covenant with our wives and in the resurrection claim that which is our own and enjoy blessings & glories peculiar to those in that condition even the multiplication of spirits in the eternal world.”³¹

About six weeks later in his sermon on August 27, 1843, reported by William Clayton, Joseph Smith apparently made another oblique reference to these doctrines: “The power of the Melchisek

²⁹Franklin D. Richards, “Scriptural Items,” July 16, 1843, MS 4409; emphasis mine; see also Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 232.

³⁰Ibid., 370–71; see also 1 Cor. 15:50.

³¹Richards, “Scriptural Items,” July 16, 1843; see also Ehat, and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 293 note 7.

P'd [priesthood] was to have the power of an 'endless lives.'"³²

The next identifiable reference to spirit birth came the following year when Orson Pratt was sent to Washington, D.C., where, on April 14, 1844, with fellow Apostle Orson Hyde, he presented a memorial and petition for redress about the Missouri persecutions to members of the Senate Judiciary Committee.³³ From there Pratt traveled to New York, arriving about June 1, 1844. In his spare time in the East, Pratt composed a *Prophetic Almanac for 1845*. The New York newspaper, *The Prophet*, announced the twenty-four-page booklet on June 22 as being at the printer,³⁴ and it was available for purchase on August 3, by which time Joseph and Hyrum Smith had been killed at Carthage.³⁵ This publication contains Pratt's exposition on spirit birth:

What is man? The offspring of God. What is God? The father of man. Who is Jesus Christ? He is our brother. What is man in Embrio [sic]? He is a helpless babe. What is man in progress? He is a man. What is man perfected? He is as Christ; and Christ is as the Father; and they all are one. How many states of existence has man? He has three. What is the first? It is spiritual. What is the second? It is temporal. What is the third? It is immortal and eternal. How did he begin to exist in the first? He was *begotten and born of God*. How did he begin to exist in the second? He was begotten and born of the flesh. How did he begin to exist in the third? By the Resurrection of the dead. What is his final destiny? to be like God. What has God been? Like man. . . . How many Gods are there? "There are lords many, and gods many: but to us there is but one God." [1 Cor. 8:5-6] How many heavens are there? They are innumerable. Where will heaven be? On the earth; and on all other glorified worlds.³⁶

Pratt's exposition echoes Joseph Smith's teachings in the King

³²Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 247.

³³Elden J. Watson, *The Orson Pratt Journals* (Salt Lake City: Elden Jay Watson, 1975), 214; Peter Crawley, *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Mormon Church*, 2 vols. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1997), 1:256. The memorial, introduced in Congress, died in committee.

³⁴Advertisement, *The Prophet* 1, no. 1 (June 22, 1844): 4.

³⁵Crawley, *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Mormon Church*, 1:270-71.

³⁶Orson Pratt, *Prophetic Almanac for 1845*, no. 1 (New York: *The Prophet* Office, 1844), 5-7; emphasis mine.

Follett Discourse, which was given just days before Orson's departure from Nauvoo.³⁷ But it also goes beyond the King Follett declarations by stating that, while God has been "like man," man is also "the offspring of God," that man's spiritual beginning came by being "begotten and born of God." Was Orson publishing Joseph Smith's private teachings regarding spirit birth or was he printing his own speculations, which he was known to have done years later?³⁸

In summary, these few quotations do not provide definitive evidence that Joseph Smith taught spirit birth as a doctrinal concept

³⁷"Man the Offspring of God," *Millennial Star* 19 (November 21, 1857): 738. Orson Pratt was then the *Star's* editor and is probably the author of this article.

³⁸Orson Pratt authored numerous articles that he published in *The Seer* in Washington, D.C., between January 1853 and August 1854. The *Millennial Star* reprinted several of them. Brigham Young inserted the following notice, "Publications," *Millennial Star* 17, no. 19 (May 12, 1855): 298: "A monthly periodical called the 'Seer,' published by Elder Orson Pratt at Washington City, D.C., contains beautifully written articles; but notwithstanding the general beauty of the style, and the apparent candour and minuteness of the reasoning, the 'Seer' has many items of erroneous doctrine. As it would be a lengthy and laborious operation to enter minutely into their disapproval, I prefer, for the present, to let the Saints have opportunity to exercise their faith and discernment in discriminating between the true and erroneous; and simply request them, while reading the 'Seer,' to ask themselves what spirit they are of, and whether the Holy Ghost bears testimony to the truth of all the doctrines therein advocated." In 1860 Orson admitted: "Some of the doctrines I had advanced in the 'Seer,' at Washington were incorrect." "Instructions to the Saints," *Deseret News*, July 25, 1860, 2, col. 2. The First Presidency responded to Pratt's confession: "One of the Elders of Israel had written a long revelation which he deemed to be very important, and requested br. Joseph to hear him read it. The Prophet commended its style in glowing terms, remarked that the ideas were ingeniously advanced, [etc., etc.] and that he had but one objection to it. 'What is that?' inquired the writer, greatly elated that his production was considered so near perfect. The Prophet Joseph replied, 'It is not true.'" Quoted in Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Daniel H. Wells, "Instructions to the Saints," *Deseret News*, July 25, 1860, 3, col. 1; see also Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Daniel H. Wells, "Hearken, O Ye Latter-Day Saints, and All Ye Inhabitants of the Earth Who Wish to Be Saints to Whom This Writing Shall Come," *Deseret News*, August 23, 1865, 2-5.

during his lifetime. However, Clayton's firsthand quotations, Lorenzo Snow's 1842 letter, Heber C. Kimball's 1843 written prayer, Franklin D. Richards's notes, and Orson Pratt's declarations composed in the spring of 1844, supplemented by Parley P. Pratt's late reminiscence, support the possibility.

DOES SECTION 132 TEACH SPIRIT BIRTH?

An obvious question is whether the July 12, 1843, revelation on celestial marriage, canonized in 1876 in the LDS Doctrine and Covenants as Section 132, mentions spirit birth. While the wording is far from conclusive, Joseph's allusion to "a continuation of the seeds" is not the only possible reference to the procreation of spirit offspring by exalted beings after the resurrection. For example, the revelation substitutes "eternal lives" for "life eternal," in an otherwise familiar New Testament verse, John 3:17: "This is *eternal lives*—to know the only wise and true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent" (D&C 132:24; emphasis mine). Also altered is Matthew 7:14: "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life . . ." Instead, Doctrine and Covenants 132:22 reads: "For strait is the gate, and narrow the way that leadeth unto the exaltation and *continuation of the lives* . . ." (emphasis mine). Joseph left no commentary explaining these changes. However, he had in 1832 received a revelation identifying all inhabitants of the terrestrial and telestial kingdoms as "heirs of salvation" (D&C 76:88) who would receive "eternal life," meaning that they never die after the resurrection (D&C 76:39). Hence, it would appear that "eternal lives" and "continuation of the lives" in the celestial glory signify something greater than "eternal life" or a "continuation of life."

Similarly, verse 17 declares that unexalted angels "cannot be enlarged, but remain separately and singly, without exaltation, in their saved condition, to all eternity" (D&C 132:17). Logically, then, exalted beings are capable of being "enlarged" and do not live "separately and singly," a description consistent with an expanding eternal family.

Verse 30 cites a promise to Abraham of "innumerable" descendants: "Abraham received promises concerning his seed, and of the fruit of his loins—from whose loins ye are, namely, my servant Joseph—which were to continue so long as they were in the world; and as touching Abraham and his seed, out of the world they should continue; both in the world and out of the world should they continue as innumerable as the stars; or, if ye were to count the sand upon the sea-

shore ye could not number them” (D&C 132:30).

This verse identifies “seed” as “the fruit of his loins.” Although, “loin” technically refers to “the lateral portions of the lumbar region,”³⁹ the King James Version, whose language strongly influenced Joseph Smith’s revelations and translations, routinely used the term euphemistically for reproductive anatomy that is covered with a “loincloth.” For example, Genesis 35:11 records God’s command to Jacob to “be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins.” Lehi told his son Joseph: “Thou are the fruit of my loins” (2 Ne. 3:4). Accordingly, the “fruit” of a person’s “loins” would seem to be literal offspring on earth and possibly after the resurrection.

A question arises whether Abraham’s “seed” could become “innumerable” without spirit birth. Joseph Smith taught that, by receiving the gospel on this earth, those who are not biological descendants of Abraham can become his “seed” (Abr. 2:10; D&C 84:34). So could the number of Abraham’s “seed” through both biological and adopted progeny on earth fulfill the prophecy to become “innumerable”? The point is moot because large but finite groups found elsewhere in the scriptures are labeled “innumerable” (Luke 12:1; Alma 58:8) and are also sometimes compared to sand or stars (Heb. 11:12; D&C 76:109). In other words, large numbers that are actually finite but difficult to count might be labeled “innumerable.”

However, the next verse states: “This promise is yours also, because ye are of Abraham” (D&C 132:31). In other words, Joseph Smith, like Abraham (and by extension all exalted beings?), was promised that “his seed, and the fruit of his loins” would be “innumerable.” Joseph Smith’s biological offspring, even today, is very small when compared to Abraham’s, comprising no more than a few thousand.⁴⁰ Therefore, it is unclear how this promise will be fulfilled. Even with the addition of thousands of priesthood adoptions, the number would still be compar-

³⁹Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language; Exhibiting the Origin, Orthography, Pronunciation, and Definitions of Words*, 3rd ed. (New York: S. Converse, 1830), *s.v.* loin, 503.

⁴⁰Joseph and Emma Smith had four sons who lived to maturity: Joseph Smith III (b. November 6, 1832), Frederick Granger Williams Smith (June 29, 1836), Alexander Hale Smith (June 2, 1838), and David Hyrum Smith (November 17, 1844, born after Joseph’s death). Their combined descendants are probably measured in the thousands, not tens of thousands.

atively small. Also, if the promise in the verse applies to all exalted beings, including those born in the very last generation of this earth (individuals who will have no mortal children), then it is even less clear how this promise could be realized without spirit birth.

In addition, verse 63 returns to a relevant point, stating: “. . . for they [plural wives] are given unto him [a husband] to multiply and replenish the earth, according to my commandment, and to fulfil the promise which was given by my Father before the foundation of the world, and for their exaltation in the eternal worlds, that they may bear the souls of men; for herein is the work of my Father continued, that he may be glorified” (emphasis mine). The meaning of “bearing the souls of men” is subject to interpretation. Is it a reference to spirit birth, mortal birth, or some other process? One of Joseph’s theological statements, now canonized, is that “the spirit and the body are the soul of man” (D&C 88:15), seeming to require a physical body. The context in verse 63 of “exaltation in the eternal worlds” argues for some form of procreation in that realm.

Perhaps the most interesting possible reference to spirit birth in the revelation is found in the statement mentioned earlier: that exalted beings receive a “continuation of the seeds” (D&C 132:19). Webster’s 1830 dictionary defines a “seed” as: “1. The substance, animal or vegetable, which nature prepares for the reproduction and conservation of the species. 2. That from which any thing springs; first prin-

The strongest evidence that the Prophet had children by his plural wives is a second-hand source identifying Olive Frost (sealed to him in the spring or summer of 1843); she gave birth to a child who died and she also died; no death dates are available but it was before the Saints left Nauvoo. Joseph E. Robinson, *Autobiography*, entry dated October 26, 1902, Ms 7866, LDS Church History Library; James Whitehead, interviewed by Joseph Smith III, April 20, 1885; original in possession of John Hajicek. Better evidence exists for the second child, Josephine Rosetta Lyon, who was born February 8, 1844, to Sylvia Sessions Lyon who was sealed to Joseph in the fall of 1843 after the excommunication of her legal husband, Windsor Lyon. Sylvia confided her daughter’s parentage to her “just prior to [her] mother’s death in 1882,” and Josephine made an affidavit about her mother’s statement. Josephine R. Fisher, *Affidavit*, February 24, 1915, LDS Church History Library, Ms 3423. Josephine married John Fisher in 1863 and gave birth to ten children, seven of whom lived to adulthood. www.FamilySearch.org (accessed March 14, 2012). Josephine’s offspring would also measure in the thousands.

ciple; original. 3. Principle of production. 4. Progeny; offspring; children; descendants. 5. Race; generation; birth.” Joseph Smith would have been fully familiar with these definitions that generally refer to the reproduction of “species, progeny, offspring, children, descendants, race etc.” The definition and the scripture imply procreation with offspring that can grow to become like the parents.⁴¹ Typically, a seed, if planted, can produce fruit and more seeds, hence the popular saying: “You can count the number of seeds in an apple, but not the number of apples in a seed.” It seems that, if “a continuation of the seeds” meant simply a continuation of earthly parent-child relationships as defined in the genealogical tree, the verse would instead have promised a “continuation of the roots and branches.”

While the interpretation of these verses in Section 132 continues to be debated today,⁴² a question arises regarding how some of Joseph Smith’s polygamy confidantes would have interpreted them. Two months before Joseph dictated the revelation, William Clayton recorded that Joseph taught of “children in the resurrection” and “children in the Celestial glory.”⁴³ Just weeks earlier, Heber C. Kimball prayed to be enthroned in eternity “on worlds, to propragate [sic] that thare may be no end to us or our Seeds.”⁴⁴ Four days after Clayton wrote Doctrine and Covenants 132 to Joseph’s dictation, Franklin D. Richards recorded his already quoted comment that the Prophet

⁴¹Hale, “The Origin of the Human Spirit in Early Mormon Thought,” 121–22, cautioned: “Here Smith implies that gods procreate but does not specify that their offspring are spirits. There is no known explanation from Smith on this subject. In a sermon on July 16, 1843, he explained ‘that he could not reveal the fulness of these things untill the Temple is completed,’ which was not accomplished until after his death. However, the conclusion some of his contemporaries drew, and the one which has prevailed through Mormon history, is that children born after the resurrection to exalted couples will be spirit children for future worlds.” Hale points out that, in Joseph’s thought, “it is equally unclear if the alternative possibility, that the offspring of the gods are physical children, would be any more plausible in the prophet’s thinking.

⁴²See Brian C. Hales, “Spirit Birth and ‘Chains of Belonging’” (letter to the editor), *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2012): vi–viii.

⁴³George D. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 102. See also D&C 132:1–4.

⁴⁴Kimball, *On the Potter’s Wheel*, 52.

taught of a “multiplication of Lives that the eternal worlds are created and occupied that which is born of the flesh is flesh that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.”⁴⁵ Nine months later, Orson Pratt wrote plainly that man is “the offspring of God” and that humankind’s “spiritual” beginning started when they were “begotten and born of God” prior to earth life.⁴⁶ All four of these men are known to have conversed with Joseph Smith regarding his deeper doctrines.⁴⁷ That some of them might have understood the revelation to refer to spirit birth, not just once, but many times, is a possibility.

POST-MARTYRDOM TEACHINGS, 1845–47

Historical sources exist supporting the conclusion that Joseph Smith had taught the concept of spirit birth privately to trustworthy friends before his death, concepts that they apparently explicated in the months and years after his death. For example, W. W. Phelps, preaching his funeral sermon for Joseph and Hyrum Smith on June 29, 1844, taught that exalted beings

can go on from birth to age; from life to lives; and from world to heaven; and from heaven to eternity; and from eternity to ceaseless progression . . . from glory to glory; from wisdom to wisdom; from system to system; from god to god, and from one perfection to another, while eternities go and eternities come, and yet there is room—for the curtains of endless progression are stretched out still and a god is there to go ahead with improvements. . . .

The best of saints from many creations, will hold a grand jubilee, of prophets, priests and kings, with their wives, and children, for the purpose of crowning the faithful to enter into the joys of their Lord; prepar[a]tory to their going into eternity to multiply and replenish new worlds.⁴⁸

To “multiply and replenish” the earth was God’s command to Adam and Eve to have offspring (Gen. 1:28). Phelps uses this same language to describe the Saints’ behavior in eternity with respect to “new worlds,” which implies the creation of children after the resur-

⁴⁵Richards, “Scriptural Items,” July 16, 1843, quoted in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 232.

⁴⁶Pratt, *Prophetic Almanac for 1845*, 5–7.

⁴⁷See Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: History and Theology*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), Vol. 3, chaps. 6, 8, 10.

⁴⁸Phelps, “The Joseph/Hyrum Smith Funeral Sermon,” 11–13.

rection. That he taught this concept only two days after the martyrdom at Joseph Smith's own funeral suggests that he learned these ideas from the Prophet.

Six months later at the dedication of the Seventies Hall in Nauvoo on December 31, 1844, Joseph Hovey, who was present, recorded that Brigham Young "spoke of the relation we held to our Father in Heaven and to our Mother, the Queen. If we are faithful we will come in their presence and learn of our first estate."⁴⁹ Spirit birth requires exalted couples which, in LDS theology are a resurrected father and mother. Also for that dedicatory service, W. W. Phelps composed a hymn, a portion of which reads:

Come to me; here's the myst'ry that man hath not seen:
Here's our Father in heaven, and Mother, the Queen,
Here are worlds that have been, and the worlds yet to be:
Here's eternity,—endless; amen: Come to me.⁵⁰

Eliza R. Snow, who was one of Joseph's plural wives, wrote a poem in 1845 titled "My Father in Heaven," that, set to music, become a popular Mormon hymn, "O My Father," still in the current hymnal.⁵¹ One verse refers to heavenly parents:

I had learned to call thee Father,
Through thy Spirit from on high,
But until the key of knowledge
Was restored, I knew not why.
In the heavens are parents single?
No, the thought makes reason stare!

⁴⁹Joseph Grafton Hovey, Journal, 1812–47, pp. 24–25, MS 1576, LDS Church History Library; digitized version, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/JHovey.html> (accessed January 29, 2010). Joseph Grafton Hovey, born November 17, 1812, was baptized in 1839, moved first to Nauvoo, and then to Utah where Brigham Young commended him for his devotion and obedience. Young, February 24, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 3:236–40.

⁵⁰W. W. Phelps, "A Voice from the Prophet: 'Come to Me,'" *Times and Seasons* 6 (January 15, 1845): 783.

⁵¹Eliza R. Snow, "O My Father," *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), no. 292.

Truth is reason, truth eternal
Tells me I've a mother there.⁵²

Similarly on November 24, 1846, while camped at Council Bluffs, Parley P. Pratt penned a verse to his “wife.” By that time, he had been sealed to eight women, seven of whom were still living. It is unclear to whom the poem is addressed or if it was meant for all seven. Regardless, in it he refers to “kindred spirits” and “Offsprings of Deity”:

Ye kindred spirits from world's celestial!
Offsprings of Deity;—Sons and daughters
Of Eternity;—Ye nobles of heaven
Whose dwellings were of old among the Gods

⁵²Eliza R. Snow, “My Father in Heaven,” *Times and Seasons* 6 (November 15, 1845): 1039. Wilford Woodruff considered the words of the song to be inspired: “With regard to our position before we came here, I will say that we dwelt with the Father and with the Son, as expressed in the hymn, ‘O My Father,’ that has been sung here. That hymn is a revelation, though it was given unto us by a woman—Sister Eliza R. Snow. There are a great many sisters who have the spirit of revelation. There is no reason why they should not be inspired as well as men.” “Discourse by Wilford Woodruff,” *Millennial Star* 56 (April 9, 1894): 229. Susa Young Gates left this account: “Although no one thought to ask Sister Snow in life to recount the incidents connected with the composition of the famous and inspired hymn entitled ‘O my Father,’ we know from two of her associates, Sisters Bathsheba W. Smith and Emmeline B. Wells, a little of the surroundings of the poetess at this time. She was living in Nauvoo at the home of Stephen Markham and had for her own room a tiny upstairs chamber, whose sloping roof was all unfinished inside, but which sheltered its inmate from snows and sun, while it provided a quiet retreat for occasional contemplation and composition. The room was severely plain in its furnishings, with one small window to light the dim gloom of the half-completed story. . . . It was in such environments that the simple but divine words of that matchless Mormon hymnal were written.” Susa Young Gates, “Eliza R. Snow Smith,” in Gates’s *History of the Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association: From November 1869 to June 1910* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1911), 15–16 footnote. See also Jill Mulvay Derr and Karen Lynn Davidson, eds., *Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press/Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009), 312–14.

In everlasting mansions, and who stood
In the councils of the High and lofty . . .⁵³

On December 6, 1847, while meeting with members of the Quorum of the Twelve in Kanesville, Iowa, Brigham Young explained that exalted beings will have powers to beget spirits: “We have power to beget children with flesh, bones, & blood—When bodies are celestialized our power is increased—[W]hy not get [a] Sp[irit] without bodies [?]-Sp[irits] are susceptible of Sp[irit] as body with body—[W]e will have powers to beget Sp[irits]—& tell them to take tabernacles—[T]hen you put the inclinat[io]n. into man & woman to beget bodies—God is the Fat[her]. Of our Sp[irit] yet not the Fat[her]. Of our bodies—We shall beget Sp[irits] & send these Sp[irits] into the world.”⁵⁴

These teachings, enunciated so soon after Joseph Smith’s death, could either represent a rapid evolution or elaboration of his private instructions or they may represent a more public disclosure of doctrines he was hesitant to proclaim openly.

JOSEPH SMITH’S RETICENCE ON SPIRIT BIRTH

Despite these quotations and statements, as observed above, some scholars have concluded that Joseph Smith did not teach that resurrected couples would give birth to spirit offspring or that he gave only general hints that were expanded or possibly conflated by Church members like Lorenzo Snow, Heber C. Kimball, Orson Pratt, Brigham Young, William Clayton, Parley P. Pratt, W. W. Phelps, and Eliza R. Snow.

Another interpretation is that Joseph Smith privately taught

⁵³Parley P. Pratt, *An Apostle of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Was in the Island of Great Britain, for the Gospel’s Sake; And Being in the Spirit on the 21st of November, A.D. 1846, Addressed the Following Words of Comfort to his Dearly-Beloved Wife and Family, Dwelling in Tents, in the Camp of Israel, at Council Bluffs, Missouri Territory, North America; Where They and Twenty Thousand Others Were Banished by the Civilized Christians of the United States, for the Word of God, and the Testimony of Jesus* (London: J. B. Franklin, 1851), 1; also published in Parley P. Pratt Jr., ed., *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (New York: Russell Brothers, 1874), 389; rpt, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975, 350.

⁵⁴*Minutes of the Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1835–1893* (Salt Lake City: Privately published, 2010), 141.

spirit birth to these men and possibly others, but was hesitant to publicly preach the doctrine.

For example, in a discourse delivered on May 21, 1843, he referred to “the Spirits in the Eternal world” and then characterized God as “He who rules in the heavens.”⁵⁵ Joseph gave no hint of any special connection or familial relationship between the spirits and God. More striking are the Prophet’s comments in the King Follett Discourse as reported in the *Times and Seasons* several weeks after the martyrdom: “All the spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement. . . . God himself finds himself in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was greater, and because he saw proper to institute laws, whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself, that they might have one glory upon another, in all that knowledge, power, and glory, &c., in order to save the world of spirits.”⁵⁶ In this statement Joseph Smith acknowledged the existence of premortal spirits before they were “sent into the world.” Then he explained that God “finds himself” in their midst and is motivated out of compassion to help them because “he was greater.” There’s no mention of how or why God would “find himself” in their company. Nor is there discussion regarding any possible kindred tie between Him and these spirits.

Similar language is also found in the Book of Abraham, Chapter 3, which recounts a vision in which God shows Abraham the premortal beings. According to Abraham, God refers to them as “spirits,” (vv. 19, 21), “intelligences” (vv. 21-22), and “souls” (v. 23), without any hint that they might be His spirit offspring. In addition, no reason is given as to why He would associate with them. Instead, He states simply: “I dwell in the midst of them all. . . . I came down in the beginning in the midst of all the intelligences thou hast seen” (v. 21) and “stood among those that were spirits” (v. 21).

It seems that the wording used by both Joseph Smith and Abraham supports a conscious effort to avoid revealing that the relationship between God and the premortal spirits could be that of a literal parent and child. Accordingly, these accounts and scriptures might support the position that spirit birth is a false teaching or that it did not originate with Joseph Smith. However, it is also possible that spirit

⁵⁵Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 207.

⁵⁶Joseph Smith, “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 5 (August 15, 1844): 615; sermon given April 7, 1844.

birth is a true principle that was known to the Prophet (and possibly also Abraham), but that both men were taking pains to avoid making such a declaration. Perhaps spirit birth was a doctrine designed to be “kept hid from before the foundation of the world” (D&C 124:41) and revealed only in the last dispensation through Joseph the Seer. While he was incarcerated in Liberty Jail, on March 20, 1839, he was promised: “God shall give unto you knowledge by his holy Spirit, yea, by the unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost, that has not been revealed since the world was until now” (D&C 121:26).⁵⁷

If so, the question arises: Why would God withhold knowledge of spirit birth from previous followers and even prophets, possibly for thousands of years? Several hypotheses may apply. First, it seems that such details could be easily perverted. As listeners naturally hypothesize regarding the mechanics of procreation in heaven, many might draw a direct parallel to sexual relations on earth, possibly leading to conjugal perversions in the name of deity. Satan, who is labeled in Joseph Smith’s revelations as “the father of all lies” and who constantly seeks “to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will” (Moses 4:4) would exploit such knowledge if he could. In addition, while such lofty teachings might inspire some individuals to greater obedience, a more likely response is greater curiosity about unanswerable mysteries that could give Satan power over them as they end up contemplating carnality in the name of divinity. In the arithmetic of eternal salvation, the problems introduced by such revelations could easily outweigh the potential benefits.

Also, theories about spirit birth might facilitate more open discussions of sexuality, discussions that would better be given by “par-

⁵⁷According to available texts, New Testament authors did not address the possibility of marriage in the hereafter, possibly because they were unaware or because they believed that Christ’s teaching that “they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage” (Luke 20:35) would preclude the perpetuation of marital relationships after death. See Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 232. Paul referred to the union of husbands and wives as a “great mystery” saying: “a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery . . .” (Eph. 5:31–32). He apparently never explained the mystery, possibly because he lacked knowledge of the details, or the proper forum to discuss it, or authorization to do so.

ents” to their “children in Zion” in the family setting (D&C 68:25, 29:48). Joseph condemned “idle thoughts” (D&C 88:69), “lusting” (D&C 42:23, 63:16), and “lustful desires” (D&C 88:121) and criticized the Saints in an 1839 letter:

How vain and trifling have been our spirits, our conferences, our councils, our meetings, our private as well as public conversations—too low, too mean, too vulgar, too condescending for the dignified characters of the called and chosen of God, according to the purposes of His will, from before the foundation of the world! We are called to hold the keys of the mysteries of those things that have been kept hid from the foundation of the world until now.⁵⁸

Was Joseph Smith thinking about the concepts taught in the revelation on eternal and plural marriage when he wrote these concerns? We do not know because the chronology of his own understanding is undocumented. Regardless, the historical record shows that he did not commit those supernal concepts to paper until dozens of polygamous unions had been performed and until problems in his own life seemed to demand such disclosures.

Even for believers today, teaching spirit birth with the Spirit (D&C 42:14) is a challenge. When contemplating such ideas, it may be helpful to resist the temptation to assume an exact parallel between the creation of earthly children, which begins with sexual relations. For example, the role of blood in the physiological processes of fertilization, gestation, labor, and delivery is indispensable. Joseph Smith clearly took the position that resurrected beings’ bodies do not contain blood. Replacing blood with “spirit” in resurrected tabernacles might have little impact on physiological processes, but it might just as easily completely transform everything medical science understands. Many questions exist. Do resurrected bodies have stomachs and intestines to digest and absorb nutrients from ingested foods? Do they have livers that make enzymes like acetylcholinesterases? Do they possess kidneys to extract bilirubin from the “spirit” flowing in the arteries and veins? In addition, specific questions arise respecting spirit reproductive physiology. Are the ovaries in resurrected females

⁵⁸Joseph Smith, Epistle to “the Church,” March 20–25, 1839, quoted in *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978 printing), 3:295–96.

capable of producing an unlimited supply of spirit eggs? (The number is finite in mortal women.) Does conception require physical conjugality? Is a forty-week gestation period required for spirit births? Speculating or quoting the opinions of others regarding possible answers to these questions will not yield verifiable conclusions or orthodox teachings.

Whether Joseph Smith's hesitancy was divinely inspired, he had other reasons to withhold such meaty teachings from his listeners. He could not soon forget the ferocious outcry generated both internally and externally by the novel doctrine of plural marriage, and the memory would have naturally deterred him from asserting yet another innovative doctrine at a time when he was also launching a campaign for the U.S. presidency and secretly developing both the endowment and the Council of Fifty.

It would also have been realistic for Joseph to expect both honest inquiries and scandalized reactions concerning the process through which spirit children are created in the afterlife. The accusation that he was teaching sexual relations in heaven would have been a predictable consequence of those who were already accusing him of "spiritual wifery."⁵⁹ Just months earlier former assistant counselor to the First Presidency, John C. Bennett, now disgraced and excommunicated, had vigorously denounced the Prophet as "an unprincipled libertine, unequalled in the history of civilized man" and lamented that Joseph "should so deliberately and shamelessly have gone to work to gratify, in so monstrous a manner, his abominable lusts."⁶⁰ To avoid a repeat of such a public backlash, Joseph may have prudently decided that such lofty discussions should take place in carefully screened circles where trusted followers could hear, have their questions answered, and seek spiritual confirmation.

Three months before delivering the King Follett Discourse, Jo-

⁵⁹See, for example, Orson Pratt, "Celestial Marriage," *The Seer* 1 (October 1853): 158–59; Brigham Young, June 18, 1865, *Journal of Discourses*, 11:122; Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology: Designed as an Introduction to the First Principles of Spiritual Philosophy; Religion; Law and Government; as Delivered by the Ancients and as Restored in this Age, for the Final Development of Universal Peace, Truth and Knowledge* (Liverpool, England: F. D. Richards, 1855), 51.

⁶⁰John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints: Or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), 228, 225.

seph lamented: “There has been a great difficulty in getting anything into the heads of this generation it has been like splitting hemlock knots with a corn dodger for a wedge and a pumpkin for a beetle. Even the Saints are slow to understand I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God, but we frequently see some of them after suffering all they have for the work of God will fly to pieces like glass as soon as any thing comes that is contrary to their traditions.”⁶¹

SUMMARY

While the evidence is far from complete, I conclude, based on the contemporaneous or near-contemporaneous evidences presented in this article that the Prophet personally taught that resurrected couples would be able to procreate and that spirit birth would occur. That Joseph Smith would have initially broached these ideas privately is not surprising, given the potential for incredulity and confusion. Years earlier, he had been warned: “For they cannot bear meat now, but milk they must receive; wherefore, they must not know these things, lest they perish” (D&C 19:22).⁶²

⁶¹Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 319.

⁶²See Brian C. Hales, “Historical Truth and Gospel Meat: Teaching the Milk Drinkers,” *Sunstone*, forthcoming.