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JOHN C. BENNETT AND JOSEPH SMITH'S POLYGAMY: ADDRESSING THE QUESTION OF RELIABILITY

Brian C. Hales

EVER SINCE JOHN C. BENNETT ARRIVED IN NAUVOO in September 1840 and experienced a meteoric climb in public profile, followed by an equally meteoric plunge into disfavor and opprobrium only twenty-two months later, historians have been intrigued by his personality, influence, and role in building up Nauvoo. One aspect studied has been the intriguing possibility that he was personally in-

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volved with Joseph Smith's introduction of plural marriage. Oliver Olney penned the earliest assessment on June 18, 1842: "If Bennett had not moved quite so fast, all would have been well."¹ (Olney himself was excommunicated on March 17, 1842, and went on to write two rambling and disjointed exposés that contain much chaff but also some wheat.²) In Utah in the early 1870s, T. B. H. Stenhouse wrote: "Many even of the 'good Mormons' have always believed that Joseph taught Bennett of the proposed introduction of polygamy, but that Bennett ran ahead of his teacher, and introduced free-loveism in its broadest sense."³ Since then, other influential historians have taken the same position. Fawn Brodie asserted: "For a year and a half he was Joseph's most intimate friend."⁴ Robert Bruce Flanders labeled Bennett "a promiscuous and lascivious man," asserting that he "stumbled onto a developing religious principle which he apparently distorted to aid and justify himself in his amours." Flanders added, "Just who took the first step [Bennett or Joseph Smith], or when, is impossible to determine from reliable sources."⁵ Lawrence Foster also speculated on the relationship between the two men. He felt that Joseph had taken John

¹Oliver Olney, Journal, June 18, 1842, Olney Papers, original at Yale; microfilm at LDS Church History Library, MS 8829, item 8, entry for date. Two months earlier, he had written on April 8, 1842: "And some of the twelve [were] trying to be very intimate with females. But if it was so, I thought . . . they had wives." By that date, it seems that only Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball, in addition to Joseph himself, had plural wives. See Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: History and Theology*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 1:484–96.

²Oliver H. Olney, *The Absurdities of Mormonism Portrayed: A Brief Sketch* (Hancock Co., Ill. March 3, 1843); Olney, *Spiritual Wifery at Nauvoo Exposed* (St. Louis: Author, 1845).

³T.B.H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1873), 184. See also Linda Wilcox DeSimone, ed., *Fanny Stenhouse: Exposé of Polygamy, A Lady's Life among the Mormons* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2008), 10–12.

⁴Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 309.

⁵Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 267.

C. Bennett “into his full confidence” about polygamy.⁶ In his book based on his dissertation, Foster went into more detail: “Bennett’s indiscretions and excesses threatened the legitimate development of polygamy. . . . Joseph Smith was faced with a dilemma in trying to deal with Bennett. The man knew too much to be summarily thrown out, yet his indiscretions were so great that if he were not thrown out the lid would blow off eventually anyway. Bennett never understood what Joseph Smith was really trying to do. His account [of polygamy] is like the reflection in a fun-house mirror, grotesquely elongated or distorted in different directions, although the original object reflected did in fact exist.”⁷ Richard Van Wagoner also embraced this view: “Much of what Bennett wrote about Mormonism’s inner circles was factual. As a member of the First Presidency, he was clearly in a privileged position to witness much of Joseph’s personal behavior.”⁸ Todd Compton seemed to agree, writing that Bennett, “did have early first-hand knowledge of the Mormon leader’s polygamous activities.”⁹ Gary Bergera concludes: “He [Bennett] probably knew more about the origins of plural marriage in Nauvoo than any other person besides Smith himself.”¹⁰ George D. Smith affirmed: “One of the instrumental people in the inauguration of plural marriage was John Bennett, who in

⁶Lawrence Foster, “Between Two Worlds: The Origins of Shaker Celibacy, Onedia Community Complex Marriage, and Mormon Polygamy” (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1976), 271 note 1.

⁷Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 171.

⁸Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 298.

⁹Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 239.

¹⁰Gary James Bergera, “John C. Bennett, Joseph Smith, and the Beginnings of Mormon Plural Marriage in Nauvoo,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 25 (2005): 52. See also Bergera, *Conflict in the Quorum: Orson Pratt, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 16; Bergera, “‘Illicit Intercourse,’ Plural Marriage, and the Nauvoo Stake High Council, 1840–1844,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 23 (2003): 65.



The Homestead in Nauvoo where the Smith family lived between April 1839 and August 31, 1843. The left newer portion was added after the Prophet's death. Photo courtesy of Alex Baugh.

1841 functioned as perhaps Joseph Smith's closest confidant."¹¹

What was John C. Bennett's actual impact on Nauvoo plural marriage? This article examines his two-year path through Mormonism to explore which aspects of Joseph Smith's polygamy he described correctly or incorrectly, with particular attention to the controversial elements of Bennett's claims and an analysis of Bennett's actual closeness to Joseph Smith.

JOHN C. BENNETT'S FIRST MONTHS IN NAUVOO

John C. Bennett arrived in Nauvoo in September 1840 and

¹¹George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*: "... but we called it celestial marriage" (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 65; see also 67, 70; Smith, "The Summer of 1842: Joseph Smith's Relationships with the 12 Wives He Married after His First Wife, Emma," Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake Community College, July 31, 1998, 12.

moved in with the Smith family, paying three dollars a week for his room and board for the next thirty-nine weeks.¹² The Smiths and their four children were then living in the Homestead, one of the few buildings already in the town originally named Commerce. It consisted of three rooms: a living room area, a back kitchen, and a single room upstairs, most likely used for sleeping. Given the close proximity in which they lived, it seems likely that he and Joseph had many conversations during this time, although it seems *unlikely* that these conversations could have been private unless they retired to the yard or barn. Further, it seems impossible that they would have discussed polygamy in Emma's presence or in a room she was likely to enter, considering how stoutly she resisted rumors about plural marriage, defended Joseph's reputation, and accepted polygamy only reluctantly and briefly for a short period in 1843.

John C. Bennett's arrival coincided with a power vacuum in the city. Most members of the Quorum of the Twelve were away on missions, and Sidney Rigdon was ill. Bennett's apparent sincerity and charisma quickly ingratiated him with Joseph Smith, and he was invited to speak at a general conference held October 3–5, 1840, just weeks after his arrival.

In late November 1840, Bennett traveled to Springfield, Illinois, where he successfully lobbied the legislature to pass the expansive Nauvoo Charter.¹³ Thomas Ford, who was governor of Illinois from 1842 to 1846, served as an associate justice of the Illinois Supreme Court in 1840 and worked closely with the state legislature, later re-

¹²Red Brick Store Daybook, December 8, 1843, account number 59; quoted in Richard and Pamela Price, *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy*, Vol. 1 (Independence: Price Publishing, 2000), 79.

¹³The Nauvoo Charter was similar to those granted to other Illinois cities by the state legislature. The difference was largely in how Nauvoo City leaders interpreted its powers. James L. Kimball, Jr., "The Nauvoo Charter: A Reinterpretation," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 64 (Spring 1971): 66–78; rpt., in Roger D. Launius and John E. Hallwas, eds., *Kingdom on the Mississippi Revisited: Nauvoo in Mormon History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 39–47. However, according to Thomas Gregg, *History of Hancock County, Illinois* (Chicago: Charles C. Chapman, 1880), 274, the charter seemed "contrived to give the Mormons a system of government so far as possible independent of the rest of the state" by omitting a common provision "guarding against infringement of state or federal law."



John C. Bennett. Courtesy of the LDS Church History Library.

membered: "Bennett managed matters well for his constituents. He flattered both sides with the hope of Mormon favor. . . . The vote was taken, the ayes and noes were not called for, no one opposed it, but all were busy and active in hurrying it through."¹⁴ Joseph Smith III, who turned eight in 1840, much later recalled, "Much of the good that was injected into the by-laws and ordinances of Nauvoo was partially due to his ability to direct civic affairs."¹⁵ Bennett was rewarded for his efforts at the state capital by being elected mayor of Nauvoo on February 1, 1841.

On January 19, 1841, Joseph dictated a revelation containing impressive promises for Bennett:

Again, let my servant John C. Bennett help you in your labor in sending my word to the kings and people of the earth, and stand by you, even you my servant Joseph Smith, in the hour of affliction; and his reward shall not fail *if* he receive counsel.

And for his love he shall be great, for he shall be mine *if* he do this, saith the Lord. I have seen the work which he hath done, which I accept *if* he continue, and will crown him with blessings and great glory. (D&C 124:16–17; emphasis mine)

The promises extended to Bennett in these verses are indeed remarkable, but they are also clearly conditional.¹⁶ The three sentences addressing John C. Bennett contain three "ifs" that identify the re-

¹⁴Thomas Ford, *History of Illinois from Its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847* (Chicago: S. C. Griggs, 1854; rpt., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 182.

¹⁵Mary Audentia Smith Anderson, *The Memoirs of President Joseph Smith III (1832–1914)* (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1979), 29. Joseph III dictated his memoirs to his son, Israel, and they were published serially in the *Saints' Herald*; this comment appears in the January 8, 1935, issue.

¹⁶A few authors have suggested that, despite Bennett's sincerity up to January 1841, the promises extended in this revelation far out-distanced his inherent goodness and worthiness. See, for example, Gary James Bergera, "John C. Bennett, Joseph Smith, and the Beginnings of Mormon Plural Marriage in Nauvoo," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 25 (2005): 57–58; Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 281.

quirements needed to receive the blessings prophesied.¹⁷ Furthermore, none of the surrounding verses that specifically address five other men contain a single “if” clause: Robert B. Thompson (vv. 12–14), Hyrum Smith (v. 15), Lyman Wight (vv. 18–19), George Miller (vv. 20–21), and John Snider (v. 22). Later in this same revelation, “if” language is employed in addressing three additional individuals who are promised rewards contingent on continuous personal righteousness.¹⁸ But like Bennett, those three men also apostatized: William Law (four “ifs”: vv. 82–90), Sidney Rigdon (four “ifs”: vv. 103–10), and Robert D. Foster (one “if”: vv. 115–16).¹⁹ A review of the entire revelation confirms that the verses containing provisional blessings couched in “if” language—language that demanded persistent compliance—seemed to be prophetic of future noncompliance.

The conditionality of Bennett’s promised blessings in the January 19, 1841, revelation was undoubtedly not missed by the Prophet. The revelatory language treated Bennett differently from several other brethren mentioned, giving hope, but possibly infusing doubts concerning his future obedience. It is unlikely that it would have in-

¹⁷Bennett’s patriarchal blessing given September 21, 1840, by Hyrum Smith also contains four “if” clauses. One “if” statement instructs that “if” Bennett “shouldst step aside from the path of rectitude at any time because of temptation,” he would “return to the path from whence thou [Bennett] hast strayed,” which apparently did not occur. The other three “ifs” describe conditional blessings. Quoted in John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints, or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), 42–44.

¹⁸Doctrine and Covenants 124 contains thirty-three “ifs,” several of which were addressed to men (Vinson Knight, Amos Davies, George Miller, Lyman Wight, John Snider, and Peter Haws) admonishing them to invest in Nauvoo House stock (vv. 70–71, 74, 111–12) but the wording included no specifications of worthiness.

¹⁹Law and Foster were excommunicated on April 18, 1844. Rigdon was excommunicated after Joseph’s death. However, he and Joseph Smith endured several conflicts in Nauvoo. One was generated by a letter Bennett wrote to Rigdon on January 10, 1843; Rigdon failed to immediately turn the letter over to the Prophet. See Joseph Smith Jr. et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev. (6 vols., 1902–12, Vol. 7, 1932; rpt., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980 printing), 5:250–51.

spired Joseph to trust Bennett with lofty doctrines until after he had manifested a willingness to "receive counsel" and "continue." The revelation was published five months later in the *Times and Seasons*.²⁰

BENNETT'S RESUMPTION OF IMMORAL BEHAVIOR

Despite Bennett's talents and personal charm, he also had moral failings. Historian Linda King Newell assessed: "There is no evidence that Bennett was hampered by either theological or ethical considerations."²¹ His pre-Nauvoo reputation involved several vices, including sexual improprieties.²² Within months of his move to Illinois, Joseph Smith heard rumors of Bennett's tainted past. Five months after Bennett reached Nauvoo, in mid-February 1841, the Prophet sent George Miller to McConnelsville, Ohio, to investigate.²³ Four weeks later, Miller reported that Bennett, who had been passing himself off as a bachelor, was already married and that "his poor, but confiding wife, followed him from place to place, with no suspicion of his unfaithfulness to her; at length however, he became so bold in his departures, that it was evident to all around that he was a sore offender, and his wife left him under satisfactory evidence of his adulterous connections; nor was this his only fault; he used her bad otherwise."²⁴ At one point in their marriage when Bennett was accused of adultery that broke up another wedded couple, his wife

²⁰"Extracts: From a Revelation Given to Joseph Smith, Jr., Jan. 19th 1841," *Times and Seasons* 2 (June 1, 184): 425.

²¹Linda King Newell, "Emma Hale Smith and the Polygamy Question," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 4 (1984): 13 note 18.

²²Price and Price, *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy*, 63–73, for a synopsis of Bennett's pre-Nauvoo past. See also W. P. Rowell, "Affidavits and Certificates, Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett's Letters. Nauvoo," *Wasp* extra, August 31, 1842.

²³Andrew C. Skinner, "John C. Bennett: For Prophet or Profit?" in H. Dean Garrett, ed., *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Illinois* (Provo, Utah: BYU Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1995), 256–63.

²⁴Joseph Smith, "To the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and to All the Honorable Part of Community," *Times and Seasons* 3 (July 1, 1842): 839–40; see also Michael W. Homer, *Joseph's Temples: The Dynamic Relationship Between Freemasonry and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of

reportedly “declared that if he succeeded in separating the pair . . . that it would be the seventh family that he had parted during their union.”²⁵ According to Gary Bergera, “Depending on the source, either Bennett left/abandoned Mary [his wife] when she refused to accompany him to Illinois [in 1838] or Mary left him because of his infidelities and/or abuse of her.”²⁶

In a late recollection, Lyman O. Littlefield, who had been an early follower of Bennett’s immoral teachings and was disfellowshipped for his misbehavior by the Nauvoo High Council on May 27, 1842, described one of Bennett’s earliest transgressions in Nauvoo:

During the winter when a lyceum was in progress [early 1841²⁷] in the upper room of Joseph’s store, this same Bennett became enamored of a lady of good repute and comely mien. The lyceum sessions were held regular each Wednesday evening. The husband of this lady was a member of that institution and a regular attendant of the same. The doctor [Bennett] selected these particular evenings as being propitious for the success of his wicked design and commenced to make calls upon her at such hours. Notwithstanding he was well skilled in the etiquette that belongs to social life and knew how to ape refinement when he chose, yet upon these occasions he was grossly rude and impulsive in his advances. The lady, from the beginning, knowing his influence at that time, dreaded to offend him and tried to argue and reason with him against his unjustifiable course. She also dreaded the consequences in case she informed her husband of the facts. She took this course during two of his visits, but finding her efforts ineffectual, she resolved to detain her husband at home when the next evening for the lyceum should arrive. Her pleadings grew so earnest that she became successful, her husband not suspecting the real cause. He

Utah, 2014), 151–52.

²⁵Untitled notice beginning, “Dear Sir: On being requested . . .,” *The Wasph* 1 (October 1, 1842): 24.

²⁶Bergera, “John C. Bennett, Joseph Smith, and the Beginnings of Mormon Plural Marriage,” 53 note 5.

²⁷The first Lyceum meeting was on January 5, 1841, and it met thereafter for several months. Andrew 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), 82 note 1.

was somewhat surprised, of course, when the great Doctor Bennett called at his humble abode.²⁸

Joseph Smith similarly described how Bennett “had not been long in Nauvoo before he began to keep company with a young lady, one of our citizens; and she being ignorant of his having a wife living, gave way to his addresses, and became confident, from his behavior towards her, that he intended to marry her; and this he gave her to understand he would do. I, seeing the folly of such an acquaintance, persuaded him to desist; and, on account of his continuing his course, finally threatened to expose him if he did not desist. This, to outward appearance, had the desired effect, and the acquaintance between them was broken off.”²⁹

However, Bennett’s amorous activities did not abate. Joseph Smith continued: Shortly thereafter, Bennett “seduced an innocent female by his lying, and subjected her character to public disgrace, should it ever be known.”³⁰ The identity of the unfortunate woman is not available.³¹ However, it appears that Vilate Kimball, Heber C. Kimball’s wife, was aware of the incident. On March 2, 1841, Joseph

²⁸Lyman Omer Littlefield, *Reminiscences of Latter-day Saints: Giving an Account of Much Individual Suffering Endured for Religious Conscience* (Logan: Utah Journal, 1888), 158. The time frame Littlefield recalls suggests that Bennett began making improper advances soon after his arrival in Nauvoo. However, elements of the story are too ambiguous to allow identification of the woman described. If Littlefield was referring to Sarah Pratt, who later charged both Bennett and Joseph with making indecent proposals, this incident of persuading her husband to stay home could have occurred only after July 1841, since her husband, Orson, did not return from his mission until that month.

²⁹Joseph Smith, “To the Church of Jesus Christ,” 839–40. It should be noted that, by this date (July 1, 1842), Bennett had already fled from Nauvoo in disgrace, had been excommunicated on May 11, and was accusing Joseph of “spiritual wifery” and debauchery, so it is natural that Joseph had no interest in defending Bennett’s reputation.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹RLDS conservatives Richard and Pamela Price, *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy*, 77, 84–87, use Wyl to theorize that Eliza R. Snow was the seduced woman and that she become pregnant in Nauvoo. The hypothesis seems unlikely for three reasons. The account refers to a “young woman,” and Eliza

Smith wrote her:

I can in some measure enter into your feelings respecting the occurrence which has lately taken place in the church which is indeed painful to every lover of Truth and Holiness, and probably to none more so than myself. I am indeed sorry that any thing should have caused such a stir in the Church, and bro't disgrace upon persons who are otherwise respectable. The course I have taken in the matter was such as I felt warranted to take from the testimony which was adduced. Whether they were guilty of crime or not I do not say, but this I must say that their imprudence was carried to an unwarranted extent.

I do not desire that you should turn the young woman out of doors, far be it from me to advise any such course I think it would be well for her to remain with you at least until Bro Kimball comes home, because I think that your advise [sic], may be a blessing to her, and your council and advise such as will tend to her future welfare and happiness. I have no doubt but you will act in wisdom in this matter.³²

This letter does not mention Bennett specifically and it is possible that it refers to someone else; however, the chronology coincides strikingly—only two months after the Lyceum began its meetings.³³ Joseph noted, “The course I have taken in the matter was such as I felt warranted to take.” Even if Bennett was not the culprit, the letter demonstrates the Prophet’s willingness to show mercy by not confirming

was thirty-seven. (Bennett was thirty-six.) Second, Eliza was known for her strong character and firm moral views, making it less plausible that Bennett’s flattery or wooing would have been enticing. And third, despite second-hand accounts and persistent gossip, there is no firm evidence that Eliza was ever pregnant. Brian C. Hales, “Emma Smith, Eliza R. Snow, and the Reported Incident on the Stairs,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 41–53.

³²Joseph Smith, Letter to Vilate Kimball, March 2, 1841, holograph, in Helen Vilate Bourne Fleming Papers, MS 9670, Box 1, fd. 25, LDS Church History Library. Precisely why Joseph chose to write a letter rather than communicate directly with Vilate is unclear. He was present in Nauvoo on that date and presumably so was she.

³³Littlefield, *Reminiscences of Latter-day Saints*, 157–59; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 82 note 1. An alternate interpretation is that Francis Higbee was the actual perpetrator. Joseph Smith testified to personal knowledge that Higbee had “seduced a girl” although he did not specify the time of the seduction. “Municipal Court,” *Times and Seasons* 5 (May 15, 1844): 538–40.

the woman's misbehavior to Vilate and maintaining strict public silence concerning the incident.

BENNETT PRESENTED AS "ASSISTANT PRESIDENT"

Even if Bennett manifested immoral behavior in early 1841, the undercurrent of licentiousness did not immediately diminish his public stature. In fact, on April 8, 1841, he was presented as an "assistant president, until Pres't. Rigdon's health should be restored."³⁴ This surprising development can be read several different ways. Skeptics may assume that Joseph had confided in Bennett regarding polygamy or "spiritual wifery" and both were guilty of the same behaviors. According to this theory, Joseph elevated him to the First Presidency so that the two men could work more closely together in their endeavors. Then when Bennett rebelled, the Prophet sought to destroy his reputation by fabricating accusations against Bennett's morality.³⁵

Superficially, this interpretation may seem plausible. However, on closer examination, it appears that Bennett's advancement as an assistant to the First Presidency gave him a title that was devoid of authority, responsibility, or privileged access to Joseph Smith's private teachings. Interestingly, Rigdon felt well enough to resume his ecclesiastical duties only two months later in June 1841.³⁶

Available documents show that Bennett never formally functioned as a member of the First Presidency or as a counselor to them in any meaningful way. He seldom, if ever, met in private council with Joseph Smith or other Church leaders.³⁷ The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve met many times in the months immediately after the Twelve's July 1841 return from England. While no minutes of those meetings are available, multiple journal entries fail to list Ben-

³⁴"Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 2 (April 15, 1841): 387.

³⁵Richard S. Van Wagoner, "Sarah M. Pratt: The Shaping of an Apostate," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (Summer 1986): 71.

³⁶Untitled notice beginning "We have to announce. . .," *Times and Seasons* 2 (June 1, 1841): 431; *History of the Church*, 4:364.

³⁷George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 106; Andrew F. Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the Mormon Succession Question" (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1982), 56-60.

nett's presence at any of those gatherings.³⁸

Similarly, Joseph Smith's diary between December 13, 1841, and May 18, 1842, (when Bennett resigned as mayor) contains twenty-one references to Brigham Young, fifteen to Heber C. Kimball, thirteen to Willard Richards, eight to Hyrum Smith, seven to Sidney Rigdon, and five to William Law.³⁹ The context of these encounters varies from Joseph's teaching Brigham regarding the building of the temple on December 11 to a group meeting with Brigham, Heber C. Kimball, Willard Richards, and John Taylor on December 27 "instructing them in the principles of the kingdom."⁴⁰ Another example is that, on February 11, Joseph instructed Brigham and Willard to write a letter to discipline a rebellious elder.⁴¹ In contrast, Bennett's name appears only three times, twice in conjunction with public debates and once as assisting with publishing an article in the *Times and Seasons*.

Also, the *Times and Seasons* referred to several Church leaders as "president" many times during the year after Bennett was sustained as "Assistant President," yet the paper does not identify him as "president" even once. Instead, his titles are given as "general" (thirty-nine times), "mayor" (nineteen times), "doctor" (six times), and "chancellor" (five times), all of them titles he genuinely held because of his civic/professional offices but, arguably, all of them of less significance to the Saints than "Assistant President" would have been.⁴² In contrast, Joseph Smith was listed as "president" twenty-seven times and, while mentioned far fewer times than Bennett or Joseph, Hyrum

³⁸Elden Jay Watson, ed., *Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1801–1844* (Salt Lake City: Smith Secretarial Service, 1968) for the following dates: August 16, October 30, 31, November 28, 30, December 11, 12, 19, 26, 27, 1841; January 2, 17, 28, 29, 30, 31, March 1, 9, April 6, 12, 1842. Bennett may have been in council with the Prophet on February 13, 1842. See also February 15.

³⁹Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Volume 2, Journal, 1832–1842* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 335–84. In addition, John Taylor was mentioned eight times, Wilford Woodruff six, Newel K. Whitney five, William Marks four, and Orson Pratt three.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 2:345.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 2:303.

⁴²See the next twelve months of issues of the *Times and Seasons* after Vol. 2, no. 12 (April 15, 1841): 24, which announced Bennett's presentation

Smith was designated as "president" eight times, Sidney Rigdon twice, and William Law twice.⁴³

Bennett's biographer, Andrew F. Smith, concludes: "Despite the importance of his position, Bennett appears to have officiated at few public religious activities. He occasionally preached, and as mayor of Nauvoo he performed a few [civil] marriage ceremonies. He did serve as president pro tem in a special conference held on April 6, 1842, but otherwise he played little role in church conferences."⁴⁴

"THE ONLY SIN I EVER COMMITTED WAS IN EXERCISING SYMPATHY"

A second interpretation of Bennett's presentation as an assistant president to the First Presidency during Rigdon's illness asserts that, before the advancement, Bennett privately admitted his indiscretions and vowed to reform. For his part, Joseph responded by accepting his promises at face value (naively, as it turned out) but with sufficient misgivings to keep Bennett away from his councils and prevent his participation in any meaningful ecclesiastical activities. Concerning forgiveness, Joseph Smith taught the Relief Society in April 1842: "The sympathies of the heads of the Church have induced them to bear a long time with those who were corrupt until they are obliged to cut them off."⁴⁵

On May 8, 1844, Frances Higbee sued Joseph Smith in "plea of cause" claiming five thousand dollars damage. Joseph was taken into custody and told the court: "I want to testify to this court of what occurred a long time before John C. Bennet left his city."⁴⁶ The Prophet then described how Higbee had seduced a woman prior to the summer of 1842 when Bennett fled Nauvoo. Next, Joseph lamented, "The only sin I ever committed was in exercising sympathy and covering up their [the Higbees', Fosters', Laws' and Bennett's] iniquities, on their solemn promise to reform, and of this I am

as "assistant president."

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Andrew F. Smith, *The Saintly Scoundrel: The Life and Times of Dr. John Cook Bennett* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 62.

⁴⁵Andrew 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), 117.

⁴⁶"Municipal Court," *Times and Seasons* 5 (May 15, 1844): 538–40.

ashamed, and will never do so again.”⁴⁷

In fact, there is evidence that this may have happened, not only prior to Bennett’s sustaining as assistant president, but also several times during the next year prior to his excommunication and exit from Nauvoo. In his July 1842 general epistle published in the *Times and Seasons*, Joseph Smith stated: “I received a letter from Elder H. [Hyrum] Smith and Wm. [William] Law, who were then at Pittsburgh, Penn. This letter was dated June 15th [1842], and contained the particulars of a conversation betwixt them and a respectable gentleman from the neighborhood where Bennett’s wife and children resided. He stated to them that it was a fact that Bennett had a wife and children living, and that she had left him because of his ill treatment towards her.” While Joseph had essentially tabled George Miller’s report of substantially the same facts in mid-March, now he took action: “This letter was read to Bennett, which he did not attempt to deny; but candidly acknowledged the fact.”⁴⁸

Joseph Smith’s recollections, published after Bennett had left Nauvoo but before his letters to the *Sangamo Journal* were printed, undoubtedly carry biases as the Prophet was then attempting to deflect Bennett’s charges against him. Nevertheless, Lorenzo D. Wasson, Emma Smith’s nephew, recalled in a letter to Joseph and Emma in late July 1842: “I was reading in your chamber last summer [1841]—yourself [Joseph] and Bennett came into the lower room, and I heard you give J.C. Bennett a tremendous flagellation for practicing iniquity under the base pretence of authority from the heads of the Church—If

⁴⁷Manuscript History of the Church, May 8, 1844, in Richard E. Turley Jr., ed., *Selected Collections from the Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, [December] 2002), Vol. 1, DVD #1 (hereafter cited as *Selected Collections*); see also *History of the Church*, 6:360. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 144 note 5, summarize: “Bennett’s immoralities had come to the attention of the Prophet [by early 1841], but the latter, acting on a bleak hope of possible reformation of Bennett, deferred publicly exposing his counselor in the First Presidency.”

⁴⁸Joseph Smith, “To the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and to All the Honorable Part of Community,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (July 1, 1842): 840; *History of the Church*, 5:36–37.

you recollect I came down just before you were through talking.”⁴⁹ If Wasson is correct, the Prophet reprimanded Bennett sharply in the summer of 1841. Joseph Smith related the apparent aftermath of that confrontation:

Dr. Bennett made an attempt at suicide, by taking poison; but he being discovered before it had taken effect, and the proper antidotes being administered, he again recovered; but he very much resisted when an attempt was made to save him. The public impression was, that he was so much ashamed of his base and wicked conduct, that he had recourse to the above deed to escape the censures of an indignant community. It might have been supposed that these circumstances transpiring in the manner they did, would have produced a thorough reformation in his conduct.⁵⁰

Evidently, Joseph and others who were aware of the doctor's suicide attempt were sympathetic and kept the matter quiet. However, since no contemporaneous supportive documentation has been identified for this event, another interpretation is that Joseph Smith fabricated the story with the purpose of incriminating Bennett after the two had split.

Hyrum Smith also corroborated Bennett's willingness to ask forgiveness by recalling his statements before the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge. The lodge began holding meetings in January 1842;⁵¹ however, Hyrum identifies “about sixty present” in the meeting indicating that it was later in the year, probably after April.⁵² “I recollect Dr. Bennett asking forgiveness of the Lodge when there was about sixty present . . . the statement of Bennet was, that he was guilty, he was sorry and asked forgiveness, he said he had seduced six or seven, he

⁴⁹L. D. Wasson, Letter to Joseph and Emma Smith, July 30, 1842, in *Journal History*, July 30, 1842; photographic reproduction of typescript in Turley, *Selected Collections*, Vol. 2, DVD #1.

⁵⁰Joseph Smith, “To the Church of Jesus Christ,” 840.

⁵¹Michael W. Homer, *Joseph's Temples: The Dynamic Relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2014), 148.

⁵²Brady G. Winslow, “Irregularities in the Work of Nauvoo Lodge: Mormonism, Freemasonry, and Conflicting Interests on the Illinois Frontier,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 34, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2014): 643–65.

acknowledged it, and said if he was forgiven, he would not be guilty any more.”⁵³

Supporting the view that the Prophet was sincere in his claims to forgive is a September 8, 1842, diary entry penned in the midst of a war of words that erupted after Bennett’s exit from Nauvoo: “The next in consideration is John C. Bennett. I was his friend. I am yet his friend, as I feel myself bound to be a friend to all the sons of Adam; whether they are just or unjust, they have a degree of my compassion and sympathy. If he is my enemy, it is his own fault; and the responsibility rests upon his own head.”⁵⁴

RELIEF SOCIETY REACTIONS

Contemporaneous evidence describing the actions of Joseph Smith and John C. Bennett during 1841–42 regarding their extramarital behaviors and teachings is limited. However, several authors have alleged that statements made at meetings of the Relief Society in 1842 condemning immorality or in favor of extending mercy to sinners were reactions to Joseph Smith’s secret plural marriage teachings and practices.⁵⁵ Michael Homer wrote: “The Society was intended to protect Joseph and the church hierarchy from rumors that the prophet was teaching the doctrine of plural marriage.”⁵⁶ This interpretation is complicated by the fact that John C. Bennett was also advocating “spiritual wifery” during this period. Some observers may believe that Joseph’s celestial plural marriage and Bennett’s “wifery” were essentially the same thing, so distinguishing between the two is unnecessary. However, as discussed below, much evidence supports the view that the two processes were distinct, running parallel courses that never truly connected. If so, then assuming that Relief Society comments were reactions to Joseph Smith and his plural marriages may not be justified. The focus could have been Bennett’s misbehavior.

⁵³Hyrum Smith’s comment at the trial of Francis Higbee, May 6, 1844, quoted in “Municipal Court,” *Times and Seasons*, 5 (May 15, 1844): 539.

⁵⁴Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:463.

⁵⁵Cheryl Bruno, “Keeping a Secret: Freemasonry, Polygamy, and the Nauvoo Relief Society, 1842–44,” *Journal of Mormon History* 39, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 158–81; Homer, *Joseph’s Temples*, 181.

⁵⁶Homer, *Joseph’s Temples*, 181.

Available evidence indicates that, at the time of the organization of the Relief Society on March 17, 1842, Joseph Smith may have been the only authorized polygamist in Nauvoo. By that date he had been sealed to six women (Louisa Beaman, Zina Huntington, Presendia Huntington, Agnes Coolbrith, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, and Patty Bartlett). All of these women but Louisa were married at the time. I take the position that most of these unions were nonsexual, "eternity-only" sealings. It is true that Vinson Knight, Brigham Young, and Heber C. Kimball would each marry one plural wife in undated ceremonies before summer. However, their sealings appear to have been a reaction to an "early February" angelic visit to Joseph Smith commanding him and other LDS men to practice plural marriage.⁵⁷ Perhaps four or five weeks would have been sufficient for each of these men to teach and marry a polygamous wife, but more time may have been needed. Therefore, according to available documentation, there was no underground network of authorized polygamists for the Relief Society to react to in the spring of 1842, unless four men and four or five "time and eternity" plural wives constitute such a group. In contrast, the Nauvoo High Council trials at the end of May 1842 demonstrated that, throughout 1841 and early 1842, Bennett, his followers, and their victims comprised a much larger group.

More importantly, available evidence supports that most sisters in the Relief Society were unaware of Joseph's celestial marriage teachings or unions. Consequently, a majority of members would not have understood any public attempt to react to such teachings. The earliest documented date for Emma's introduction is a year later in the spring of 1843.⁵⁸ Other prominent Church leaders were equally unaware until 1843. For example, Hyrum Smith, Joseph's brother, Associate Church President, and Church Patriarch, did not learn of po-

⁵⁷See Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Letter to Emmeline B. Wells, summer 1905, MS 282, LDS Church History Library; photocopy of holograph in Linda King Newell Collection, Ms 447, Box 9, fd. 2, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, "Statement" signed February 8, 1902, Vesta Crawford Papers, copy, MS 125, Box 1, fd. 11, Marriott Library. Original owned by Mrs. Nell Osborne. See also Juanita Brooks Papers, Utah State Historical Society, MSB103, Box 16, fd. 13.

⁵⁸Brian C. Hales, "Emma's Awareness," letter to the editor, *Journal of Mormon History* 40, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 333.

lygamy until May 26, 1843.⁵⁹ Similarly, Joseph's second counselor in the First Presidency, William Law, became informed in mid-1843 as well.⁶⁰ Accordingly, it seems less likely that speeches made in Relief Society meetings would have included veiled references to authorized plural marriage since it involved so few participants and because knowledge of the doctrine had not spread to include even some of those men closest to the Prophet.

For example, during a Relief Society meeting on May 26, 1842, Joseph counseled that women "should be arm'd with mercy notwithstanding the iniquity among us. Said he had been instrumental in bringing it to light—melancholy and awful that so many are under the condemnation of the devil & going to perdition." Emma spoke next: "Mrs. Prest. rose and said all idle rumor and idle talk 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—all who walk disorderly must reform, and any knowing of heinous sins against the law of God, and refuse to expose them, becomes the offender—said she wanted none in this Society who had violated the laws of virtue."⁶¹

In their remarks Joseph asked for "mercy" and described himself as being "instrumental in bringing [the iniquity] to light." In turn, Emma sought to expose the "offenders." Were they in disagreement? One author affirmed that Joseph and Emma's remarks that day con-

⁵⁹William Clayton confirms date in his journal: "Hyrum received the doctrine of priesthood." George D. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 106; see also Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances," 56–60.

⁶⁰William Law, Affidavit, July 17, 1885, quoted in Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1914), 126.

⁶¹"A Book of Records, Containing the Proceedings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo," Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, March 17 1842–March 16, 1844, May 26, 1843; handwriting of Eliza R. Snow, Phebe M. Wheeler, Hannah M. Eells, and an unidentified scribe; 124 pp., LDS Church History Library. Includes redactions and archival marking, accessed November 13, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book?p=1&highlight=relief%20society%20minutes#!/paperSummary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book&p=48>. Hereafter cited as Nauvoo Relief Society.

firm a “wrestle” between them regarding polygamy.⁶² An alternate view is that they were united in stamping out Bennett’s debaucheries and that the Prophet’s secret plural marriages were not known to members of the Relief Society unless they were participating in the highly secret practice. That very week, between May 21 and 28, 1842, the Nauvoo High Council met several times to explore reports of adulteries instigated by Bennett and his followers. Among the women called to testify were Catherine Fuller Warren, Mary Hardman, Melinda Lewis, Caroline Butler, Matilda Nyman, Margaret Nyman, Polly Mecham, Polly Masheres, Melinda Lewis, and Maria Champlin.⁶³ Their testimonies incriminated others including Justus Morse, a Mrs. Barriss, George W. Thatcher, Lyman O. Littlefield, Joel S. Miles, Mrs. Alfred Brown, J. B. Backenstos, and Alexander McRay (McRae).⁶⁴

Many of the men and women whom the high council investigated repented of their transgressions or were innocent. They seem to be the most likely candidates for whom Joseph pled for “mercy” from Relief Society sisters. Importantly, the Prophet and other Nauvoo polygamy insiders considered plurality to be a commandment from God and never referred to it as “iniquity” or as a violation of “virtue.” From my research, I conclude that the vast majority of Church members who learned about the doctrine and practice from Joseph Smith eventually accepted it. It seems highly unlikely to me that participants would have discussed it publicly or in negative terms. However, both the authorized polygamists and uninformed devout Saints would have universally condemned Bennett’s adulteries. Accordingly, authors who assert that the Relief Society in 1842 was a forum for polygamy innuendos and disguised conflicts should bolster their argument by providing unambiguous supportive evidence and accounting for the lack of knowledge by key authorities during that same time period. In short, I conclude that Bennett’s depravities were sufficient to explain the Relief Society’s discussions

⁶²Bruno, “Keeping a Secret,” 174.

⁶³Nauvoo High Council, Minutes, May 21–28, 1842, LDS Church History Library; photocopy of holograph in Valeen Tippetts Avery Collection, MSS 316, Box 24, fd. 14, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan (hereafter Avery Collection); also John S. Dinger, ed., *The Nauvoo City and High Council Minutes* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011), 413–19.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

of immorality during those months.

BENNETT'S FINAL WEEKS

By May 1842, Joseph Smith was apparently ready to diminish Bennett's prominence and influence among the Saints. Many authors have listed May 11, 1842, as the day of his excommunication, quoting a notice with that date that was published on June 15.⁶⁵ However, a better case can be made that Bennett was cut off on June 18. Michael Marquardt has written:

The May 11, 1842 notice was not an excommunication. This notice is repeatedly used as though it is the date Bennett was excluded from the church. . . . There is no discussion regarding John C. Bennett's formal withdrawal. The records are clear that he withdrew from the church on May 17, 1842, and was finally excommunicated a month later. The May 11, 1842, document . . . was written by Willard Richards and signed by members of the presidency, some apostles, and the bishops. The signatures of three members of the Quorum of the Twelve were not their own. The following is a copy of John C. Bennett's withdrawal from the church:

May 17th 1842. Br. James Sloan; You will be so good as to permit Gen. Bennett to withdraw his Name from the Church Record, if he desires to do so, and this with the best of feelings towards you and General Bennett. Joseph Smith. In accordance with the above I have permitted General Bennett to withdraw his Membership from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints, this 17th day of May 1842. the best of feelings Subsisting between all Parties. City of Nauvoo. May 17th 1842. James Sloan. General Church Clerk & Recorder. (Copy) Genl. Bennett has the original, which was signed by Joseph Smith.⁶⁶

June 18, 1842, is the correct date of Bennett's excommunication. Bennett wrote a little over a week later, "On Saturday, the 18th of June,

⁶⁵"Notice," *Times and Seasons* 3 (June 15, 1842): 830.

⁶⁶Marquardt's citation for this note is: Letters Sent, Box 2, fd. 5, Joseph Smith Collection, LDS Church History Library. For John C. Bennett's printed copy, see Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 40–41, with the added notation the same day: "The above is a true copy from the original. Orson Pratt." When Bennett joined with James J. Strang he produced his withdrawal. "Conference Minutes," *Voree Herald* 1 (October 1846): 1.

I was excommunicated from this holy sect.”⁶⁷ The date is confirmed by a number of sources.⁶⁸

On May 18, Bennett swore an affidavit before non-Mormon Alderman, Daniel H. Wells, stating: “He never was taught any thing in the least contrary to the strictest principles of the Gospel, or of virtue, or of the laws of God, or man, under any circumstances, or upon any occasion either directly or indirectly, in word or deed, by Joseph Smith; and that he never knew the said Smith to countenance any improper conduct whatever, either in public or private; and that he never did teach to me in private that an illegal illicit intercourse with females was, under any circumstances, justifiable, and that I never knew him so to teach others.”⁶⁹

At a special meeting of the city council two days later, Bennett resigned as mayor and Joseph Smith was elected in his place.⁷⁰ While no official minutes were recorded for the first portion of the meeting, Joseph apparently asked the ex-mayor if he had anything against him.⁷¹ According to Joseph Smith’s journal, Bennett replied: “I publicly avow that any one who has said that I have stated that General Joseph Smith has given me authority to hold illicit intercourse with women is a Liar in the face of God. Those who have said it are damned

⁶⁷Marquardt’s citation: John C. Bennett, to the Editor of the Journal, Letter [No. 1], June 27, 1842, *Sangamo Journal*, July 8, 1842. See also Andrew Smith, *The Saintly Scoundrel*, 91.

⁶⁸See H. Michael Marquardt, “Review of Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 32, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2012): 255–56.

⁶⁹Reprinted in Joseph Smith, “To the Church of Jesus Christ,” 840–41. In *History of the Saints*, 287, Bennett later claimed that he made the affidavit under duress. His accusation was repudiated by an affidavit signed by thirteen men who were present when the affidavit was signed, saying Bennett was not under duress. “Affidavit of the City Council,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 19 (August 1, 1842): 869–70.

⁷⁰Dinger, *The Nauvoo City and High Council Minutes*, 84–86.

⁷¹See discussion in Andrew Smith, *The Saintly Scoundrel*, 87. Andrew Smith suggests that Bennett’s confession may have been “staged for public consumption” because Bennett was a candidate for the Illinois House of Representatives and wanted to avoid a public scandal.

Liars: they are infernal Liars. He never <eithe[r]> in public or private gave me any such authority or licence, & any person who states it is a Scoundrel & a Liar.”⁷²

According to accounts written weeks or even months later, on May 25 Joseph Smith gave Bennett his disfellowship notice dated May 11, with plans to publish it in the *Times and Seasons* at that time. The Prophet’s journal recorded that “the first Presidency. Twelve & Bishops had withdrawn fellowship from him & were about to publish him. but on his humbling himself & requesting it the withdrawal was withheld from the paper.”⁷³ The following day Bennett appeared before the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge where he confessed and “cried like a child, and begged that he might be spared in any possible way, so deep was his apparent sense of his guilt.”⁷⁴ Joseph’s scribe Willard Richards wrote: “Joseph plead [sic.] in his behalf.”⁷⁵ Unfortunately, lodge minutes do not record any of Bennett’s reported actions that day.⁷⁶

At this point, it appears that both Joseph and Bennett were willing to move forward without publicizing why Bennett had left the Church and resigned as mayor. Even after the numerous witnesses appeared before the Nauvoo High Council on May 21–28 with their damaging testimony, Bennett apparently intended to stay with the Saints and renew their confidence in him. As late as June 14, Bennett wrote a letter that was published in *The Wasp* on June 18 that was sup-

⁷²Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, Vol. 2 of the Journals Series of THE JOSEPH SMITH PAPERS (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), May 26, 1842, 60.

⁷³*Ibid.*, May 26, 1842, 63.

⁷⁴*Ibid.* This may have been the same meeting Hyrum Smith referred to above.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶H. Michael Marquardt, email to Brian Hales, November 10, 2014; Brady G. Winslow, email to Brian Hales, November 14, 2014. Both researchers examined the original Nauvoo Masonic Lodge minutes. Winslow, “Irregularities in the Work of Nauvoo Lodge: Mormonism, Freemasonry, and Conflict Interests on the Illinois Frontier,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 34, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2014): 58–79, analyzes editing changes that William Clayton made in the minutes when he copied the first minute book over into Minute Book 2, both at the LDS Church History Library.

portive of Joseph and the Church.⁷⁷

However something apparently caused Joseph Smith to change his mind about publishing Bennett's excommunication notification. The May 11 "Notice" was printed in the *Times and Seasons* on June 15: "The subscribers, members of the First Presidency of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, withdraw the hand of fellowship from General John C. Bennett, as a christian, he having been labored with from time to time, to persuade him to amend his conduct, apparently to no good effect."⁷⁸ At that point, all of Nauvoo learned that the rumors were true. Apparently, Bennett appeared before the Masonic lodge the next day. Joseph's journal records: "Special Lodge. John C. Bennet[t] made his defence for the last time."⁷⁹ No commentary is provided explaining why the Prophet would have known it was Bennett's "last" defense; but the statement was accurate. There were no additional pleas for leniency and no more offerings of forgiveness.

On June 18, Joseph spoke "near the Temple for a general meeting" with "many thousands" assembled according to Wilford Woodruff. "Among other subjects he spoke his mind in great plainness concerning the iniquity & wickedness of Gen John Cook Bennet, & exposed him before the public."⁸⁰ In addition, the very next issues of both *The Wasp* (printed June 25) and the *Times and Seasons* (printed July 1) published a long letter from Joseph Smith: "To the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and to All the Honorable Part of Community." Within it, the Prophet outlined Bennett's history (as he remembered it) and the problems and moral lapses Bennett had committed. Apparently aware of Bennett's ability to strike back, on June 26, Joseph prayed for deliverance from his enemies including "John

⁷⁷John C. Bennett, "Let Him that Readeth Understand," *The Wasp* 1, no. 10 (June 18, 1842): 1-3.

⁷⁸"Notice," *Times and Seasons* 3 (June 15, 1842): 830; the date of the notice is "May 11, 1842," undoubtedly the reason many writers have listed that date as the date of his excommunication.

⁷⁹Hedges, Smith, and Anderson, *Journals, Volume 2*, June 16, 1842, 67.

⁸⁰Scott G., Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833-1898*, typescript, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983-85), 2:179.

TABLE 1
JOHN C. BENNETT'S 1842 LETTERS
ALLEGING JOSEPH SMITH'S MISBEHAVIOR

<i>Letter Number</i>	<i>Date Written (1842)</i>	<i>Date Published (1842)</i>	<i>Location Where Written</i>	<i>Polygamy-Related Content</i>	<i>Reprinted in Book</i>
1	June 27	July 8	Nauvoo, Illinois	General accusations	—
2	July 2	July 15	Nauvoo, Illinois	Sarah Pratt account Nancy Rigdon account Bennett reports he saw Joseph Smith with Mrs. Catherine Fuller [Warren] Melinda Schindle affidavit	227–32 226–32 253 253
3	July 4		Carthage, Illinois	<i>History of the Saints</i> to be published	—
4	July 15	July 22	St. Louis, Missouri	Reference to letters from Springfield, Illinois, to Mrs. Emeline White signed “Old White Hat” Martha Brotherton’s lengthy account written two days earlier	232–36 236–41
5	July 23	August 19	River steam- er <i>Imposter</i>	[nothing about poly- gamy]	—
6	August 3		Erie Canal, boat <i>Nassau</i>	“Happiness” letter to Nancy Rigdon	243–45
[7- reprint from <i>Louis- ville Jour- nal</i> 1]	July 30	Sept- ember 2	Cleveland, Ohio	Claim of hierarchy of “Cloistered, Cham- bered, and Cyprian maids and maidens”	217–18
			Not included	Account of “Widow Miller”	255–56

C. Bennett.”⁸¹ By that point, Bennett had left Nauvoo abruptly on June 21 and thereafter actively fomented anti-Mormon sentiment throughout Illinois and on the East Coast.

Bennett's biographer asks: “One wonders why Smith acted against Bennett in mid-June and not earlier. Perhaps Smith expected or at least hoped that Bennett would leave Nauvoo quietly.”⁸² Another possibility mentioned above is that Joseph was too sympathetic. That is, he still held out hope that Bennett would repent and become obedient. Admittedly, this view is based on accounts that are almost exclusively from Joseph Smith and his supporters, whose biases are clearly shown. However, these and other sources could support a repeating dynamic of Bennett's transgressions, pleas for forgiveness, and the extension of mercy with the Prophet offering Bennett yet another chance to comply. This pattern would be consistent with Joseph's 1844 regrets about “exercising sympathy and covering up their [the Higbees', Fosters', Laws', and Bennett's] iniquities, on their solemn promise to reform.”⁸³

Had John C. Bennett quietly departed from Nauvoo leaving the flurry of accusations to fade through the passage of time, the remainder of Joseph Smith's life might have been dramatically altered. However, Bennett was a general in the armed forces with military training. He was not inclined to walk away from a fight. Months later he wrote: “He [Joseph Smith] has awakened the wrong passenger . . . and must suffer.”⁸⁴ John C. Bennett commanded a formidable armada of personal resources and was willing to recruit them to combat his new enemy—Joseph Smith.⁸⁵

⁸¹Ibid., June 26, 1842, 68.

⁸²Andrew Smith, *The Saintly Scoundrel*, 91.

⁸³Manuscript History of the Church, May 8, 1844, in *Selected Collections*, Vol. 1, DVD #1; see also *History of the Church*, 6:360.

⁸⁴John C. Bennett, Letter to Sidney Rigdon and Orson Pratt, erroneously dated January 10, 1842. It was undoubtedly penned one year later. Typescript in Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (chronological scrapbook of typed entries and newspaper clippings, 1830–present), LDS Church History Library, http://churchhistorylibrary.lds.org/primo_library/libweb/custom/CHL/pages/collections.jsp.

⁸⁵See discussion in Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 317 and note.

BENNETT'S KNOWLEDGE OF SOME DETAILS OF POLYGAMY

A review of Bennett's writings demonstrates that he had accurate knowledge of some details about Joseph Smith's plural marriages. About six weeks after Bennett's departure from Nauvoo, he began publishing letters that appeared between July 8 and September 2, claiming intimate knowledge of Joseph Smith's private teachings regarding plural marriage. (See Table 1.) He expanded these charges in his *The History of the Saints: Or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), published in November 1843.

On the topic of polygamy, Bennett made an especially impressive declaration identifying several of Joseph Smith's plural wives in a way that makes it possible to reconstruct most of their names: "I will semi-state two or more cases, among the vast number, where Joe Smith was privately married to his spiritual wives—in the case of Mrs. A**** S****, by Apostle Brigham Young; and in that of Miss L***** B*****, by Elder Joseph Bates Noble. Then there are the cases of Mrs. B****, Mrs. D*****, Mrs. S*****, Mrs. G*****, Miss B***** etc. etc."⁸⁶

In this single paragraph, Bennett successfully identified several of Joseph Smith's plural wives through the device of using their initials: Mrs. A**** S**** is Agnes Coolbrith Smith, sealed to Joseph January 6, 1842, by Brigham Young. Miss L***** B***** is Louisa Beaman, sealed April 5, 1841, by Joseph B. Noble. Mrs. B**** is Presendia Huntington Buell, sealed December 11, 1841. Mrs. D***** is probably Elizabeth Davis Durfee, sealing date ca. 1842, while Mrs. S***** is Patty Sessions, sealed on March 9, 1842.⁸⁷ (To date, no one has convincingly identified whom Bennett might have meant by "Mrs. G" and "Miss B.")

John C. Bennett also obtained a private letter that Joseph Smith had sent to Nancy Rigdon in an attempt to present a context in which plural marriage would be more comprehensible. Nancy's father, Sidney Rigdon, first counselor in the First Presidency, may have been the primary audience for its teachings. The letter begins, "Happiness is the

⁸⁶Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 256.

⁸⁷Ibid. For the sealing officiators, see Noble, Affidavit, June 26, 1869, in Joseph F. Smith Affidavit Books, 1:3, 4:1; and Brigham Young, Journal, January 6, 1842, both in LDS Church History Library.

object and design of our existence . . .”⁸⁸ According to George W. Robinson, this letter fell into the hands of Francis M. Higbee, who was at the time courting Nancy. Francis gave it to his brother Chauncey who delivered it to Bennett.⁸⁹ Bennett published it his August 19, 1842, letter to the *Sangamo Journal* and reprinted it in *The History of the Saints*.

Bennett also published two affidavits in *The History of the Saints*, one from Martha Brotherton and another from Melissa Schindle, which implicate Joseph Smith and others in either illicit sexual interactions or polygamy.⁹⁰ Also included were several letters and certificates that were peripherally related to Nauvoo plural marriage, written by Emeline White, George W. Robinson, J. F. Olney, Francis M. Higbee, Chauncey L. Higbee, and “Old White Hat.”⁹¹ He also printed four certificates—from Carlos Gove, Sidney Rigdon, George W. Robinson, and Henry Marks.⁹²

A review of these sources identifies only one item that reflects personal familiarity with Joseph Smith’s plural marriages: John C. Bennett’s ability to name five of the Prophet’s plural wives. The other documents required no participation from the Prophet to produce or acquire.

PROBLEMS WITH MOST OF BENNETT’S POLYGAMY CLAIMS

John C. Bennett’s publications purport to describe plural marriage as he believed it was being practiced when he left Nauvoo in June 1842. Throughout his writings he consistently referred to polygamy as “spiritual wifery,”⁹³ a term used by other religionists of previous centuries but which Bennett himself apparently first introduced

⁸⁸“Sixth Letter from John C. Bennett,” *Sangamo Journal*, August 19, 1842, rpt. in Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 243–45; *History of the Church*, 5:134; and Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 256.

⁸⁹George W. Robinson, Letter to John C. Bennett, July 3, 1842, in Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 44.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 236, 253.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 232, 235, 245, 247–49, 261, 262. I have found no evidence that J. F. Olney was related to the better-known Oliver Olney.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 251–52.

⁹³Foster, “Between Two Worlds,” 204, observed that “spiritual wif-

into the Mormon community.⁹⁴ Available records indicate that the Prophet described plural marriage as “the new and everlasting covenant of marriage” and as an “order of the priesthood” but never as “spiritual wifery.”⁹⁵ Church leaders worked to distinguish the two in the minds of Church members, although they were not always successful.⁹⁶

Joseph Smith taught that celestial marriage was a restoration of Old Testament polygamy like that practiced by Abraham and Jacob.⁹⁷ Bennett’s “spiritual wifery” would have been considered adultery under Old Testament standards (Gen. 39:9; Exod. 20:14). The revelation on celestial and plural marriage, dictated by Joseph Smith (now LDS D&C 132), contains no mention of either “spiritual” or “wifery.” Bennett did not use, in any combination, Joseph’s actual terminology mixed with his own, such as “everlasting wifery,” “celestial wifery,” “eternal wifery,” or “spiritual marriage.” Bennett’s terminology had virtually no theological content. “Spiritual wifery” created “spiritual wives” who could have sex with men who became their spiritual husbands so long as they kept the union a secret. The spiritual wifery and spiritual husbandhood meant nothing after the liaison unless the couple decided to re-create their secret sexual union at some future time.

ery” was, in some parts of the country in the 1820s “a catchall suggesting rationalized infidelity.”

⁹⁴John L. Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 56.

⁹⁵Joseph Smith is known to have employed the term only once—on October 15, 1843; see also Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 257.

⁹⁶Hyrum Smith, April 8, 1844, Discourse, in *Selected Collections*, Vol. 1, DVD #1, Vol. 6, 1984–91. Demonstrating the confusion that sometimes existed, Emily D. Partridge Young observed in 1883: “In the days of Nauvoo the holy order of celestial marriage was in its infancy; it was not taught publicly, consequently the people generally did not know of it. . . . Spiritual wives, as we were then termed, were not very numerous in those days, and a spiritual baby was a rarity indeed.” Emily D. Partridge Young, “Pioneer Day,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12 (August 1, 1883): 37.

⁹⁷Joseph A. Kelting, “Statement,” Joseph F. Smith, Affidavits, LDS Church History Library, MS 3423, fd. 2, images 11–16a; see also Joseph A. Kelting, “Statement,” *Juvenile Instructor* 29 (May 1, 1894): 289–90; Orson Pratt, October 7, 1869, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1855–86), 13:193.

Characteristic of Joseph's teachings were a sword-bearing messenger⁹⁸ and/or discussion of the biblical practice in the time of the patriarchs. Bennett's approach lacked any such religious component. According to Catherine Fuller, Bennett approached her with a straight-forward proposition for sex only a week after they first met. On May 25, 1842, she testified to the Nauvoo High Council:

Nearly a year ago I became acquainted with John C. Bennett, after visiting twice and on the third time he proposed unlawful intercourse being about one week after first acquaintance. He said he wished his desires granted. I told him it was contrary to my feelings he assured me there was others in higher standing than I was who would conduct in that way and there was no harm in it. He said there should be no sin upon me if there was any sin[,] it should come upon himself. . . . John C. Bennett was the first man that seduced me—no man ever made the attempt before him.⁹⁹

In *History of the Saints*, but not in his earlier letters, Bennett created three different "orders" into which spiritual wives were ranked in what he called the "Grand Lodge" or "Mormon Seraglio."

1. Cyprian Saints wore a white veil. "The members of the Female Relief Society, who are ever upon the watch for victims, have the power, when they know, or even suspect, that any Mormon female has, however, slightly, lapsed from the straight path of virtue . . . is immediately, by the council, pronounced a Cyprian, and is excluded from any further connection with the Relief Society. . . . [H]er name and failing are stealthily promulgated among the *trustworthy* members of the Church at whose command she is, for licentious purposes, forever after."

2. The Chambered Sisters of Charity were attired in green veils. "This order comprises that class of females who indulge their sensual propensities, without restraint, whether married or single, by the express permission of the Prophet. . . . [They] are much more numerous than the *Cyprian Saints*. This results naturally from the greater re-

⁹⁸Brian C. Hales, "Encouraging Joseph Smith to Practice Plural Marriage: The Accounts of the Angel with a Drawn Sword," *Mormon Historical Studies* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 23–39.

⁹⁹Catherine Fuller, Testimony before the Nauvoo High Council, May 25, 1842; photocopy of holograph, Valeen Tippetts Avery Collection, MSS 316, Box 24, fd. 14, Merrill-Cazier Library.

spectability of their order.”

3. Consecratees of the Cloister or Cloistered Saints wore black. “This degree is composed of females whether married or unmarried, who, by an express grant and gift of God, through his Prophet the Holy Joe, are set apart and consecrated to the use and benefit of particular individuals as *secret, spiritual wives*. . . . When an Apostle, High Priest, Elder, or Scribe, conceives an affection for a female, and he has satisfactorily ascertained that she experiences a mutual flame, he communicates confidentially to the Prophet his *affaire du Coeur* and requests him to inquire of the Lord.”¹⁰⁰

No man or woman who was taught about polygamy by Joseph Smith describes any such orders, names, colored veils, or functions. Nor does Joseph Smith’s plural marriage theology refer, even tangentially, to such polygamy orders or colored veils. Lawrence Foster speculates that “‘wives and concubines’ could well correspond to Bennett’s two upper levels of plural wives.”¹⁰¹ However, there is no evidence of women being designated as “concubines” or of a marriage ceremony involving “concubines” being practiced in Nauvoo. Furthermore, neither before nor after Joseph’s death has there been any official sanction of concubinage in the Church. Heber C. Kimball declared in a meeting of the Twelve on December 21, 1847: “[T]here has been a doctrine taut—if a man & woman makes a Cov[enan]t. they have a right to connect themselves—[but] this is wrong—I have mentioned it scores of times, [that] they commit Adultery.”¹⁰² The closest possible parallel is Joseph’s authorization of three types of sealings:

¹⁰⁰Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 220–25; emphasis his.

¹⁰¹Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 173.

¹⁰²*Minutes of the Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1835–1893* (Salt Lake City: Privately published, 2010), 157; also on *New Mormon Studies: A Comprehensive Resource Library*, CD-ROM (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1998). This sentiment may contrast with private counsel given decades later on April 5, 1894, in a meeting of the First Presidency and Twelve when George Q. Cannon, a counselor in the First Presidency, stated: “I believe in concubinage, or some plan whereby men and women can live together under sacred ordinances and vows until they can be married. Thus our surplus girls can be cared for, and the law of God to multiply and replenish the earth be fulfilled. There is the danger of wicked men taking license from such a condition.” In the same meeting, Lorenzo

TABLE 2
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JOSEPH SMITH'S PLURAL MARRIAGE AND
JOHN C. BENNETT'S "SPIRITUAL WIFERY"

	<i>Joseph Smith</i>	<i>John C. Bennett</i>
Name(s) of Relationship	New and Everlasting Covenant of Marriage or Order of the Priesthood	Spiritual Wifery
Restoration of Old Testament polygamy	Yes	No
Angel with a sword commanding?	Yes	No
Ceremony required?	Yes	No
Priesthood authority required?	Yes	No
Worthiness required?	Yes	No
Husband-wife marriage relationship established?	Yes	No
Eternal relationship formed?	Yes	No
"No sin where there was no accuser" argument?	No	Yes
Polyandrous sexual relations permitted?	No	Yes
Need to keep relationship completely secret?	No	Yes
Three orders of polygamous wives?	No	Yes

Snow commented: "I have no doubt but concubinage will yet be practiced in this Church, but I had not thought of it in this connection. When the nations are troubled good women will come here for safety and blessing, and men will accept them as concubines." Church President Wilford Woodruff seemingly agreed: "If men enter into some practice of this character to raise a righteous posterity, they will be justified in it." Abraham H. Cannon, Diary, April 5, 1894, in Dennis B. Horne, *An Apostle's Record: The Journals of Abraham H. Cannon* (Clearfield, Utah: Gnolaum Books, 2004), 314–15.

for time only, for time and eternity, or for eternity only.¹⁰³ However, identifying any additional similarities between those covenanted marriage relationships and Bennett's various "orders" that were focused exclusively on status and sexuality is difficult.

In Bennett's description, "Cyprian,"¹⁰⁴ "Chambered," and "Cloistered" Saints required no marriage ceremonies. In most ways, it seems that Bennett's "spiritual wives" were "wives" primarily in the sense of sexual gratification. In contrast, Joseph Smith's plural marriages required that sealing ceremonies be performed by special priesthood power, and he designated non-authorized unions as adultery (D&C 132:41–42). Authorization to enter in such a sealing was at the sole discretion of the "one man" (Joseph Smith) holding sealing keys he had received through ordination (D&C 132:7). Even correct ceremonial language and deep sincerity on the part of the participants was insufficient to overcome the lack of proper priesthood authority (D&C 132:18). These plural marriage ceremonies were designed to create genuine husband-wife relationships that would endure for eternity (D&C 132:19–20).

John C. Bennett's "spiritual wifery" allowed a woman to be sexually active with more than one man, thus creating a "polyandrous" wifery situation. The revelation canonized as LDS Doctrine and Covenants 132 condemned such relations (D&C 132:42, 63). Bennett's relations did not obligate the participants to accept familial responsibilities, instead focusing exclusively on the sexual act. These physical unions produced no commitments between the man and woman. A possible exception is that one of Bennett's followers paid his "spiritual wife" two dollars after their sexual encounter,¹⁰⁵ but how this payment was different from simple prostitution is not clear.

Bennett's claims also suffer from factual errors. He refers to

¹⁰³John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations: Aids to Faith in a Modern Day*, 3 vols., 1943–51; rpt. in one vol., G. Homer Durham, comp. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 340; Francis Gibbons, *Joseph Smith: Seeker after Truth, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1951), 240.

¹⁰⁴"Cyprian" does not appear in Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language; Exhibiting the Origin, Orthography, Pronunciation, and Definitions of Words*, 3rd ed. (New York: S. Converse, 1830). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) defines "cyprian" as "licentious, lewd; in 18–19th century applied to prostitutes."

¹⁰⁵Catherine Fuller testified: "J. B. Backenstos has also been at my

Emma Smith as: "Lady Abbess of the Seraglio, or 'Mother of the Maids.'"¹⁰⁶ In fact, Emma did not accept "time and eternity" plural marriages until 1843 and then her support vacillated.

To summarize, Joseph Smith's "new and everlasting covenant of marriage" or "order of the priesthood" had seven characteristics—none of which Bennett's spiritual wifery system shared: it restored Old Testament polygamy, was commanded by an angelic messenger, required a ceremony, required an officiator with proper priesthood authority, required that both spouses be worthy, and established a husband-wife marriage as an eternal relationship. Bennett's spiritual wifery had four characteristics, none of which overlapped with Joseph Smith's. (See Table 2.)

Most significantly, Bennett claimed that there was "no sin where there was no accuser" and, as a parallel, required that the relationship remain completely secret, described three orders of spiritual wives, and allowed polyandrous sexual relations.

JOHN C. BENNETT'S CONTROVERSIAL CLAIMS

Between the contradictory teachings analyzed above are other statements from Bennett that are more controversial. In his book and letters, he recounted private conversations and transactions that he could have known only if he had been Joseph Smith's personal confidant. Specifically Bennett alleged having intimate knowledge of Joseph's involvement with "Widow Fuller—Now Mrs. Warren," who was discussed above.¹⁰⁷ Bennett added two additional names: "Widow Miller," whom he described as "one of Joe's most notorious Cyprian Saints."¹⁰⁸ However, as discussed above, no known account from Nauvoo but Bennett's describes orders like "Cyprian Saints." Also, testimony from the purported victim, Sarah Miller, directly contradicted Bennett's charges. She declared that she "had heard no such teaching from Joseph . . . but that it was

house . . . gave me two dollars." Catherine Fuller testimony before the Nauvoo High Council, May 25, 1842; copy of holograph in Avery Collection, MSS 316, Box 24, fd. 14.

¹⁰⁶Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 227.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 234, 241, 253, 255.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 255–56.

wicked to commit adultery, etc.”¹⁰⁹ Bennett also quoted a letter from “Old White Hat,” Joseph Smith’s alleged alias, to a woman “Emeline White.”¹¹⁰ The text contains over-the-top statements, unfulfillable promises, and a reckless openness that contradict Joseph’s teachings and documented behaviors. Few serious historians have considered this letter authentic.

Nancy Rigdon

Bennett’s alleged involvement with Nancy Rigdon may be better known because, as mentioned, Joseph wrote a letter that he hoped would change her rejection of plural marriage. Bennett asserted, “Knowing that I had much influence with Mr. Rigdon’s family, Joe Smith said to me, one day last summer [1841], when riding together over the lawn in Nauvoo, ‘If you will assist me in procuring Nancy [Rigdon] as one of my spiritual wives, I will give you five hundred dollars, or the best lot on Main Street.’”¹¹¹ This account is implausible for four reasons. First, Bennett presents himself as a model of propriety and circumspection, even though the testimony of others, as discussed above, shows him as unabashedly sensual and not even particularly subtle about his seductions. Second, he quotes Joseph Smith as using “spiritual wife” to refer to a plural spouse, which makes him the only person to assert that the Prophet ever employed the term when discussing celestial marriage. Third, it is unlikely that the Prophet could have made such an exorbitant payment or had access to such funds in Nauvoo which, though experiencing a real-estate boom, was cash-strapped. And fourth, why would Joseph need Bennett’s help as he had successfully proposed to half a dozen women without Bennett’s assistance?

Sarah Bates Pratt

Bennett provides another example: “Joe Smith told me, *confi-*

¹⁰⁹Sarah Miller, testimony before the Nauvoo High Council, May 24, 1842, copy of holograph, and Nauvoo High Council, Minutes, August 24, 1842, both in Avery Collection, MSS 316, Box 24, fd. 14; also quoted in “History of Joseph Smith,” *Millennial Star* 23 (October 12, 1861): 657–59.

¹¹⁰John C. Bennett, “Gen. Bennett’s 4th Letter,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 22, 1842; rpt., in Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 235.

¹¹¹Bennett, “For the Sangamo Journal,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 2, 1842; rpt. in Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 241.

entially, during the absence of her husband, that he intended to make Mrs. [Sarah] Pratt one of his *spiritual wives*, one of the *Cloistered Saints*, for the Lord had given her to him as a special favor for his faithfulness and zeal; and, as I had influence with her, he desired me to assist him in the consummation of his hellish purposes."¹¹² According to Bennett, who claimed to have been present during the meeting with Sarah, Joseph proposed: "Sister Pratt, the Lord has given you to me as one of my spiritual wives. I have the blessings of Jacob granted me, as he granted holy men of old, and I have long looked upon you with favor, and hope you will not deny me." She replied: "I care not for the blessings of Jacob, and I believe in no such revelations, neither will I consent under any circumstances. I have one good husband, and that is enough for me."¹¹³ In 1886, anti-Mormon Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal, writing under the pseudonym of Wilhelm Wyl, quoted Sarah as telling him this version of the events:

When my husband went to England as a missionary, he got the promise from Joseph that I should receive provisions from the tithing-house.¹¹⁴ Shortly afterward Joseph made his propositions to me and they enraged me so that I refused to accept any help from the tithing-house or from the bishop. Having been always very clever and very busy with my needle, I began to take in sewing for the support of myself and children, and succeeded soon in making myself independent. When Bennett came to Nauvoo, Joseph brought him to my house, stating that Bennett wanted some sewing done, and that I should do it for the doctor. I assented and Bennett gave me a great deal of work to do. He knew that Joseph had his plans set on me; Joseph made no secret of them before Bennett, and went so far

¹¹²Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 228; emphasis his.

¹¹³John C. Bennett, "Bennett's Second and Third Letters," *Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1842; edited version printed in Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 228–31; [author unidentified], "Workings of Mormonism related by Mrs. Orson Pratt," holograph, MS 4048, 1–3, LDS Church History Library; W. Wyl [pseud. of Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal], *Mormon Portraits, or the Truth about Mormon Leaders from 1830 to 1886, Joseph Smith the Prophet, His Family and His Friends: A Study Based on Fact and Documents* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing, 1886), 61.

¹¹⁴The Twelve Apostles left for England on April 26, 1839, from Far West, Missouri (D&C 118:5). At that time, the Church had no tithing office and Nauvoo had not yet been chosen as the next gathering place.

in his impudence as to make propositions to me in the presence of Bennett, his bosom friend. Bennett, who was of a sarcastic turn of mind, used to come and tell me about Joseph to tease and irritate me.¹¹⁵

These reports are not corroborated by other witnesses than Bennett and Sarah Pratt, but stories from those two are generally consistent with each other and claim, among other things, that Joseph Smith sought an illicit relationship with Sarah.

However, a counter-story that Bennett and Sarah Pratt were having an affair is substantiated by five documents. In August of 1842, non-Mormon.¹¹⁶ J. B. Backenstos, signed an affidavit charging “Doctor John C. Bennett, with having an illicit intercourse with Mrs. Orson Pratt, and some others, when said Bennett replied that she made a first rate go, and from personal observations I should have taken said Doctor Bennett and Mrs. Pratt as man and wife, had I not known to the contrary.”¹¹⁷ Sarah Pratt boarded with Stephen H. Goddard and his wife in 1841. In a letter to Orson Pratt dated July 23, 1842, Stephen claimed: “She could let a certain man smack upon her mouth and face half a dozen times or more in my house without making up the first wry face.”¹¹⁸ Ebenezer Robinson reported in 1890: “In the spring of 1841 Dr. Bennett had a small neat house built for Elder Orson Pratt’s family [Sarah and one male child] and commenced boarding with them. Elder Pratt was absent on a mission to England.”¹¹⁹ John D. Lee recalled: “He [John C. Bennett] became intimate with Orson Pratt’s wife, while Pratt was on a mission. That he built her a fine

¹¹⁵Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 61.

¹¹⁶Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 477.

¹¹⁷“Affidavit of J. B. Backenstos,” *Affidavits and Certificates, Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett’s Letters*, Nauvoo, Illinois, August 31, 1842. These affidavits have been listed as an “Extra” and were printed as a single, two-sided sheet on the Church’s printing press. Catherine Fuller testified that both J. B. Backenstos and Bennett had approached her.

¹¹⁸Stephen H. Goddard, Letter to Orson Pratt, July 23, 1842, published in *ibid.*

¹¹⁹Ebenezer Robinson, *The Return* (St. Louis) 1, no. 11 (November 1890): 362.

frame house, and lodged with her, and used her as his wife."¹²⁰ Another Nauvooan recalled that Joseph Smith tried to intervene to discourage intimacy between Sarah and Bennett. Mary Ettie V. Coray Smith,¹²¹ although a sometimes confused author, related a story consistent with the rest:

Orson Pratt, then, as now [1858], one of the "Twelve," was sent by Joseph Smith on a mission to England. During his absence, his first (i.e., his lawful) wife, Sarah, occupied a house owned by John C. Bennett, a man of some note, and at that time, quartermaster-general of the Nauvoo Legion. Sarah was an educated woman, of fine accomplishments, and attracted the attention of the Prophet Joseph, who called upon her one day, and alleged he found John C. Bennett in bed with her. As we lived but across the street from her house we heard the whole uproar. Sarah ordered the Prophet out of the house, and the Prophet used obscene language to her.¹²²

Sometime later on July 14, 1842, visitors reportedly heard Joseph Smith refer to Sarah Pratt as a "whore from her mother's breast."¹²³

Like Bennett's allegations, these counter-charges were produc-

¹²⁰John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled* (St. Louis: Byron, Brand, 1877), 148.

¹²¹Mary Ettie is a problematic source due to many credibility weaknesses. However, her recollection coincides with the other witnesses so it is included here. Anti-Mormon Fanny Stenhouse said of Mary Ettie's book: "Much has already been written on this subject [polygamy] much that is in accordance with facts, and much that is exaggerated and false. Hitherto, with but one exception [Mrs. Ettie V. Smith is footnoted as the author referred to] that of a lady who wrote very many years ago, and who in her writings, so mixed up fiction with what was true, that it was difficult to determine where the one ended and the other began no woman who really was a Mormon and lived in Polygamy ever wrote the history of her own personal experience. Mrs. T.B.H. [Fanny] Stenhouse, *"Tell It All": The Story of a Life's Experience in Mormonism* (Hartford, Conn.: A. D. Worthington & Company, 1875 [1874]), 618.

¹²²Nelson Winch Green, *Fifteen Years among the Mormons: Being the Narrative of Mrs. Mary Ettie V. Smith* (New York: D. W. Evans, 1860; rpt. by Kessinger Publishing), 31.

¹²³Quoted in John C. Bennett, "A Rumor—Holy Joe Demanded," *Sangamo Journal*, July 29, 1842.

ed after the fact, and the advantages of attacking both Sarah's and Bennett's credibility are obvious during the heated events spiraling out of control that summer. Clearly both sides had their own agendas to advance.

Months later in a meeting of the Twelve Apostles dated January 20, 1843, Joseph Smith told Orson: "[Sarah] lied about me. I never made the offer which she said I did."¹²⁴ In 1845, Sidney Rigdon interviewed Orson Pratt and concluded that Orson was "literally telling the people that all Smith said about his wife was true." Rigdon added: "He has left on the character of his wife a stain, by this degraded condescension, that he can never wash out. . . . Pratt is determined to make us believe it, by virtually declaring it was true; for if he was wrong when he called Smith a liar, then his wife was guilty of the charges preferred."¹²⁵

Unsolicited Kisses

Bennett is also the only writer to allege that Joseph Smith or Brigham Young tried to kiss their intended plural wives. He claimed, "He [Joseph Smith] then attempted to kiss her [Nancy Rigdon], and desired her to kiss him."¹²⁶ Similarly, Bennett asserted that on another occasion Joseph "stealthily approached and kissed her [Sarah Pratt]."¹²⁷ Sarah never corroborated this story, despite having many opportunities to do so and making many allegations of her own.¹²⁸ In the case of Brigham Young's awkward courtship of Martha Brotherton, she put him off, saying she needed time to consider it, at which

¹²⁴*Minutes of the Apostles of the Church*, 15; also on *New Mormon Studies: A Comprehensive Resource Library*, CD-ROM (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1998).

¹²⁵Sydney Rigdon, "Tour East," *Messenger and Advocate of the Church of Christ* (Pittsburgh), December 1845, 1.

¹²⁶Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 243. Apparently this episode appears only in the book.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, 231.

¹²⁸See Sarah Pratt's numerous comments as "Mrs. P." in Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 10, 16–17, 22–23, 27–28, 33–34, 41–42, 53–56, 59–63, 72–73, 89–90.

point, Brigham reportedly said: "I will have a kiss, any how."¹²⁹ Since Bennett helped Brotherton prepare her affidavit, he had both motivation and opportunity to enhance the sensationalism of the account.

However, undercutting the credibility of seeing Joseph and Brigham attempting to embrace their allegedly unwilling prospective brides are other accounts denying that Joseph engaged in premarital physical affection. Emily Partridge, providing a deposition almost fifty years later in the Temple Lot, spoke directly to this point. The interrogator asked, did Joseph Smith ever "lay his hand on your shoulder?" or "put his arm around you?" or "offer to take your hand then?" Emily rejected all three descriptions, even though as much as a year may have passed between Joseph's first broaching the subject to Emily and their eventual sealing: "He never did for he was not that kind of a man. He was a gentleman in every way and did not indulge in liberties like that . . . not before we was married."¹³⁰ Brigham Young, speaking in a meeting of the Twelve on November 30, 1847, recalled that Joseph insisted on strict propriety between the apostles and their unmarried women converts who came to Nauvoo from England: "Joseph never allowed the 12 nor any man . . . [to] touch them nor put our arms round them."¹³¹

Unbelievable Accusations

Bennett let out all stops in a torrent of accusations against Church leaders: "It appears from the mass of evidence . . . that the Mormon Hierarchy are guilty of infidelity, deism, atheism; lying, deception, blasphemy; debauchery, lasciviousness, bestiality; madness, fraud, plunder; larceny, burglary, robbery, perjury; fornication, adultery, rape, incest; arson, treason, and murder."¹³² Since he includes virtually every sin and crime in the catalogue (I can think of only cannibalism and forgery as missing), the credibility of any specific charge is greatly reduced by the company it is keeping.

¹²⁹Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 238.

¹³⁰Emily Partridge, Deposition, Temple Lot transcript, respondent's testimony (Part 3), 357–58, questions 148–54, 179–85. Emily also specifically denied that she and Joseph had sexual relations before their sealing. *Ibid.*, Part 3, 371, questions 481–84.

¹³¹*Minutes of the Apostles*, 121, also 126.

¹³²Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 257.

BENNETT'S IGNORANCE OF "MARRYING FOR ETERNITY"

Evaluating the possible accuracy of Bennett's controversial statements is facilitated by first assessing his actual proximity to Joseph Smith and his private teachings. The fact that he knew the identities of some of the Prophet's plural wives could be evidence that the two had personally spoken on the subject. However, it is also possible that his source was Nancy Rigdon and her suitor Francis Higbee, who was Bennett's close associate. The erotic titillation, heightened by gossip and rumors of plural marriage that had some basis in fact, and intensified by the lure of secret-making and secret-keeping could have easily seemed appealing to the curious and confused. Bennett provided medical care to Nancy Rigdon when she was sick in early 1842¹³³ and could easily have become aware of Sidney Rigdon's negative reaction to plurality. Also, Higbee was the link transmitting Joseph's "happiness" letter from Nancy to Bennett.¹³⁴ Bennett's flow of information appears to have stopped sometime after March 9, 1842 (the latest marriage date of the plural wives listed). Joseph's next plural marriage (to Marinda Johnson Hyde) occurred in April 1842 and was not included on Bennett's list.¹³⁵ The Prophet proposed plural marriage to Nancy on April 9, 1842, and may have told Nancy of a few of his previous sealings as an attempt to persuade her that the practice was legitimate. Thus, she could have passed the information on to Bennett, either directly or indirectly.

Tellingly, however, Bennett's lurid description of "spiritual wifery" that greatly contrasted with Joseph Smith's teachings about plural and eternal marriage suggests that Joseph had never directly explained the principle to Bennett. On October 28, 1843, more than a year after he had published his series of six letters in *Sangamo Journal*, Bennett published an additional letter in the Burlington, Iowa, *Hawk Eye*, then being edited by James G. Edwards. Bennett's first paragraph reads:

¹³³"Certificate of General George W. Robinson," September 3, 1842, reproduced in Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 252.

¹³⁴Robinson, "Certificate," in Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 252. On p. 245, Bennett wrote: "It was handed me by Colonel F. M. Higbee, in the presence of General George W. Robinson."

¹³⁵See the final entry in Joseph Smith's journal, July 14, 1843, in *Selected Collections*, Vol. 1, DVD #20; see also Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 396.

According to promise, I now address you a few lines in relation to the new doctrine of "MARRYING FOR ETERNITY," lately gotten up by the Holy Joe . . . for the benefit of his flock. Joe says that as "they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels which are in Heaven," *in eternity*, it has been revealed to him that there will be no harmony in heaven unless the *Saints* select their companions and marry IN TIME, FOR ETERNITY!!! They must marry *in time* so as to begin to form that sincere attachment and unsophisticated affection which it is so necessary to consummate *in eternity* in order to the peace of Heaven. So Joe Smith has lately been married to his present wife Emma, *for eternity* as well as *for time* . . . This "marrying for eternity" is not the "*Spiritual Wife doctrine*" noticed in my Expose [*The History of the Saints*], but is an entirely new doctrine established by special Revelation. The "SPIRITUAL WIVES,' *for time!* And the 'CELESTIAL WIVES,' *for eternity!*"¹³⁶

Bennett presents "marrying for eternity" as a new revelation—an accusation, in essence, that Joseph had created a revelation of convenience after Bennett left Nauvoo. It might be argued that Bennett sensationalized his declared ignorance for effect and, hence, did not wish to admit that he knew about sealings for eternity. However, I argue that he was genuinely ignorant of this powerful doctrine, which Joseph taught as early as 1840 and had alluded to years earlier.¹³⁷ In May 1835, W.W. Phelps introduced a "new idea" to his wife in a letter: "A new idea, Sally, If you and I continue faithful to the end, we are certain of being one in the Lord throughout eternity. This is one of the most glorious consolations we can have in the flesh. Do not forfeit your birth right."¹³⁸

As evidence, Bennett's six letters published in the *Sangamo Journal* during the summer of 1842 and his 344-page *History of the Saints*

¹³⁶John C. Bennett, "Letter from General Bennett," *Hawk Eye*, December 7, 1843, 1; emphasis in original.

¹³⁷Joseph B. Noble, Affidavit, in Joseph F. Smith Affidavit Book 1:38, 4:38; printed in Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," *Historical Record* 6 (July 1887): 221.

¹³⁸W. W. Phelps, Letter to Sally Phelps, May 26, 1835, Journal History, in *Selected Collections*, Vol. 2, DVD #1. See also Bruce Van Orden, "Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters (1835–1836)," *BYU Studies* 33, no. 3 (1993): 542–93; M. Guy Bishop, "Eternal Marriage in Early Mormon Marital Beliefs," *The Historian*, 53, no. 1 (Autumn 1990): 77–88.

printed in November 1842 do not mention eternal marriage or describe Joseph's marriages in terms that would fit "time and eternity" sealings.¹³⁹ For example, he claimed that Joseph Smith used the following language in officiating in plural marriages:

I now anoint you with holy, consecrated oil, in the name of Jesus Christ, and by the authority of the holy priesthood, that you may be fully and unreservedly consecrated to each other, and to the services of God, and that with affection and fidelity you may nourish and cherish each other, so long as you shall continue faithful and true in the fellowship of the Saints; and I now pronounce upon you the blessings of Jacob, whom God honored and protected in the enjoyment of like special favors; and may the peace of Heaven, which passeth all understanding, rest upon you in time and in eternity!¹⁴⁰

Three references in this alleged prayer are significant. First, Bennett refers to plural marriage as "special favors," a term that Joseph Smith does not use in any known document.¹⁴¹ George D. Smith argues that Joseph Smith used "favor" as a synonym for plural marriage. On the contrary, except for Bennett's "prayer," I have found only one secondhand reference in which Joseph may have linked "favor" to plural marriage. On March 7, 1843, William Clayton recorded: "Elder Brigham Young called me on one side and said he wants to give me some instructions on the priesthood the first oppor-

¹³⁹The Martha Brotherton affidavit quotes Brigham Young as saying: "If you will have me in this world, I will have you in that which is to come." Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 238.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 224; emphasis mine. Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 172, commented: "This statement is essentially identical to—though slightly more detailed than—the one suggested as a model in a recently published revelation dated July 27, 1842." The revelation referred to, received for Newel K. Whitney, July 27, 1842, contains numerous dissimilarities, does not mention the word "favor," and specifies that the marriage would persist "through [o]ut all eternity." See H. Michael Marquardt, *The Joseph Smith Revelations: Text and Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 315–16.

¹⁴¹See George D. Smith, "Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841–46: A Preliminary Demographic Report," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 10, and his *Nauvoo Polygamy*, xiii, xv, 45, 47, 217, 241, 244, 245, 410, 453, 473, for his interpretation of "favor" as meaning plural marriage.

tunity. He said the prophet had told him to do so and give me a favor which I have long desired.”¹⁴² Clayton seems to be paraphrasing, not quoting, Brigham who may, in turn, have been only paraphrasing Joseph. A more colloquial phrase would have been “do him a favor,” or, in a more traditional use, “show favor to” (see, for example, Psalms 44:3). And, of course, Joseph may have simply been directing Brigham to help Clayton; the fact that the “help” needed was facilitating Clayton’s plural sealing to his first plural wife may have created an idiosyncratic link in not-standard (though “coded”) language.

The second significant reference in Bennett’s language is his mention of applying “consecrated oil” to the marital couple. Consecrated oil had been used since Kirtland days, but never as part of the sealing ordinance in Nauvoo. Bennett probably heard reports of washings and anointings in Kirtland and also in the endowment rituals being performed in Nauvoo, but he was never included in or present at any of these experiences. George W. Robinson may have been Bennett’s source. An August 8 letter stated: “I have something new to communicate respecting ORDER LODGE, (though I do not expect it is new to you.) After they are initiated into the lodge, they have oil poured on them.”¹⁴³

The third, and perhaps most instructive, problem is Bennett’s use of the phrase “time and eternity.” In Bennett’s version of the ceremonial prayer, the *marriage* is not sealed for “time and eternity.” Instead, his version invokes the “peace of Heaven” to “rest upon you [the couple] in time and eternity.” Joseph Smith’s sealing ordinances do not refer to the “peace of Heaven.” In his dictation in July 12, 1843, of the revelation now canonized as LDS Doctrine and Covenants 132, it is the marriage covenant that is sealed “for time and eternity” (v. 18). It seems likely that Bennett heard about “time and eternity” but did not know what role it played in the ceremony proper. The “peace of heaven” is a traditional Christian belief that blesses the faithful, both in this life and the next, but is not specifically associated with marriage in either state—and in fact, orthodox Christians saw death as dissolving marriages. The only written plural marriage ceremony known to have survived is Joseph’s sealing to Sarah Ann Whitney. That prayer, pronounced by her father, Newel K. Whitney, following

¹⁴²George D. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 94.

¹⁴³Robinson to Bennett, August 8, 1842, reproduced in Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 247–48.

Joseph's instruction, uses different language: They would be together "so long as you both shall live" and "also through out all eternity."¹⁴⁴

Bennett then comments that the couple married by this ceremony "consider themselves as united in spiritual marriage, the duties and privileges of which are in no particular different from those of any other marriage covenant."¹⁴⁵ In fact, the greatest privilege of plural marriage was its eternal nature, countering the traditional Christian view that the marriage ended with the death of the partners.

As a result of these differences, I conclude that Bennett was unaware of eternal marriage in Nauvoo. William Law's affidavit, created during that turbulent summer of 1842, affirmed: "J. C. Bennett declared to me before God that Joseph Smith had never taught him such doctrines [of spiritual wifery], and that he never told anyone that he (Joseph Smith) had taught any such things, and that anyone who said so told base lies."¹⁴⁶ John C. Bennett's biographer, Andrew F. Smith, also concluded: "No primary evidence has been presented indicating that Bennett was officially involved in the evolving practice of polygamy at Nauvoo. . . . No evidence indicates that Bennett's extramarital relationships were sanctioned by Joseph Smith."¹⁴⁷ Bennett was surrounded by clues about plural and eternal marriage, but he consistently got it wrong. His *History of the Saints* contains seven references to "eternity," yet never in the context of marital sealings.¹⁴⁸ He published Martha Brotherton's affidavit, in which she quotes Brigham Young as saying, "[I] will take you straight to the celestial kingdom; and if you will have me in this world, I will have you in that which is to come" and also quotes Joseph Smith's declaration: "I have the keys of the kingdom,

¹⁴⁴Quoted in Marquardt, *The Joseph Smith Revelations*, 315–16; see also "Revelations in Addition to Those Found in the LDS Edition of the D&C" in *New Mormon Studies: A Comprehensive Resource Library*, CD-ROM (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1998).

¹⁴⁵Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 224.

¹⁴⁶William Law, Affidavit, July 20, 1842, *The Wasp*, Extra of July 27, 1842.

¹⁴⁷Andrew F. Smith, "John Cook Bennett's Nauvoo," *John Whitmer Historical Association 2002 Nauvoo Conference Special Edition* (Nauvoo: John Whitmer Historical Association, 2002), 114–15.

¹⁴⁸Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 43, 131, 154, 172, 224, 244, 320.

and whatever I bind on earth is bound in heaven.”¹⁴⁹ This description of sealing seems clear to anyone who knows about eternal marriage, but Bennett did not make the connection. He apparently knew that “time and eternity” was a significant phrase but not how it applied to marriage. In short, during the twenty-two months he lived in Nauvoo, John C. Bennett never understood Joseph Smith’s teachings about eternal marriage. Equally curious is the fact that his creativity and deductive reasoning were insufficient to put the pieces together.

These observations are significant considering that Joseph Smith always taught his closest followers the principle of eternal marriage in conjunction with plural marriage. Plurality was required in Joseph Smith’s eternal marriage teachings because individuals not sealed eternally would “remain separately and singly, without exaltation, in their saved condition, to all eternity” (D&C 132:17). Accordingly, *eternal* marriage was Joseph’s zenith doctrine, not *plural* marriage, which exists as one component in his overarching marital theology.¹⁵⁰ Parley P. Pratt recalled that the Prophet privately taught him in Philadelphia in 1840 that “the wife of my bosom was an immortal, eternal companion.”¹⁵¹ Bathsheba W. Smith reported in her Temple Lot deposition, “I heard of being married for eternity before that time [1843], but that had nothing to do with plurality of wives.”¹⁵²

Mary Ann West, who was briefly a plural wife of William Smith, recalled that the Prophet told her: “God had given him a revelation, that a man was entitled to more wives than one. . . . He said that there was power on earth to seal wives in plural marriage. . . . He said it was for time and eternity, and not until death, as we were generally married,—it was for eternity.”¹⁵³ Thirty years after Nauvoo, William Clayton signed an affidavit explaining his understanding of how Joseph

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 238–39.

¹⁵⁰See discussion in Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: Theology*, 3:103–27.

¹⁵¹Parley 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 printing), 297–98; see also Lorenzo Snow to “Elder Walker,” February 14, 1842, in Lorenzo Snow Notebook, typescript, 75–76, MS 2737, Box 1, fd. 1, LDS Church History Library.

¹⁵²Bathsheba Smith, Deposition, Temple Lot transcript, respondent’s testimony, Part 3, 295, questions 67–71.

¹⁵³Mary Ann West, Deposition, Temple Lot transcript, respondent’s

linked celestial (eternal) and plural marriage: “After the revelation on celestial marriage was written, Joseph continued his instructions, privately, on the doctrine to myself and others. . . . From him I learned that the doctrine of plural and celestial marriage is the most holy and important doctrine ever revealed to man on the earth, and that without obedience to that principle no man can ever attain to the fullness of exaltation in celestial glory.”¹⁵⁴

If Bennett was genuinely uninformed about eternal marriage, then it seems even less probable that he would have had confidential conversations with Joseph Smith about prospective plural brides like Nancy Rigdon and Sarah Pratt. Assigning him the role of firsthand witness and even private accomplice in Joseph’s secretly expanding polygamy also seems increasingly improbable. It is quite probable, in contrast, that he would have feigned insider status if it enhanced his public persona and especially if it aided in forming a group of disciples and giving him extra leverage in seducing women. After breaking with Joseph Smith under humiliating circumstances, it is predictable that he would have claimed a special relationship to Joseph Smith whose villainy he could thereby denounce more convincingly.

JOHN C. BENNETT AS AN ABORTIONIST

The question of whether John C. Bennett performed abortions while in Nauvoo has been recently discussed by the online community.¹⁵⁵ The allegation can be traced to three historical documents. Hyrum Smith testified in 1842 that Bennett told his victims that “he would give them medicine to produce abortions, providing they should become pregnant.”¹⁵⁶ Also, Mrs. Zeruiah Goddard affirmed on August 28, 1842: “Mrs. Pratt stated to me that Dr. Bennett told her, that he could cause abortion with perfect safety to the mother, at any

testimony, Part 3, 504, questions 269–78.

¹⁵⁴William Clayton, Affidavit, in Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” 226; see also George D. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 559.

¹⁵⁵See for example “John C. Bennett—J. Smith’s very own abortionist!?” http://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon/comments/1xeg73/john_c_bennettj_smiths_very_own_abortionist/ (accessed March 22, 2014).

¹⁵⁶Hyrum Smith, Affidavit, in *Affidavits and Certificates, Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett’s Letters*, Nauvoo, Illinois, August 31, 1842. These affidavits have been listed as an “Extra” ei-

stage of pregnancy, and that he had frequently destroyed and removed infants before their time to prevent exposure of the parties, and that he had instruments for that purpose, &c.”¹⁵⁷ The final evidence is from excommunicated Mormon, Sarah Pratt, who reportedly stated:

You hear often that Joseph had no polygamous offspring. The reason of this is very simple. *Abortion was practiced on a large scale in Nauvoo.* Dr. John C. Bennett, the evil genius of Joseph, brought this abomination into a scientific system. He showed to my husband and me the instruments with which he used to “operate for Joseph.” There was a house in Nauvoo, “right across the flat,” about a mile and a-half from the town, a kind of hospital. They sent the women there, when they showed signs of celestial consequences. Abortion was practiced regularly in this house.¹⁵⁸

All sources agree that Bennett was capable of inducing (via medications) or performing (with surgical instruments) an abortion. As a licensed physician and experienced obstetrician, he may have done so in Nauvoo.¹⁵⁹ However, the likelihood that he performed abortions on any of Joseph Smith’s plural wives seems highly unlikely. As discussed above, little evidence supports that the Prophet confided in him regarding any of his plural marriage dealings. Bennett’s lack of knowledge of authorized Nauvoo polygamy reveals him to have been an outsider, who was not consulted for any purpose asso-

ther to *The Wasp* (more commonly) or to the *Times and Seasons*. It was printed as a single, two-sided sheet apparently not associated with either newspaper. Also republished as “Affidavit of Hyrum Smith, *Times and Seasons* 3 (August 1, 1842): 870–72.

¹⁵⁷“Testimony of Mrs. Zeruiah Goddard,” in *ibid.*

¹⁵⁸Sarah Pratt quoted in Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 59; emphasis in original; see also 128.

¹⁵⁹In 1825 John C. Bennett passed the examination then required to practice medicine. Andrew C. Skinner, “John C. Bennett: For Prophet or Profit?” in H. Dean Garrett, ed., *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Illinois* (Provo, Utah: Department of Church History and Doctrine, BYU, 1995), 249–50. In 1837 he published *The Accoucheur’s Vade Mecum*, an account of his obstetrical experiences. Andrew F. Smith, “John Cook Bennett’s Nauvoo,” *John Whitmer Historical Association 2002 Nauvoo Conference Special Edition*, 112.

ciated with the practice.

Sarah Pratt's timeline is also problematic. When Joseph Smith and Bennett split (in early 1842), Joseph was arguably the only man practicing authorized polygamy. Also, there is no evidence that Louisa Beaman (sealed for "time and eternity") or Agnes Coolbrith (married "for time" but no evidence of sexuality) had become pregnant. They were the only two plural wives with whom, in my opinion, Joseph would have had sexual relations. It seems that, if Bennett performed abortions during his twenty-two-month stay in Nauvoo, they would have been on women whom he or his followers had impregnated, but no evidence supporting such procedures has been found. Sarah Pratt made other statements that contradict more reliable historical data, thus reducing her credibility as a witness.¹⁶⁰

BENNETT'S LEGACY AMONG THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS

The entrance of John C. Bennett into Joseph's life in 1840 complicated the already complex process the Prophet had initiated of secretly establishing plural marriage. The historical record attests that Bennett's intersection with Nauvoo plurality generated questions and apparent contradictions that persist today.

Bennett's influence was due to several factors. First, when he arrived in Nauvoo his previous adulterous behavior was unknown to the Saints, and he outwardly proclaimed belief in Joseph's strict moral teachings. At the same time that the Prophet was privately introducing celestial plural marriage to selected Church members, Bennett resumed his previous promiscuous activity. There is little evidence that Bennett was ever informed regarding Joseph's plural marriage teachings. However, in early 1842 he apparently heard whispers of the Prophet's activities. Even though his behavior and Joseph's plurality were unrelated to one another, they ran a similar course and both involved extra-legal sexual relations.

Second, Bennett had excellent credentials. Having lived with Joseph Smith's family for thirty-nine weeks and having served as both

¹⁶⁰For example, when asked about the statement, "Joseph had eighty wives at the time of his death," Sarah Pratt replied: "He had many more, my dear sir; at least he had seduced many more, and those with whom he had lived without their being sealed to him, were sealed to him after his death." Quoted in Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 54. Currently there is no evidence for "eighty wives" or "many more" than eighty as Pratt alleged.

Nauvoo's mayor and as an Assistant President to the First Presidency, he could convincingly portray himself as an insider based on those credentials alone. Only Joseph and a handful of the highest Church leaders knew how fully ostracized from the Prophet's private counsels and teachings he had been.

Third, as Bennett made his claims against Joseph Smith, the Prophet could not publicly draw a clear distinction between Bennett's immoralities and celestial marriage without disclosing details that included plurality. Joseph could truthfully deny any connection with Bennett's adulteries; but rumors of plural marriage, some of which may have been accurate, soon undermined the credibility of those denials.

Once excommunicated, Bennett exercised his formidable gifts and abilities to publicize his own version of the introduction of Joseph Smith's plural marriage in Nauvoo. His geographic proximity made him a credible witness in the eyes of many readers, while his lack of scruples freed him to create damaging fictional accounts dealing with polygamy's introduction. His version included stories of licentiousness and sexual conquest that continue to be popular with critics today.

Admittedly, other interpretations of the limited historical evidences are possible, and it is undeniable that Bennett was positioned to hear rumors: rumors about polygamy, rumors about "time and eternity," rumors about consecrated oil, and rumors about the identities of plural wives.¹⁶¹ However, his apparent distance from the nucleus of Nauvoo polygamy requires all authors who quote him to exercise great caution. Those who would portray him as a polygamy confidant of Joseph Smith would need to also present documentation to validate that interpretation.

¹⁶¹John Taylor recalled that John C. Bennett's knowledge of plural marriage in Nauvoo came from "an inkling" rather than from personal instruction from the Prophet. See John Taylor, "Sermon in Honor of the Martyrdom," June 27, 1854, Papers of George D. Watt MS 4534, Box 2, disk 2, 1854 images 152–53, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth, September 1, 2009; used by permission. This sermon was not published in the *Journal of Discourses* or filed among other sermons/minutes in CR 100 317.