

Chapter 1—John C. Bennett

It would seem that appearance is now considered of more moment than reality.¹

- John C. Bennett, Mayor of Nauvoo

Probably nothing caused Joseph more difficulty in fulfilling the command to establish plural marriage than the August 1840 arrival of John C. Bennett in Nauvoo. In the short space of 20 months, Bennett would exploit the true doctrine of plural marriage for his own purposes, employing the confidentiality the doctrine then required to cloak his iniquity (see **CHAPTER**). This inevitably pressed upon Joseph the multiple necessities of complying with the divine revelation and warning that he must implement it, denying that Bennett's teachings were authorized while unable to fully explain why, preventing the unwary from succumbing to Bennett's seductions, protecting himself and the Saints from anti-Mormon violence, and out-maneuvering Emma Smith's attempt to use the Relief Society to oppose the doctrines she knew had been revealed to her husband, but about which she was in constant turmoil (see **CHAPTER**).

When Bennett arrived in August 1840, he appeared to have brought with him a stellar character, a high education, and a long list of exemplary accomplishments. Publicizing these ably, and with an undeniable charm, he quickly ingratiated himself with many of the Latter-day Saints. Given the unctuous letters he had written to Joseph before his arrival, Bennett clearly had his sights set on influencing the prophet.²

When he extracted himself from Nauvoo less than two years later it would be apparent to all but the willfully complicit that he was a classic psychopath. The leaders and Saints would, of course, not have known that term, nor would they have been able to describe his character in clinical terms; but they were fully aware of the moral and ethical vacuum constituted by such a personality, and that John C. Bennett fit the diagnosis. They knew enough: he was a liar, a con-artist, a fraud, and a seducer of innocent women. That would have been enough for 1842 Nauvoo; but today's readers want more detail, and we can give it to them.

Bennett's Character

¹ Mayor John C. Bennett's inaugural address (3 February 1841); printed in John C. Bennett, "MISCELLANEOUS. Inaugural Address. City of Nauvoo, Illinois, Feb. 3rd 1841," *Times and Seasons* 2/8 (15 February 1841): 317; also cited in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, ed. Brigham H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1980), 4:289–290.

² Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:168–172.

As a physician with a psychiatric practice, I am sceptical of many historians' efforts to see historical figures through the lens of psychiatry (often with minimal training in psychology or psychiatry). Such historians often manifest a prescience and certainty that would make a mental health worker jealous, and they often rely on little more than warmed-over Freudianism and a mixture of pop psychology gleaned here and there. Although a writer may not intend to engage in "psychobiography," many do so anyway. This approach often obscures more than it reveals, and tells us more about the author and his biases than his subject.

I will now risk disregarding my own advice. I have sufficient training and clinical experience to render an opinion, and Bennett is sufficiently obvious that we can have no reasonable doubt that he was a classic example of what we would now call an anti-social personality disorder. Even a freshman diagnostician would have no trouble recognizing that John C. Bennett passed all the tests.

Anti-sociality is more easily diagnosed in retrospect than most psychiatric disorders because most of the criteria revolve around *behaviour*, rather than the patient's inner state (see Table **NAME-1**). Sociopaths "lack any enduring sympathy or fellow-feeling...[they] evidence a remarkable degree of selfishness and egocentricity."³

Table NAME-1: DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for antisocial personality disorder⁴

<p>A. There is a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others occurring since age 15 years, as indicated by three (or more) of the following:</p> <p>(1) failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors as indicated by repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest</p> <p>(2) deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure</p> <p>(3) impulsivity or failure to plan ahead</p> <p>(4) irritability and aggressiveness, as indicated by repeated physical fights or</p>	<p>(6) consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behavior or honor financial obligations</p> <p>(7) lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another</p> <p>B. The individual is at least age 18 years.</p> <p>C. There is evidence of conduct disorder with onset before age 15 years.</p> <p>D. The occurrence of antisocial</p>
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³ David P. Moore and James W. Jefferson, *Handbook of Medical Psychiatry*, 2nd ed. (Mosby, Inc., 2004), chapter 137.

⁴ American Psychiatric Association. and American Psychiatric Association. Task Force on DSM-IV., *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders : DSM-IV*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994) as cited in J. Reid Meloy, "Antisocial Personality Disorder," (10 April 2006), Table 81-81 <http://www.health.am/psy/more/antisocial_personality_disorder_pro/>.

assaults (5) reckless disregard for safety of self or others	behavior is not exclusively during the course of schizophrenia or a manic episode.
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Of course, Bennett could fool me too, and so our diagnosis must remain provisional. We also do not have enough information to assess Bennett's behaviour before age eighteen. The record is clear, however, that as an adult he demonstrated virtually every anti-social trait.

A small subset of sociopaths can be classed as severe "psychopaths"—such individuals demonstrate a "callous and remorseless disregard for...others," coupled with an "aggressive narcissism."⁵ Robert Hare's twenty-point psychopathy checklist is often used to assess these traits, and even at historical distance Bennett does not fare well (see Table **NAME-2**).

Table NAME-2: Hare Psychopathy Checklist—Revised⁶	
1. Glibness/superficial charm	11. Promiscuous sexual behavior
2. Grandiose sense of self-worth	12. Early behavioral problems
3. Need for stimulation/proneness to boredom	13. Lack of realistic long-term goals
4. Pathological lying	14. Impulsivity
5. Conning/manipulative	15. Irresponsibility
6. Lack of remorse or guilt	16. Failure to accept responsibility for own actions
7. Shallow affect [i.e., restricted emotional range]	17. Many short-term marital relationships
8. Callous/lack of empathy	18. Juvenile delinquency
9. Parasitic lifestyle	19. Revocation of conditional release
10. Poor behavioral controls	20. Criminal versatility

Given the insidious characteristics of the psychopath, it is not surprising that even the astute and prescient B.H. Roberts, with the benefit of hindsight, would later write:

[t]here is a strong temptation, when the whole truth about this man is known, to regard him as an adventurer and a wicked man from the beginning. But those who had, perhaps, the best opportunity to know him held that his motives for coming to Nauvoo were honest, that his intentions in life at that time were honorable, but that he fell into transgression and would not repent.⁷

⁵ Meloy, "Antisocial Personality Disorder," .

⁶ From Robert D. Hare, *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist—Revised Manual* (Toronto, Ontario: Multi-Health Systems, 1991); cited in Meloy, "Antisocial Personality Disorder," Table 82-82.

⁷ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:xviii.

And Elder Roberts may even have been right, though I doubt it. Psychopaths have been known to use a change in location and occupation in a fruitless attempt at a “new start.” We should not ignore the possible influence of the Holy Spirit, which could have urged Bennett to shed what even he knew was a deeply flawed character. In any event, giving him the benefit of the initial doubt does the historian no harm, although it devastated the Latter-day Saints at Nauvoo.

Given the amazing deceptive abilities of the practiced psychopath, it is not surprising that he could charm B. H. Roberts in spite of all he knew of what came later. Bennett charmed the equally guileless Joseph Smith, who had none of Robert’s historical hindsight. Given Joseph’s open and welcoming nature, it would have been surprising had he not made Bennett his friend at once. His amazing ability to accept people at face value, never doubting that their motives were as pure as his own, has many exemplars. The case of W.W. Phelps is one.

Phelps had betrayed Joseph and the Church during the Missouri persecutions, and contributed to Joseph's confinement in Liberty Jail. His signature was on the petition that resulted in the extermination order which led to the Saints' murder and dispossession. After receiving a penitent letter from Phelps, Joseph quickly responded

I must say that it is with no ordinary feelings I endeavor to write a few lines to you... I am rejoiced at the privilege granted me... when we read your letter—truly our hearts were melted into tenderness and compassion when we ascertained your resolves... It is true, that we have suffered much in consequence of your behavior... we say it is your privilege to be delivered from the powers of the adversary, be brought into the liberty of God's dear children, and again take your stand among the Saints of the Most High, and by diligence, humility, and love unfeigned, commend yourself to our God, and your God, and to the Church of Jesus Christ...

Believing your confession to be real, and your repentance genuine, I shall be happy once again to give you the right hand of fellowship, and rejoice over the returning prodigal...

"Come on, dear brother, since the war is past,
For friends at first, are friends again at last."⁸

So it was that Joseph, while willing to do almost anything—from taking up arms, to petitioning presidents, to launching a campaign of disinformation—to protect the revealed Restoration and the Latter-day Saints, repeatedly opened himself to abuse and worse because of his total inability to think the worst of someone in

⁸ Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, "Dear Brother Phelps, 22 July 1840, Nauvoo, Illinois; cited in Smith, *History of the Church*, 162–164.

advance of the evidence. Joseph assumed that all men were as purely motivated as he was. "It takes a con to know a con," and Joseph wasn't a con.⁹ Bennett gained himself the trust of the prophet and the confidence of the Saints, and in his wake left seduced women, broken hearts, and a prophet with a tarnished reputation.

If ever a wolf wore sheep's clothing, none ever wore it as stylishly or better fitted than had John C. Bennett. He sowed confusion and weakened faith in 1840–42 Nauvoo, and he continues to do so even today, as those as hostile to Joseph's mission as Bennett himself still rely uncritically on his perjury. We are compelled, then, to turn to the tawdry details, since a brief review of Bennett's history before he joined Joseph Smith is essential to assessing the evidence which he provides, and for understanding the dynamics of Nauvoo.

Bennett's Career Before Nauvoo

If history hadn't taught us better, there is no question that Bennett's early career looked both altruistic and promising. It would have taken a practiced observer with his attention trained on Bennett's every move to appreciate what was really going on. Small wonder that the state of Illinois made Bennett a quartermaster, or that the Mormons were glad to have such an accomplished citizen in Nauvoo.

Born in 1804, Bennett completed a medical apprenticeship and began practice at age twenty-one.¹⁰ Bennett simultaneously worked as a Methodist preacher, and tried to use his Methodist connections to support the establishment of a university in Ohio. When the Methodists were not enthusiastic, Bennett abandoned their church and became one of Alexander Campbell's Christian Disciples—one suspects with the same goal in mind. When Ohio firmly rejected the proposed institution, Bennett changed his field of operations and immediately used the Disciples as sponsors to solicit Virginia to establish a university and medical college.¹¹

Virginia yielded and the institution was established, but trouble beset the university almost at once. As part of his promotional effort, Bennett had presented the state with an impressive roster of faculty and trustees. The problem was, however, that "Bennett had not obtained permission to use all the names listed as faculty and trustees." Unable to live up to his representations, within a few months, Bennett abandoned the area and moved on, thus presaging

⁹ On the evident sincerity of Joseph in his personal writings, see Paul H. Peterson, "Understanding Joseph: A Review of Published Documentary Sources," in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, the Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1988), 109–110.

¹⁰ Andrew F. Smith, *The Sainly Scoundrel: The Life and Times of Dr. John Cook Bennett* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 3–4.

¹¹ Smith, *Sainly Scoundrel*, 8–10.

a course of hit and run misrepresentation that he would follow for life.¹² Those familiar with sociopaths will find little surprising.

Before the end of 1832, Bennett's was the first name on a petition for the formation of yet another college—this time in Indiana—and again claiming that the Christian Disciples were sponsors. As in Virginia, the college was founded, but also as in Virginia, problems arose almost immediately. Two prominent Disciples were listed as sponsors, but one startled man said he "had no knowledge, nor hint" that such a college was contemplated, and another regarded the inclusion of his name on the petition as "an absolute forgery and 'declined every and all connection' with the college."¹³

Alexander Campbell himself was taken by surprise, since "the members of the Christian Disciples had not been contacted [by Bennett] before the proposal was submitted."¹⁴ The understandable lack of enthusiasm by the Disciples doomed the new scheme, since Bennett had counted on their ability to raise funds to procure the money he needed. Bennett raised \$54, which he kept, claiming it was due to him for out-of-pocket expenses of \$150 he said he had incurred.¹⁵ Never easily discouraged or unresourceful, Bennett then set out to raise money by selling bogus degrees from Christian College.

Most physicians of the era, like Bennett, learned their craft via an apprenticeship, and had not attended medical school. For a doctor to have a degree was thus relatively rare and prestigious. Those with degrees enjoyed an advantage in the building of a practice. Having thus correctly assessed the market for degrees—and not holding a degree himself—Bennett set out to satisfy the demand by providing degrees to "anyone who passed examinations or was otherwise obviously qualified."¹⁶ If he ever had good intentions, Bennett quickly abandoned them and began bestowing a variety of medical, legal, and other degrees on virtually anyone almost immediately. He gave free degrees to anyone of influence with whom he could thus curry favour, and sold degrees to anyone who wanted one and could pay the price. One observer complained that Bennett "rained down his [degrees] like a shower of hail," while another charged that the diplomas went to "any ignoramus who could raise ten dollars to buy one...though they were not worth a cent."¹⁷ Some students graduated after only a few days, and other degree recipients were not even aware they had been granted a

¹² Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 11–12.

¹³ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 16.

¹⁴ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 17.

¹⁵ History does not record whether he presented receipts.

¹⁶ One of the qualifications was, of course, payment of Bennett's fee.

¹⁷ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 19.

degree.¹⁸ Bennett thus has the dubious distinction of operating the United States' first diploma mill.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, when the New York County Medical Society heard of Bennett's lucrative trade in degrees, they denounced both the degrees and Bennett. Also not surprisingly, by the winter of 1833–1834, Bennett had petitioned for *another* university. What *is* amazing is that it was back in Ohio—the people of which, Bennett apparently thought, had remarkably short memories. Bad memories or not, fortunately for Ohio, the Medical Society's complaint reached the Ohio senate, and notwithstanding Bennett's persistence, this scheme also failed.²⁰

Throughout much of the period of this fascinating failure, Bennett had been a Mason, which increased both his influence and respectability. By February 1834, however, the Masons had got wind of Bennett's shenanigans, and were not amused. Bennett was brought up on charges before the brotherhood. From those charges we learn that along with fraudulent financing and fake diploma peddling, Bennett had likely been busy at other activities. "The charges included gambling, lying, vending diplomas for money to persons who [were unqualified] and professing to be an officer or surgeon in the U.S. Army when he was not." Bennett apparently felt it was either undignified or impossible to answer those charges, and by July 1834 was promoting yet another university, without ever addressing the issues raised by the Masons.²¹

By this time Bennett appears to have learned that it was unwise to strike twice in the same place, and so had turned his charms upon the trustees of Willoughby College, Lake Erie, who permitted him to solicit funds in its behalf. Indeed, in a remarkable change of fortune Bennett was soon made a professor, and entrusted with the establishment of the institution's medical college. Never one to allow reality to impede his enthusiasm, Bennett touted the new college in glowing terms, insisting that its "facilities [were] equal to any other college in the Union," though it occupied only a single two-level building.²² Bennett further claimed that all the faculty held M.D. degrees, which was true, to a point. Three had earned legitimate M.D. degrees; the rest had obtained theirs from Bennett's Christian College diploma mill.²³

Bennett's opponents from the Christian College debacle²⁴ soon realized what he was up to. They complained that he was signing his name as "J.C." instead of

¹⁸ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 22. Bennett presumably awarded these "free" degrees because granting a degree to a prestigious person was good advertising.

¹⁹ Frederick C. Waite, "The First Medical Diploma Mill in the United States," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 20 (November 1946): 495–504.

²⁰ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 23–24.

²¹ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 25.

²² Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 26–27.

²³ With, or without paying for them, we do not know. One is entitled by this time, however, to have one's suspicions.

²⁴ He had not had the prescience to have the college name on the degrees changed.

"John Cook" to avoid detection, and again went after Bennett for his practice of granting unearned diplomas. It appears that they may have been just in time. In fact, "Bennett [seems to have] examined students alone and then agreed to graduate them. An alumni directory for Willoughby University published years later did not list the names of students who received degrees during the first year, implying that these first-year degrees were considered bogus."²⁵

The Willoughby trustees fired Bennett. As he had with Christian College, Bennett claimed to have raised less money for Willoughby than he had spent fundraising, and so kept all the money he had received. He was soon charged with "financial impropriety and dishonesty."²⁶

All the while continuing to sell bogus degrees, still bearing the *imprimatur* of Christian College, Bennett—whose repertoire of cons appears to have been limited for the moment to fraudulent fund raising and the selling of fake sheepskins—tried to establish still another school in Massillon: which is in Ohio! It came to naught.²⁷ By September 1835, he approached Allegheny College with what was probably a forged letter from Ripley College—also in his beloved Ohio. The letter claimed that Ripley (which was, in fact, "little more than a prep school,") had granted Bennett authority to grant diplomas and start a medical college at Allegheny in association with Ripley.²⁸

Bennett publicized his planned college, but the Allegheny trustees countered by publicizing their refusal to have anything to do with Bennett. Bennett then announced that a medical college would be founded at Erie, back in Ohio, in association with the bogus Ripley College of the same state. (Here we see Bennett branching out to a third con: using one bogus institution to raise funds for another.) Duly organized, the Sylvania Medical College followed the same template as Bennett's other educational undertakings. Four students graduated during the four months of the college's operation. Some of the faculty were granted bogus MD and LLD degrees—from Bennett's stock of Christian College diplomas.²⁹

Between 1835–1838, Bennett lived in at least six different towns in three states.³⁰ By the winter of 1838–1839, he was ready to plough new ground, and moved to Illinois. Perhaps not coincidentally, records show that someone proposed the establishment of a medical college in Warsaw, Illinois, the following year. Any chance of a coincidence evaporates when we learn that "[t]he effort failed and was considered a humbug...No direct connection between the college and Bennett has been uncovered, but most names connected with it were

²⁵ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 31.

²⁶ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 32–33.

²⁷ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 33.

²⁸ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 42.

²⁹ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 43–44.

³⁰ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 42.

pseudonyms, and the college was an exact replica of Bennett's earlier efforts...right down to the selling of degrees."³¹

Bennett was appointed quartermaster general for Illinois on July 20, 1840. Five days later, he wrote to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, informing them that to their great good fortune he was moving to Nauvoo.³² As we shall soon see, he was forsaking the cons that had failed him for so long, and was set to enter into what we will be forgiven for assuming he saw as “the religion business.” Con number four had begun.

Bennett On The Couch

The foregoing is sufficient to establish Bennett's sociopathy beyond all reasonable doubt. Bennett's diploma mill scheme and repeated financial improprieties clearly violated social norms. He repeatedly forged documents or signed others' names to petitions, and may have used multiple pseudonyms on petitions. His casual sale of bogus medical degrees evinces a callous disregard for the safety of untrained physicians' future patients. A law unto himself, "Bennett granted diplomas in numerous academic areas, including law, divinity, and the arts and sciences. Bennett had few, if any qualifications that justified his examining anyone or conferring degrees in these areas."³³ These facts alone meet the requirement for three anti-social traits under DSM-IV (see Table **NAME-1**).

Bennett's entire life was characterized by a singular lack of remorse, which is perhaps the defining characteristic of the sociopath. "Despite a life of serial intrigues," wrote his biographer, Bennett "expressed no regrets or remorse for the ones that failed or harmed others...He craved public recognition and was often more interested in promoting his image than in making substantive contributions."³⁴ Bennett was a master of self-promotion and self-justification; no lie or stratagem troubled him. While certainly a skilled publicist, Bennett was erratic and easily distracted. Upon marrying, he moved five times before 1831,³⁵ another five times between 1831–1835,³⁶ and at least six times before joining the Saints at Nauvoo.³⁷ His frequent moves suggest an unwillingness to consistently accept and meet financial and professional obligations:

The normal practice of staying at one job and living in one place is often too confining for sociopaths. Should it not suit them, they simply may not go to work; quitting one job after another or being fired for insubordination is common...“Moving on” is a common theme. Some sociopaths travel from town to

³¹ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 49–50.

³² Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 49; Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:168–169.

³³ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 188.

³⁴ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 187.

³⁵ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 4–6.

³⁶ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 10, 12, 23, 28, 30.

³⁷ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 42.

town and state to state; roots are not put down; being transient becomes a way of life...³⁸

In fact, of all the potential sociopathic criteria, only violence seems absent from Bennett's character.

Bennett also scores high on Hare's measure of psychopathy (see Table **NAME-2**). Historical distance makes it difficult to assess his affect or juvenile behaviour (points #7, #12, and #18), and different standards of law enforcement and incarceration make the legal issues (points #19, 20) less relevant. He easily scores positive, however, on at least fourteen of Hare's points. Prominent among these are his glib charisma and grandiosity. (The analyst encounters an embarrassment of riches when Bennett compares himself to Napoleon, and comes out on top: "And how much more superior was my object than his!"³⁹ The frontispiece of his book even shows him in a Napoleonic pose.⁴⁰)

His Nauvoo-era sexual adventurism, involvement in prostitution, medical exploitation of patients, and possible homosexuality further flaunted social norms. His wife had already left him because of his serial infidelities.⁴¹ His post-Mormon history further illustrates his willingness to cynically use religious belief as a lever for his own power (see **CHAPTER**).⁴² Even apostate Mormons rejected Bennett as utterly untrustworthy, though his account was leavened with some facts.⁴³

Bennett's more sedate later years also support my diagnosis, since "the majority of [sociopaths] seem to 'burn out' by the age of 45. After that, the frequency of antisocial acts is quite low."⁴⁴

Nauvoo member Joseph Fielding summed Bennett in an apt sentence: "no description of this Man's Characture could be to[o] bad, he was a vile Man...."⁴⁵

³⁸ Moore and Jefferson, *Handbook of Medical Psychiatry*, chapter 137.

³⁹ John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints, or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*, ed. Andrew F. Smith, 3rd ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 7–8.

⁴⁰ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 2.

⁴¹ Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 411.

⁴² Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 142–165.

⁴³ "There is, no doubt, much truth in Bennett's book...but no statement that he makes can be received with confidence." - T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints : A Full and Complete History of the Mormons, from the First Vision of Joseph Smith to the Last Courtship of Brigham Young; Including the Story of the Handcart Emigration - the Mormon War - the Mountain-Meadow Massacre - the Reign of Terror in Utah - the Doctrine of Human Sacrifice - the Political, Domestic, Social, and Theological Influences of the Saints - the Facts of Polygamy - the Colonization of the Rocky Mountains, and the Development of the Great Mineral Wealth of the Territory of Utah* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878 [1873]), 184n.

⁴⁴ Moore and Jefferson, *Handbook of Medical Psychiatry*, chapter 137. See Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 166–186 for a discussion of Bennett's later, more sedate preoccupation with poultry breeding and medical publishing.

Chapter 2—John C. Bennett in Nauvoo

...as you cannot always tell the wicked from the righteous, therefore I say unto you, hold your peace until I shall see fit to make all things known unto the world concerning the matter.

- Doctrine and Covenants 10:37

Bennett's Motives

Bennett's first meeting with Joseph Smith predated Nauvoo. While both were living in Ohio, Bennett travelled with William McLellin to see Joseph in January 1832.⁴⁶ Joseph seems to have made little impact on Bennett personally, though the visit would be remembered later.⁴⁷ Interestingly, Bennett instead became friends with Eber D. Howe, who was to print *Mormonism Unveiled*, one of the first anti-Mormon works.⁴⁸ Howe also printed the diplomas peddled by Bennett, and the doctor borrowed heavily from Howe's work when he penned his attack on Joseph and the Saints.⁴⁹ This early familiarity with both the Saints and their enemies, coupled with Bennett's unscrupulous nature and burning need for pre-eminence and power, gives credence to his later claim that he did not arrive as a sincere convert.

"*I never believed in them or their doctrines*," insisted Bennett, but

the facts and reports respecting them, which I continually heard, led me to suspect, and, indeed, believe, that their leaders had formed, and were preparing to execute a daring and colossal scheme of rebellion and usurpation throughout the North-Western States of the Union...

...the proceedings of the Mormons...at length determined me to make an attempt to detect and expose the moves and machinery of the plot.⁵⁰

Though his conversion was probably insincere, it is difficult to credit Bennett's claim that his intention was to expose Joseph as a fraud and danger to the Republic. His biographer notes that Bennett's "rationalization has properly met

⁴⁵ Andrew F. Ehat, "'They Might Have Known That He Was Not a Fallen Prophet'—the Nauvoo Journal of Joseph Fielding," *Brigham Young University Studies* 19/2 (Winter 1979): 143–144; citing p. 20–21 of the journal, dated December 1843, spelling as original.

⁴⁶ See William McLellin journal entry for 11 January 1832, reproduced in William E. McLellin, *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831-1836*, ed. Jan Shippy and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, Brigham Young University, 1994), 69.

⁴⁷ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 12.

⁴⁸ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 411.

⁴⁹ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 31–32.

⁵⁰ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 5–6, italics in original.

with derision subsequently by most historians."⁵¹ One such historian was H. H. Bancroft, who replied:

When a man thrusts in your face three-score certificates of his good character, each signed by from one to a dozen persons, you may know that he is a very great rascal. Nor are we disappointed here. This author is a charlatan, pure and simple; such was he when he joined the Mormons, and before and after....if [Bennett] really does not know better than this why he wrote his book, perhaps he will excuse me for telling him that it was, first, for notoriety; second, for money; and third, in order to make people think him a better and greater man than he is.⁵²

Following the assassination of Joseph and Hyrum, Bennett returned to Illinois (after two years of anti-Mormon lectures) and attempted to influence the succession in favor of Sidney Rigdon, even providing a supposed revelation from Joseph endorsing Rigdon.⁵³ He later threw his support behind Jesse James Strang, who made Bennett co-adjudicator of his break-off group, only to excommunicate him in 1847.⁵⁴ These are not the acts of a whistle-blower, but of someone seeking to use religion for temporal power. As quartermaster general, Bennett also arranged the transfer of ammunition and light cannon for the Mormon militia—a reckless act if he truly believed the Mormons were plotting sedition. It is far more likely that Bennett recognized that the Mormons were "an untapped political potential in Illinois," which "he could exploit...for his own gain. He likely believed from the onset [sic] that Smith was a charlatan and Mormonism a fraud. Neither of these circumstances would have particularly mattered to him,"⁵⁵ since he had repeatedly resorted to lies and misrepresentation for his own aggrandizement (see **CHAPTER**).

Was Bennett, then, *ever* sincere? An assessment of his lifelong behavior and character would probably lead most to reject this possibility—but, LDS authors have often entertained it because of a revelation addressed to Bennett.⁵⁶ Bennett and others have read this as an endorsement of his behavior to that point, and critics have seen it as evidence that Joseph was both uninspired and

⁵¹ Andrew F. Smith, "Introduction," in *The History of the Saints, or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*, ed. Andrew F. Smith (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), xvii.

⁵² Hubert Howe Bancroft and Alfred Bates, *History of Utah, 1540–1886* (San Francisco: The History Co., 1889), 150–151n; as cited in Smith, *History of the Church*, xx–xxi.

⁵³ See Thomas J. Gregory, "Sidney Rigdon: Post Nauvoo," *Brigham Young University Studies* 21/1 (Winter 1981): 51–67.

⁵⁴ Smith, "Introduction,"), xxxvi–xxxvii. See also the same point made in Stenhouse, *Rocky Mountain Saints*, 184–185n.

⁵⁵ Smith, "Introduction,"), xvii.

⁵⁶ For example, John Taylor: "I was well acquainted with him. At one time he was a good man, but fell into adultery and was cut off from the Church for his iniquity; and so bad was his conduct, that he was also expelled from the municipal courts, of which he was a member...he fell into iniquity and was cut off from the church for adultery, and then commenced his persecutions...."; reproduced in Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:80–81; citing Public discussion between Reverends Cleeve, Robinson, Carter, and Elder John Taylor at Boulogne-Sur-Mer, France, 1850.

unaware of Bennett's nature and actions.⁵⁷ B.H. Roberts believed that "his intentions in life at that time were honorable," and argued that "the Lord" shared this view in D&C 124.⁵⁸

A close reading of both the text and the historical circumstances calls this assumption into question:

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)

The praise for Bennett is, in fact, rather mild. In the same section, the Lord is "well pleased," (v. 1, 12) with others, who are described as "blessed" (v. 15), "holy" (v. 19), "without guile" (v. 20), and praised for "integrity of...heart." No such language is applied to Bennett.

Bennett is instructed to support Joseph in difficulty and receive counsel (rather than give it, as is his wont) if he wishes a reward. Bennett is told he "will be" the Lord's because of his love if he obeys—he is offered a transformation of his nature, if he will accept it. The Lord promised to accept his work "if he continue" (v. 20, emphasis added). What work had Bennett performed?

A bill for the Nauvoo charter was submitted to the Illinois legislature on November 28, 1840. By 16 December, the charter was approved, and "[b]oth Mormon and non-Mormon sources give Bennett much credit for the passage of the Charter."⁵⁹ Section 124 thus approves Bennett's political work on behalf of the Saints and offers provisional blessings—it says nothing of Bennett's current state before God. The same can be said of the patriarchal blessing given by Hyrum Smith to Bennett on September 21, 1840, which three times makes its promises contingent on faithfulness. It also notes that Bennett may "step aside from the path of rectitude...because of temptation," and promises that God will "call after" him in such a case while cautioning against turning "aside from the

⁵⁷ "So it appears from the Prophet's own showing, that the Lord was remarkably well pleased with his servant John C. Bennett so long as he was an advocate of the Mormon creed; but when he came out on the pretended man of God...Joe contended that he always knew Bennett was a scoundrel." - Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 42.

⁵⁸ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:xvii–xviii

⁵⁹ James L. Kimball, Jr., "A Wall to Defend Zion: The Nauvoo Charter," *Brigham Young University Studies* 15/4 (Summer 1975): 493–494.

truth for the popularity of the world."⁶⁰ Such a warning was well-placed, and Bennett did not heed it. Prestige and power were always his over-riding goals.⁶¹

Even the First Presidency's message about Bennett, printed four days before the receipt of the D&C 124 revelation, said nothing about Bennett's moral character or spiritual gifts. He was described as one who had helped protect them from persecution by securing passage of the Nauvoo charter, and as simply "a man of enterprise, extensive acquirements, and of independent mind, and is calculated to be a great blessing to our community."⁶² Bennett had helped already, and had great potential, but the praise was all secular—not spiritual.⁶³

Source and degree of Bennett's prominence

According to William Law, Bennett "was more in the secret confidence of Joseph than perhaps any other man in the city."⁶⁴ How did a newcomer become mayor, a member of the First Presidency, and a military leader so quickly?

The founding of Nauvoo placed even greater administrative burdens upon Joseph.

In June 1840, he asked the high council to appoint someone else to attend to "the temporalities of the Church."...Joseph wanted to free himself for 'the spiritualities'—translation and revelation—but his appeal went unheeded. The high council supplied another clerk, leaving Joseph responsible...He oversaw the business [of the Church] for another year, until the Twelve Apostles returned...⁶⁵

Not only were Joseph's needs greater than ever, he had lost many of those on whom he had relied in the past. The Twelve were away on missions. Joseph Smith, Sr., died in September 1840, and Joseph had often had to use whatever talent was available to him.⁶⁶ Bennett's organizational skills, military background, political acumen, and restless energy made him useful.

⁶⁰ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 42–44.

⁶¹ For an argument for the alternate view, that Bennett was motivated in his move to Nauvoo by basically noble motives, see Andrew C. Skinner, "John C. Bennett: For Prophet or Profit," in *Regional Studies in LDS History: Illinois*, ed. H. Dean Garrett (Provo, Utah: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1995), 249–263.

⁶² Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Hyrum Smith, "A Proclamation of the First Presidency of the Church to the Saints Scattered Abroad, Greeting," *Times and Seasons* 2/6 (15 January 1841): 275; also in Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:270.

⁶³ "Bennett never aspired to spiritual leadership. He preached politics and urban improvements, not theology." - Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 459.

⁶⁴ William Law to T.B.H. Stenhouse, letter, 24 November 1871; cited in Stenhouse, *Rocky Mountain Saints*, 198–199.

⁶⁵ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 417.

⁶⁶ Richard Price argues that the loss of other aides and family members to death made Joseph further vulnerable to Bennett. Richard Price. "Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy: How Men Nearest the Prophet Attached Polygamy to His Name in Order to Justify Their Own Polygamous Crimes." (n.p.: Price Publishing Company, 2001), chapter 7 <<http://restorationbookstore.org/jsfp-index.htm>>, <http://restorationbookstore.org/articles/nopoligamy/jsfp-vol1/chp7.htm>.

Sidney Rigdon, a counsellor in the First Presidency, was frequently ill. On April 8, "John C. Bennett was presented, with the First Presidency, as Assistant President until President Rigdon's health should be restored."⁶⁷ Modern readers should be cautious in projecting the role of the current First Presidency on Joseph's day. In the modern Church, the First Presidency is almost always composed of two apostles who have extensive experience in ecclesiastical affairs called to serve with the President. In Joseph's day, this was not the case. Most of Joseph's counsellors in the First Presidency were to betray his trust, including Jesse Gause, Frederick G. Williams, Sidney Rigdon, William Law and John C. Bennett. While some of these counsellors received keys, Bennett did not.⁶⁸ None were apostles prior to their call.

Bennett often acted as Joseph's proxy in political and secular matters, and "appears to have officiated at few public religious activities. He occasionally preached, and as mayor of Nauvoo he performed a few marriage ceremonies," though given Joseph's introduction of sealing ordinances, this is more a secular than religious function. With few exceptions, Bennett "played little role in church conferences. There might have been an unofficial division of labor between Bennett and Smith. Smith handled church affairs; Bennett took the lead in secular matters."⁶⁹ In Bennett, Joseph had found the secular aide-de-camp he had sought in vain from the high council.

Following his break with Joseph, Bennett made much of his insider status. He claimed that his role in the First Presidency "gave me access to all their secret lodges and societies, and enabled me to become perfectly familiar with the doings and designs of the whole Church."⁷⁰ It is difficult to know whether Bennett was lying or mistaken. Despite his claim, he was never part of the inner circle which received the highest temple ordinances introduced by Joseph. Bennett and Rigdon "were conspicuously absent"⁷¹ when Joseph Smith spoke to those who would be among the first to receive the full endowment necessary "to finish their work and prevent imposition" by Satan.⁷²

"Thus," wrote one author

⁶⁷ Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:340–341.

⁶⁸ Anonymous, "Kirtland Revelation Book," (Salt Lake City, Utah: LDS Church Archives), 10 (27 February 1832); D&C 84:3 [1835 edition] / 90:6 in modern LDS; D&C 124:126. See also discussion in Andrew F. Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the 1844 Mormon Succession Question" (Brigham Young University, 1981), 38–40.

⁶⁹ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 62.

⁷⁰ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 3.

⁷¹ Ehat, "1844 Mormon Succession", 40.

⁷² "Book of the Law of the Lord" entry for 1 May 1842; cited in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith : The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, Religious Studies Monograph Series (Provo, Utah and Salt Lake City, Utah: Religious Studies Center, distributed by Bookcraft, 1980), 119–120.

the considerable embarrassment to Joseph Smith and Mormonism which some have inferred from Bennett's alleged duping of the Mormons is cast in a new light because Bennett himself so effectively refutes his own claim that he was a close confidant of Joseph Smith. Unwittingly, Bennett indisputably demonstrates that he was neither directly involved with the endowment, eternal marriage, nor plural marriage—the most significant private theological developments during Bennett's stay in Nauvoo.⁷³

Storm Clouds

Bennett's past followed close on his heels. Soon after announcing his baptism in the Mormon press, Joseph received a letter reporting Bennett's abandonment of wife and children. Joseph knew from personal experience that "it is no uncommon thing for good men to be evil spoken against," and did nothing precipitous.⁷⁴ The accusations against Bennett gained credence when Joseph learned of his attempts to persuade a young woman "that he intended to marry her." Joseph dispatched Hyrum Smith and William Law to make inquiries, and in early July 1841 he learned that Bennett had a wife and children living in the east. Non-LDS sources confirmed Bennett's infidelity: one noted that he "heard it from almost every person in town that [his wife] left him in consequence of his ill treatment of her home and his intimacy with other women." Another source reported that Bennett's wife "declared that she could no longer live with him...it would be the seventh family that he had parted during their union."⁷⁵ Bennett and Francis M. Higbee were also discovered to be involved in immoral activity (see **NEXT CHAPTER**).

When confronted with these charges, Bennett broke down and confessed. Emma's nephew, Lorenzo D. Wasson, claimed to have been upstairs and heard Joseph "give J. C. Bennett a tremendous flagellation for practicing iniquity under the base pretence of authority from the heads of the church."⁷⁶ Claiming to be mortified at the idea of public censure, Bennett took poison in a suicide gesture, but recovered.⁷⁷ As a physician, Bennett probably knew how to dose himself to avoid serious harm. Such a flamboyant play for sympathy is consistent with his sociopathy; it is likely that his regret was feigned, save for his wish to avoid public exposure.

Joseph, always quick to forgive the penitent, agreed to keep Bennett's past crimes a secret. But, Bennett continued to seduce women, and eventually

⁷³ Ehat, "1844 Mormon Succession", 64–65.

⁷⁴ Joseph Smith, "To the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and to All the Honorable Part of the Community," *Times and Seasons* 3/17 (1 July 1842): 839.

⁷⁵ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:35–37.

⁷⁶ L[orenzo] D. Wasson, "Dear Uncle and Aunt," letter, 30 July 1842, Philadelphia; reprinted in *Times and Seasons* 3/20 (15 August 1842): 892.

⁷⁷ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:37, 43.

moved the leaders to action.⁷⁸ On May 17, almost a year later, Joseph instructed the Church recorder to "be so good as to permit Bennett to withdraw his name from the Church record, if he desires to do so, and this with the best of feelings towards...General Bennett."⁷⁹ (The episode with Nancy Rigdon in April 1842 may also have played a role in this decision—see **NEXT CHAPTER**).

Further evidence for the wisdom of Joseph's decision appeared within days; before the end of May 1842, Chauncey Higbee was brought before the high council and excommunicated for "unchaste and unvirtuous conduct towards certain females, and for teaching it was right, if kept secret."⁸⁰ This was a replay of Bennett's tactics, and four women testified to the high council that Higbee had thus seduced them, with two naming Bennett as the source of the doctrine.⁸¹

Hyrum Smith reported that several women confessed to submitting to Bennett's proposal, and that he also promised

he would give them medicine to produce abortions, provided they should become pregnant. One of these witnesses, a married woman that he attended upon in his professional capacity whilst she was sick, stated that he made proposals to her of a similar nature; he told her that he wished her husband was dead, and that if he was dead, he would marry her and clear out with her; he also begged her permission to give him [her husband] medicine to that effect; he did try to give him medicine, but he would not take it.⁸²

Bennett was forced to resign as mayor, and swore an affidavit stating that the doctrines he had taught were his own, and not from Joseph Smith. The entire city council later testified that Bennett was not under any duress when he made these statements. Needing to rehabilitate his reputation in his anti-Mormon book, Bennett later claimed that Joseph took him into a private room, "*locked the door,*" "*DREW A PISTOL ON ME,*" and told him that if he did not "*exonerat[e]...me from all participation whatever, either directly or indirectly, in word or deed, in the SPIRITUAL WIFE DOCTRINE, private intercourse with females in general; and if you do not do it with apparent cheerfulness, I will make CAT-FISH BAIT of you, or delivery you over to the Danites for execution to-night...'*" If you tell *that* publicly,' said he, '*death is your portion; remember the Danites!*'⁸³

⁷⁸ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 460.

⁷⁹ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 40–41.

⁸⁰ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:18.

⁸¹ Affidavits are available in Price, "Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy [Vol. 1].", chapter 12, <http://restorationbookstore.org/articles/nopoligamy/jsfp-vol1/chp12.htm>. See Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:407.

⁸² "Affidavit of Hyrum Smith," *Times and Seasons* 3/19 (1 August 1842): 870–871. See also Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:71–73.

⁸³ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 287–288, italics and small caps as original.

This story is utterly implausible. In addition to the city council's testimony, the non-LDS alderman before whom Bennett swore his oath said that

[t]he door of the room was open and free for all or any person to pass or repass...[Bennett then] said, "you know it will be better for me not to be bothered with Mayor's office, Legion, Mormon, or any thing else." During all this time if he was under duress, or fear, he must have had a good faculty for concealing it, for he was at liberty to go and come when and where he pleased... I know that I saw him in different parts of the city, even after he had made these statements, transacting business as usual.⁸⁴

Bennett, like many anti-Mormon imitators after him, would repeatedly claim that his truth telling put his life at grave risk from the "Danite" assassins, who "pledge themselves to poison the wells and the food and drink of dissenters, apostates, and all enemies of Zion, and to murder...[and] to destroy by fire and sword all the enemies of Mormonism."⁸⁵ Bennett's subsequent actions belie his worry—he was to remain openly in Nauvoo for another five weeks, and during his two years of extensive anti-Mormon lecturing and publishing, he was never threatened by Danites. He even returned to Nauvoo a week after "escaping"—hardly a sign of fear.⁸⁶ It seems far more likely that Bennett was not yet ready to burn all his bridges with Joseph Smith, and was willing to express contrition in private if it did not threaten his public influence. Such a threat was soon to appear.

(That Bennett was lying when he fretted publicly over the Danites is further illustrated by a later visit he made more than a year later to Nauvoo. Bennett had, by then, published his anti-Mormon work and had been travelling the country giving anti-Mormon lectures. Yet, he then "went to Joseph Smith's general store, and paid Smith three dollars for each of the thirty-nine weeks he had boarded with [him]." One wonders if even then Bennett thought he might win his way back into Joseph's friendship, or if he returned only to gloat.⁸⁷ At any rate, he was hardly afraid for his life.)

Chauncey Higbee's trial concluded on May 24, and Bennett's Nauvoo status was soon in jeopardy. Bennett was told that his withdrawal from the Church would be made public. Bennett once more begged for mercy, claiming that public exposure would distress his mother.⁸⁸ Joseph again deferred a public announcement, and Bennett would soon also make confession to the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge. Weeping, Bennett pleaded for leniency, with Joseph as his advocate.⁸⁹ Even Joseph's patience had an end, however. It soon became clear

⁸⁴ Daniel H. Wells, "[Affidavit]," *Times and Seasons* 3/19 (1 August 1842): 873–874.

⁸⁵ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 271.

⁸⁶ Bennett left for Springfield on 21 June 1842 to arrange publication of letters "exposing" Joseph and the Saints. See Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 461–462.

⁸⁷ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 139; describing a visit of 8 December 1843.

⁸⁸ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:18.

⁸⁹ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:18 (26 May 1842).

that still other members had used Bennett's arguments to seduce women—his excommunication was made public on 15 June. The Masonic Lodge published Bennett's crimes the next day.⁹⁰ His Nauvoo reputation in tatters, Bennett left and began plotting his revenge.

Sarah Pratt

Bennett was not long in attempting to turn the tables on Joseph Smith. Though Bennett never denied his own adulteries, he simply made Joseph out to be worse.⁹¹ In letters published in the *Sangamo Journal*, Bennett charged Joseph with "spiritual wifery," and the seduction of Mormon women. Even those married to Joseph's closest followers were not safe, according to Bennett, and Sarah Pratt was his Exhibit A.

Historian Richard Van Wagoner goes to great lengths to exonerate Sarah Pratt in his biographical article on her, his book on plural marriage which reprints much of the article word-for-word, and briefly in his more shrill biography of Sidney Rigdon.⁹² I believe his efforts are unpersuasive.

Bennett claimed that while Orson Pratt was on a mission with the Twelve in England, Joseph propositioned Sarah. Bennett's account is larded with difficulties. He claimed that Joseph confided his desire for Sarah and his plans to make her one of the "Cloistered Saints."⁹³ This is a term unique to Bennett, attested in no other source. Bennett insisted that there were "three...orders, or degrees" of women in the "Mormon seraglio." Using terminology that is almost certainly fabricated, Bennett reported that "[t]he first and lowest of these is styled the '*Cyprian Saints*;' the second, the '*Chambered Sisters of Charity*;' and the third and highest degree is called the '*Cloistered Saints*,' or '*Consecratees of the Cloister*.'"⁹⁴ That Joseph would establish a "Cyprian" (i.e., wanton or prostitute) order by name is laughable. Bennett here betrays both his ignorance of Joseph's actual plural marriage teachings and his utter disregard for the truth.⁹⁵

Bennett claimed that he "apprised [Sarah] of Joe's contemplated attack on her virtue," with a warning that Joseph would destroy her reputation if she revealed him. Bennett has Joseph professing his "earnest desire of connubial bliss,"⁹⁶ but

⁹⁰ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 461; see *Times and Seasons* 3/15 (15 June 1842): 830; Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:32.

⁹¹ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 89; Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 460.

⁹² Richard S. Van Wagoner, "Sarah M. Pratt: Shaping of an Apostate," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19/2 (Summer 1986); Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1989); Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 298–299.

⁹³ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 227–228.

⁹⁴ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 220.

⁹⁵ Bennett elsewhere invents fanciful names for his imaginary degrees: "*Saints of the White Veil*," "*Saints of the Green Veil*," and "*Saints of the Black Veil*." (See Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 220, 222, 223, italics in original.)

⁹⁶ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 228–229.

here again, his account does not match more reliable reports. Joseph's offers of plural marriage were not couched in romantic, wooing terminology.⁹⁷ Bennett and his readers could likely not conceive of a motivation for plural marriage apart from sexual desire, and so he cast Joseph in that mold.

Upon receiving Sarah's rejection, Bennett's Joseph then required a lamb to be sacrificed, "and the door-posts and the gate sprinkled with its blood, and the kidneys and entrails taken and offered upon an altar of twelve stones that had not been touched with a hammer, as a burnt sin offering." Such pseudo-Mosaic ritual is without precedent in Joseph's theology. In his original letter, Bennett went on: "So I procured the lamb from Capt. John T. Barnett, and it was slain by Lieut. Stephen H. Goddard, and I [Bennett] offered kidneys and entrails in sacrifice for Joe as desired."⁹⁸ This concluding flourish was not reprinted when the letter was included in his anti-Mormon book; even Bennett must have realized that his fabrication was over-the-top.

Having been once rejected by Sarah, Bennett claimed that after Orson's return Joseph "stealthily approach[ed] and kiss[ed] her," bringing the whole story into the open.⁹⁹ Though there is no other source for this claim, there is some suggestion that Orson knew about Bennett's charges before they were published. Bennett published a 5 July letter from Orson's brother-in-law, who claimed that "Mr. Pratt would write, but he is afraid to. *He wishes to be perfectly still, until your second letter comes out*—then you may hear."¹⁰⁰ Some have concluded that Orson was thus only awaiting Bennett's public charge against Sarah on 15 July to act.¹⁰¹ This is possible, but I am not persuaded: Bennett was not above forging a letter, and even if the letter is genuine his correspondent may not have fairly represented Orson's position.

The strongest argument against Orson's foreknowledge is his reaction on the day Bennett's letter appeared in the papers. Joseph arranged a search party after a suicidal note from Orson was found. As Ebenezer Robinson later recalled:

I remember well the excitement which existed at the time as a large number of the citizens turned out to go in search for [Orson Pratt].

...Under these circumstances his mind temporarily gave way, and he wandered away, no one knew where...[the searchers] fearing lest he had committed suicide. He was found

⁹⁷ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 440, 445. See **CHAPTER** of present work for examples.

⁹⁸ *Sangamo Journal* (15 July 1842), *The Wasp* (Extra) (27 July 1842); cited in Richard and Pamela Price, *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy—Vision Articles [from Vision Magazine, Vol. 32–46, 48–51, 53–56]*, vol. 2 (E-book: Price Publishing Company, n.d.), "The Sarah Pratt Case," <<http://restorationbookstore.org/articles/nopoligamy/jsfp-visionarticles/sarahprattcase.htm>>

⁹⁹ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 231.

¹⁰⁰ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 46; citing William M. Allred to John C. Bennett, "Dear Friend," 5 July 1842, Nauvoo.

¹⁰¹ This is the position adopted by Price, *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy [Vol. 2]*, "Apostle Pratt's Revolt Against the Prophet," <http://restorationbookstore.org/articles/nopoligamy/jsfp-visionarticles/orsonprattrevolt.htm>.

some 5 miles below Nauvoo, sitting on a rock, on the bank of the Mississippi river, without a hat.¹⁰²

It remains an open question whether Orson was taken aback by Bennett's charges, or conflicted by second thoughts over his previous decision to support his wife and Bennett over the man he had regarded as God's prophet. "Br Orson Pratt is in trouble in consequence of his wife," wrote Brigham Young to Parley Pratt two days later. "His feelings are so rought up that he dos not know whether his wife is wrong, or whether Josephs testimony and others are wrong and due Ly [do lie] and he decived for 12 years—or not." Brigham sympathized with Pratt's plight: "He is all but crazy about matters," but Young left no doubts about who he held responsible: "You may aske what the matter is concirning Sister P.—it is enoph, and doct, J.C. Bennett could tell all about himself & hir—enoph of that—we will not let Br. Orson goe away from us he is to[o] good a man to have a woman destroy him."¹⁰³

Whatever his misgivings or surprise, Pratt seems to have overcome them within the week. On July 22, he refused to vote in favor of a public resolution attesting to Joseph Smith's good character. Joseph deftly pointed out that Pratt's disenchantment was based on second-hand testimony: "Have you personally a knowledge of any immoral act in me toward the female sex, or in any other way?" Admitted Orson, "Personally, toward the female sex, I have not."¹⁰⁴ Wilford Woodruff reported how the apostles worked for "four days with Elder *Orson Pratt*...to get him to recall his sayings against Joseph & The Twelve but he persisted in his wicked course & would not recall any of his sayings which were made in public against Joseph & others sayings which were unjust & untrue... Dr John Cook Bennet was the ruin of Orson Pratt." Pratt was excommunicated on 20 August.¹⁰⁵

Joseph would not let Bennett's version stand unchallenged. Bennett's acts were repeatedly attacked from the pulpit and in print. *The Wasp*, edited by Joseph's pugnacious brother William, accused Bennett of "adultery, fornication, embryo infanticide and buggery."¹⁰⁶ On July 27, an extra of *The Wasp* published affidavits rebutting Bennett.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Ebenezer Robinson, "Items of Personal History of the Editor," *The Return* 2/11 (November 1890); cited by Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 146n142.

¹⁰³ Brigham Young to Parley P. Pratt, 17 July 1842, LDS Church Archives; cited in Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 466; Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 31; Van Wagoner, "Sarah M. Pratt," 76.

¹⁰⁴ *Times and Seasons* 3/19 (1 August 1842): 869.

¹⁰⁵ Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833-1898 Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 2:187, (1–21 Sept 1842), italics in original.

¹⁰⁶ *The Wasp* (Extra) (17 July 1842); cited in Van Wagoner, "Sarah M. Pratt," 80.

¹⁰⁷ "Affidavits and Certificates Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett's Letters," *The Wasp* (Extra) (27 July 1842). <<http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/LDS/wasp1.htm#083142-16>>

Chief among the Saints' countercharges was that Sarah Pratt had committed adultery with Bennett. Stephen Goddard, with whom Sarah had boarded in the fall/winter of 1840, swore that beginning Oct 6, 1840

from the first night, until the last, with the exception of one night, it being nearly a month, the Dr. was there as sure as the night came, and generally two or three times a day...what their conversation was I could not tell, as they sat close together, he leaning on her ... whispering continually or talking very low...

One night they took their chairs out of doors and remained there as we supposed until 12 o'clock or after; at another time they went over to the house where you now live and come back after dark, or about that time. We went over several times late in the evening while she lived in the house of Dr. Foster, and were most sure to find Dr. Bennett and your wife together, as it were, man and wife. Two or three times we found little Orson lying on the floor and the bed apparently reserved for the Dr. and herself ...¹⁰⁸

Goddard's wife Zeruah confirmed his story, and added

Dr. Bennett came to my house one night about 12 o'clock, and sat on or beside the bed where Mrs. Pratt was and cursed and swore very profanely at her; she told me next day that the Dr. was quick tempered and was mad at her, but I have no other reason. I concluded from circumstances that she had promised to meet him somewhere and had disappointed him; on another night I remonstrated with the Dr. and asked him what Orson Pratt would think, if he could know that you were so fond of his wife, and holding her hand so much; the Dr. replied that he could pull the wool over Orson's eyes.

Mrs. Pratt stated to me that Dr. Bennett told her, that he could cause abortion with perfect safety to the mother, at any 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.

My husband and I were frequently at Mrs. Pratt's and stayed till after 10 o'clock in the night, and Dr. Bennett still remained there with her and her little child alone at that late hour.

On one occasion I came suddenly into the room where Mrs. Pratt and the Dr. were: she was lying on the bed and the Dr. was taking his hands out of

¹⁰⁸ Stephen H. Goddard to Orson Pratt, 23 July 1842; published in *The Wasp* (Extra) (31 August 1842). Note that it is thought that a third page of the extra may be lost, but some sources quote this material from that issue. See: <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/LDS/wasp1.htm#083142>

her bosom; he was in the habit of sitting on the bed where Mrs. Pratt was lying and lying down over her.

I would further state that from my own observation, I am satisfied that their conduct was anything but virtuous, and I know Mrs. Pratt is not a woman of truth....¹⁰⁹

The Goddards provide particularly damning testimony, and Van Wagoner goes to some lengths to dispose of it:

The Goddard story had serious problems that even Sarah did not point out. Bennett had been appointed 4 October 1840 to work with Smith on drafting the Nauvoo Charter. On this same day he was also selected as a delegate to lobby for passage of the bill through the state legislature at Springfield, nearly one hundred miles distant. That Bennett could draft the complicated documents, make the necessary trips to Springfield, and be with Sarah Pratt every night except one during a one-month period seems improbable.¹¹⁰

Other authors have accepted Van Wagoner's analysis with little comment.¹¹¹ Unfortunately, this reading is seriously flawed. Neither Bennett or Sarah pointed out the elements that Van Wagoner thinks so implausible. A closer look at the timeline reveals that Bennett did not leave Nauvoo for Springfield until late November.¹¹² Bennett was able to present an outline of the charter during the afternoon session of the conference at which he was appointed to write it, leading one historian to conclude that "Smith and Bennett had already been at work on the charter and probably had it completed before the conference met."¹¹³ There was thus likely little complex paperwork to prepare, and Bennett could easily have done any remaining work while at Nauvoo for almost two months. (The entire printed charter fills less than 5 pages of Bennett's book.)¹¹⁴ These two errors weaken Van Wagoner's analysis irreparably, and raise the plausibility of the Goddards' accounts, since their timeframe of "about a month" fits neatly between Bennett's arrival in Nauvoo and his departure to lobby for the charter's passage. It also matches an off-hand claim made by Joseph which dated Bennett's first immoralities to October 1840.¹¹⁵

Van Wagoner makes a stronger point when he argues that

¹⁰⁹ Zeruah N. Goddard, affidavit, *The Wasp* (Extra) (31 August 1842).

¹¹⁰ Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, footnote 12, referenced on page 34.

¹¹¹ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 82.

¹¹² Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 59. See also George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "...but we called it celestial marriage"* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 2008), 67, though GD Smith does not draw the necessary conclusion.

¹¹³ Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 96.

¹¹⁴ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 194–199.

¹¹⁵ Joseph wrote to Illinois Governor Carlin, and claimed that "more than twenty months ago," Bennett began his immoral activity. Twenty months prior to June 1842 is October 1840. See Joseph Smith to Governor Carlin, "Dear Sir," (24 June 1842) in Smith, *History of the Church*, 42.

it seems likely that had Bennett and Sarah been involved in a sexual liaison as public as the Goddard story implies, objections would have been raised when Smith called him to be "assistant president" six months later. Furthermore, despite the numerous cases of church action against sexual sins brought before the Nauvoo High Council, Sarah Pratt's name is never mentioned.¹¹⁶

One should not over-read the public nature of the reported behavior. The Goddards were purportedly aware because Sarah was boarding with them—this does not necessarily mean that Bennett was making a public spectacle of his affair. Van Wagoner's analysis also presumes that any affair between Sarah and Bennett was handled by the high council. We have already seen evidence that Joseph dealt with the initial reports of Bennett's infidelities privately, without high council involvement.

In a more speculative vein, if Sarah's case was initially handled privately, Joseph may well have regarded the issue as closed—one wonders what role the Goddards may have played in first alerting the Prophet to Bennett's true nature. (Were this the case, perhaps Sarah's role was kept quiet because she promised to reform, and because Joseph wished to spare Orson Pratt the pain and embarrassment of public disclosure. Sarah's original adultery may have been resolved privately, with Orson the missionary none the wiser. When Bennett began accusing Joseph, however, the Goddards may have been given leave to reveal what they knew.)

When the Bennett imbroglio blew up a year later, Joseph may have been reluctant to publicly try Sarah—if he had proposed a plural marriage to her, the revelations that a hostile adulteress could make would be disastrous. (See discussion below on whether Joseph tried to marry Sarah.) Joseph doubtless had vivid memories of Oliver Cowdery's excommunication, and the unwanted disclosures about his Fanny Alger marriage that resulted.

The Goddards are not alone in their witness against Bennett and Sarah. Robert D. Foster claimed that "Mrs. White, Mrs. [Orson] Pratt, Niemans, Miller, Brotherton, and others," could confirm the claim that Bennett was a seducer, though the source of his information is not clear.¹¹⁷

A non-Mormon witness, Jacob B. Backenstos, testified that "some time during [the] winter" of 1841–1842, "he accused 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." Backenstos insisted that "from personal

¹¹⁶ Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, footnote 12, referenced on page 34.

¹¹⁷ Robert D. Foster, *The Wasp* 1 (15 October 1842): 2; cited in Price, *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy* [Vol. 2], "The Sarah Pratt Case," <<http://restorationbookstore.org/articles/nopoligamy/jsfp-visionarticles/sarahprattcase.htm>>

observations I should have taken said Doctor Bennett and Mrs. Pratt as man and wife, had I not known to the contrary."¹¹⁸

Van Wagoner's attempt to diffuse Backenstos' testimony is unimpressive. He argues that because Sarah was ill and pregnant, and because Orson was back in Nauvoo by that time, "Mormon Backenstos's statement may thus be dismissed as slander."¹¹⁹ (Backenstos was not, in fact, a Mormon—Van Wagoner corrects the statement in his later book, but his initial intent seems to be to impeach Backenstos on religious grounds.¹²⁰) Van Wagoner's error highlights a problem with his "slander" claim—Backenstos was, unlike the Goddards, a non-Mormon.¹²¹ He had no religious reason to defend Joseph Smith, or to accuse Bennett unfairly. Van Wagoner's effort to brush this claim away is disingenuous. Would he have us believe that no woman has carried on an affair while her husband is in the same city? Does pregnancy preclude adultery? Given that Bennett was often accused of promising abortions if his liaisons resulted in pregnancy, would not a pregnant Sarah give the lovers less reason to worry about discovery?

Backinstos' witness is credible on a number of fronts—if he was fabricating a tale, why be so vague as to the exact time? And, he carefully distinguishes between what he has been told by others, and what he has observed himself. Most importantly, perhaps, neither Bennett or Sarah challenged Backinstos' witness.¹²² If he was truly guilty of slander, why did they say or do nothing, especially when Bennett was to publish a 300 page book justifying himself and condemning his enemies?

Bennett likewise said little about the Goddard accusations, though he mentions both witnesses: Stephen is named as a witness to Joseph's demand for a sheep (he would claim that he did slaughter a sheep for supper, but denied any religious meaning behind it), while Zeruah supposedly heard Sarah Pratt declare that Joseph was "a corrupt man."¹²³ For two such damning witnesses, this is gentle treatment.

¹¹⁸ J[acob] B. Backenstos, affidavit, 28 July 1842; published in *The Wasp* (Extra) (31 August 1842). <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/LDS/wasp1.htm#083142>

¹¹⁹ Van Wagoner, "Sarah M. Pratt," 79.

¹²⁰ Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 33. On Backenstos' status as a non-Mormon, see Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 466.

¹²¹ Van Wagoner also mistakenly identifies Jacob Backenstos as the Sheriff of Hancock County. In fact, Backenstos was related to William Backenstos, the sheriff (see Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 82). Jacob was the clerk of the Hancock County Circuit Court before Joseph's murder (see *Times and Seasons* 5/10 (15 May 1844): 537) and was elected sheriff by Mormon votes in 1845 (see Robert Bruce Flanders, "The Kingdom of God in Illinois: Politics in Utopia," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5/1 (Spring 1970): 34).

¹²² One may profitably contrast Bennett and Sarah's reaction to the Goddard and Backinstos accusations (silence) with the reaction of Bennett and the Rigdon family to Stephen Markham's accusations against Nancy Rigdon, in which the witness' credibility was questioned and he was sued for slander (see **NEXT CHAPTER**).

¹²³ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 231.

Sarah said nothing to defend herself until decades later. Having left the Church, she gave an interview to anti-Mormon author Wyl, and claimed that she approached Zeruah about her testimony as soon as it appeared.

"She began to sob," [claimed Sarah,] "'It is not my fault,' said she; 'Hyrum Smith came to our house, with the affidavits all written out, and forced us to sign them. 'Joseph and the church must be saved,' said he. We saw that resistance was useless, they would have ruined us; so we signed the papers.'"¹²⁴

While such a tale fits the anti-Mormon trope of powerful Church leaders and members who are willing dupes or pawns, it is not terribly persuasive. Why was this matter not raised during the cross-fire of charge and counter-charge at Nauvoo? Even if Sarah did not wish to speak, why did Bennett not publicize this further evidence of Mormon perfidy, instead of leaving the Goddard charges unmentioned? Why did Sarah wait so long to make her accusation, speaking only when the Goddards (long residents of Utah) were safely dead?¹²⁵

Sarah's version is even undercut by an anti-Mormon work. Mary Ettie V. Smith claimed that

Sarah, occupied a house owned by John C. Bennett...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 saw and heard the whole uproar. Sarah ordered the Prophet out of the house, and the Prophet used obscene language to her.¹²⁶

Mary's book has many problems,¹²⁷ but she elsewhere showed no reluctance in condemning Joseph as a libertine and atheist.¹²⁸ Why pass up a perfect opportunity to condemn Joseph, if the Bennett/Sarah version is the truth? We have already seen how Joseph reportedly "flagellated" Bennett for his adulteries; a violent verbal reaction from the Prophet in this instance would be in character if he discovered Sarah in sin, and it is not surprising that Joseph's rebuke would be far more public than Sarah's secret tryst. It would also be unlikely for Joseph to create a scene if he was a jilted lover, but understandable if he was railing against vice.

¹²⁴ Wilhelm Wyl, [Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal], *Mormon Portraits Volume First: Joseph Smith the Prophet, His Family and Friends* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Tribune Printing and Publishing Company, 1886), 60–63; citing Sarah Pratt (21 May 1886).

¹²⁵ NEED DEATH DATES!!

¹²⁶ Nelson Winch Green, *Fifteen Years among the Mormons: Being the Narrative of Mrs. Mary Ettie V. Smith, Late of Great Salt Lake City; a Sister of One of the Mormon High Priests, She Having Been Personally Acquainted with Most of the Mormon Leaders, and Long in the Confidence of The "Prophet," Brigham Young* (New York: H. Dayton, Publishers, 1860 [1858]), 30.

¹²⁷ On her limitations as a historical source, see John W. McCoy, "True Grit and Tall Tales: How Mary Ettie Coray (1827–1867) Got Her Man," (2006).

¹²⁸ Green, *Fifteen Years*, 35–36, 51.

The most persuasive argument against Sarah and Bennett's version—and in favor of the account offered by Joseph's supporters, Mormon and non-Mormon—is Orson Pratt. Pratt would not let threats to his ecclesiastical office or his membership deter him from supporting his wife. Excommunicated, he remained in Nauvoo. He had made these sacrifices for his convictions; only an equally powerful change in those convictions would have made him reconsider.

In time his view of the matter changed. When he received a letter from John C. Bennett trying to enlist him in a plot to return Joseph to Missouri, Pratt handed the letter to Joseph.¹²⁹ Orson was later to say that he got his information about Joseph and his wife from "a wicked source, from those disaffected, but as soon as he learned the truth he was satisfied."¹³⁰ He and Sarah were rebaptized on either the 19th or 20th of January 1843.¹³¹ Joseph recommended that Orson divorce Sarah and marry another—more evidence that Joseph was genuinely concerned about Sarah's behaviour, and was not slandering Sarah to force the Pratts' support.¹³² Otherwise, why risk angering Sarah further by encouraging a divorce, now that she was back in the Church? Orson made his views clear in a later letter: "J.C. Bennett has published lies concerning myself & family & the people with which I am connected.... His book I have read with the greatest disgust. No candid honest man can or will believe it. He has disgraced himself in eyes of all civilized society who will despise his very name."¹³³

Sarah later claimed that her belief never recovered from this period.¹³⁴ Her later behaviour demonstrates that she had a talent for duplicity. Sarah soon betrayed Orson in another way, and hid her actions from everyone:

During Orson's 1852 mission...Sarah began to turn her children against Mormonism. She concealed her actions from neighbors, Church authorities, and her absent husband...

¹²⁹ Orson gave the letter to Joseph on 10 Jan 1843 (Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:251. Joseph was initially angry that Rigdon had not brought him the letter; he later accepted Sidney's explanation that as Postmaster for Nauvoo, he felt such a course would be improper when the letter instructed him to pass it to Pratt. (See Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 315.)

¹³⁰ George L. Mitton and Rhett S. James, "A Response to D. Michael Quinn's Homosexual Distortion of Latter-Day Saint History," *FARMS Review of Books* 10/1 (1998): footnote 70, citing T. Edgar Lyon, "Orson Pratt—Early Mormon Leader," (M.A. diss., University of Chicago, 1932), 31. See also *Millennial Star* 40 (16 December 1878): 788.

¹³¹ Sources disagree on the date. For the 19th, see Woodruff, *WW Journals*, 2:212–213; for the 20th, see Brigham Young, "History," *Millennial Star* 26:127; cited in Daniel W. Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Polygamy before the Death of Joseph Smith" (Purdue University, 1975), 238n268 and "Minutes of the Quorum of the Twelve," 20 Jan. 1843; cited in Van Wagoner, "Sarah M. Pratt," 80. Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:255–256 gives the date as 20th.

¹³² Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 467.

¹³³ Orson Pratt, postscript to letter written by Parley P. Pratt to John Van Cott (7 May 1843), Orson Pratt Collection); cited in Van Wagoner, "Sarah M. Pratt," 82–83.

¹³⁴ Van Wagoner, "Sarah M. Pratt," 89–90.

"I had not only to prevent my children from becoming Mormons, I had to see to it that they should not become imbued with such an early prejudice as would cause them to betray to the neighbors my teachings and intentions." She further explained to the reporter how she accomplished this:

"Many a night, when my children were young and also when they had grown up so as to be companions to me, I have closed this very room where we are sitting, locked the door, pulled down the window curtains, put out all but one candle on the table, gathered my boys close around my chair and talked to them in whispers for fear that what I said would be overheard."¹³⁵

Such actions may be understandable, and a modern reader repulsed by plural marriage may even be in sympathy with them. They demonstrate, however, that Sarah's post-Nauvoo years were filled with duplicity, by her own admission—while Orson was away preaching his faith, Sarah undermined the faith of his children at home.

At the same time that she tried to impeach the Goddards' witness, Sarah also insisted that Joseph had told her "God does not care if we have a good time, if only other people do not know it."¹³⁶ While this sounds like Bennett, it is inconceivable that Joseph would take this stance. Sarah elsewhere claimed that *Bennett* was the source of Joseph's revelation on plural marriage,¹³⁷ and that Joseph had "many more" than eighty wives, regarding himself "the Christ of this dispensation."¹³⁸ She also insisted that William Clayton was "a brute and a drunkard,"¹³⁹ while Brigham Young was "the most bloodthirsty of men."¹⁴⁰ Such transparent exaggeration and fabrication make her—or at least the version presented by Wyl—a witness to be used with extreme caution.

Conclusion

On one hand, we have Bennett—a serial adulterer, sociopath, and witness who perjured himself repeatedly, even over trivial matters—and Sarah Pratt, who waited until her accusers were safely dead before presenting any evidence in her own defense. Sarah also admitted to repeated deceptions of her husband and neighbors, and perjured herself repeatedly in Wyl's work.

¹³⁵ Richard S. Van Wagoner and Mary C. Van Wagoner, "Orson Pratt, Jr., Gifted Son of an Apostle and an Apostate," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 21/1 (Spring 1988): 85–86; citing "Orson Pratt's Harem," *New York Herald* (18 May 1877): 1–4, New York City Public Library, page 2.

¹³⁶ Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 62.

¹³⁷ Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 60–63; also in Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy* (Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Company, 1914 [1910]), 130–132.

¹³⁸ Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 53–54.

¹³⁹ Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 94.

¹⁴⁰ Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 53.

Ranged against Bennett and Sarah are the wronged husband, and multiple Mormon and non-Mormon witnesses (including a hostile anti-Mormon source) who were not challenged contemporaneously, and whose accounts match the available timeline.

I think it probable, then, that Bennett and Sarah were engaged in an illicit affair. When Joseph learned of it, he was incensed and worried. Given that he entered plural marriage with the wives of other apostles, and was also sealed to some women whose husbands were not faithful Church members (see **CHAPTER**), it is possible that he did offer Sarah a plural relationship. I suspect that he did. The tenor and circumstances of that offer, however, have doubtless been distorted beyond all recognition by Bennett and Sarah. Given Joseph's apparent belief that the sealing power could both bind him to faithful members and possibly help save the less valiant, he may have hoped to link himself more tightly to Orson and help redeem Sarah from her folly. If so, he succeeded in his first goal, but failed in the second.

Do not copy

Chapter 3—Sidney Rigdon, His Family, and John C. Bennett

[Joseph Smith had] a too implicit trust in [men's] protestations of repentance when overtaken in their sins; a too great tenacity in friendship for men he had once taken into his confidence after they had been proven unworthy of the friendship....¹⁴¹

- Brigham H. Roberts

Following his departure from Nauvoo, one of John C. Bennett's first attacks on Joseph Smith accused him of attempting the seduction of Sidney Rigdon's daughter, Nancy, in April 1842. Bennett claimed that George W. Robinson (Sidney's son-in-law) and Francis M. Higbee (Nancy's boyfriend) could confirm the tale, and called on them to do so.¹⁴² Of all the charges leveled against Joseph, this is perhaps the most convoluted. The story began with Bennett in 1841, involved Nancy by 1842, and some essential facts did not come to light until 1844.

Bennett and Prostitution

Bennett was not content with seducing the women of Nauvoo privately. Brigham Young later told him that "one charge was seducing young women, and leading young men into difficulty—he admitted it—if he had let young men and women alone it would have been better for him."¹⁴³ Young was essentially charging Bennett with prostitution.

A teacher named John Taylor, not to be confused with the third president of the Church, wrote later of Bennett's establishment of a brothel in Nauvoo: "John C. Bennett and a lot of them built an ill-fame house near the Temple in Nauvoo.... After they had built it, John C. Bennett and the Fosters,—I knew all their names at the time, they were the head men of it, after they got it built, they wrote on it in large letters what it was,—a sign declaring what it was, and what it was there for...."¹⁴⁴ The Mormons were not amused, since "We could not get [to meeting]

¹⁴¹ Brigham H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 6:358.

¹⁴² John C. Bennett, *Sangamo Journal* (7 July 1842); cited in Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy*, 57.

¹⁴³ Brigham Young testimony in Multiple, "Municipal Court," *Times and Seasons* 5/10 (15 May 1844): 539.

¹⁴⁴ Price. "Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy [Vol. 1].", chapter 11; citing John Taylor in Anonymous, *Complainant's Abstract of Pleading and Evidence in the Circuit Court of the United States, Western District of Missouri, Western Division of Kansas City. The Reorganized Church of*

without passing this house and looking right at it, and one or two thousand people would go...[past it] on a Sabbath and they didn't feel very good seeing that house there with great big letters facing them."¹⁴⁵ After Bennett's departure, they "took the building, and put it on rollers; and there was a deep gully there, and they pitched the house into it."¹⁴⁶ While mayor, Bennett also reportedly tried to prevent the city council from disposing of a "house of ill fame."¹⁴⁷

Not only did Bennett encourage vice, but he took steps to ensure that his followers did not suffer the consequences. He was repeatedly accused of "embryo infanticide" and his biographer observes that this charge "was likely true."¹⁴⁸ The accusation is plausible, since it derives from both Mormons (Hyrum Smith, Zeruah Goddard) and their enemies (Sarah Pratt). Bennett probably had the requisite expertise, since he had been twice professor of obstetrics or midwifery while promoting medical colleges.¹⁴⁹ In 1837, a medical class wrote Bennett and requested that his lecture notes be made available "for publication in pamphlet form...that the practice of obstetric medicine would be rendered much less onerous to the operator, and safer for the female."¹⁵⁰ The request demonstrates that others besides Bennett considered him an expert in women's issues. This is one of the few times when Bennett's help was sought, rather than aggressively self-promoted.

Bennett also used his medical skills to treat at least one patient for venereal disease—Chauncey Higbee's younger brother, Francis M. Higbee. He was unsuccessful.

"Too Indelicate for the Public"

Desperate for a cure, Higbee asked Joseph Smith for help. "A French woman," (likely a prostitute) from Warsaw caused Higbee's need for "medical assistance...Dr. Bennet[t] attended him, Joseph Smith administered unto him but it was irksome," recalled one witness. "Higbee assented that it was so, he did not contradict it, he promised to reform—he would do better, he would do so no more."¹⁵¹

Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Complainant, Vs. The Church of Christ at Independence, Missouri ... Respondents. (Lamoni, Iowa: Herald Publishing House and Bindery, 1893), 192.

¹⁴⁵ Vesta Crawford "Notes on Emma Smith," [typewritten notes of interviews with descendants of Emma Smith], University of Utah; cited in Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 112.

¹⁴⁶ Price. "Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy [Vol. 1].", chapter 11; citing John Taylor in Anonymous, *Pleading and Evidence*, 192.

¹⁴⁷ *The Wasp* 1 (2 October 1842): 2 reports Bennett's opposition; the decision to destroy the house is described in "The Neusance [sic]," *Times and Seasons* 3/2 (15 November 1841): 599–600.

¹⁴⁸ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 113.

¹⁴⁹ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 10, 32.

¹⁵⁰ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 45.

¹⁵¹ H.J. Sherwood testimony in Multiple, "Municipal Court," 540.

Joseph would later speak of troubling events involving Bennett and Higbee which likely date to this period.¹⁵² He claimed that it "occurred a long time before John C. Bennet[t] left [t]his city." A 1841 date seems more plausible than the spring prior to Bennett's 1842 departure. Joseph reported, "I was called on to visit Francis M. Higbee; I went and found him on a bed on the floor." At this point, the editor of the *Times and Seasons* felt that the material was too graphic for public consumption, and inserted the following parenthetical remark:

Here follows testimony which is too indelicate for the public eye or ear; and we would here remark, that so revolting, corrupt, and disgusting has been the conduct of most of this clique, that we feel to dread having any thing to do with the publication of their trials; we will not however offend the public eye or ear with a repetition of the foulness of their crimes any more.¹⁵³

What, then, was so terrible that the *Times and Seasons* would not print it? By this time—May 1844—the war of affidavits and words against Bennett had included charges of seduction, adultery, attempted murder, prostitution, and abortion. What could be worse? Novelist Samuel W. Taylor "concluded that the only charge that was worse than what was already published was sodomy. Taylor presumed that Higbee was with Bennett on the floor."¹⁵⁴

Bennett's biographer also details how after Nauvoo "he [may have] had a passionate relationship with Pierce B. Fagen."¹⁵⁵ Bennett certainly felt strongly about Fagen. "[T]his attraction might well have been of a passionate nature, at least on Bennett's part" but "no further information" is available.¹⁵⁶ The openly homosexual D. Michael Quinn is convinced of Bennett's homosexuality, but Quinn's tendency to refract evidence through the lens of his own sexual proclivities makes him a weak witness.¹⁵⁷

The only other mention of homosexual sin in Nauvoo came from William Smith, whose no-holds-barred editorial style led him to attack Bennett as guilty of "adultery, fornication and—we were going to say (*Buggery*)."¹⁵⁸ Bennett's biographer notes that no evidence was presented, "and perhaps [this charge] was made in the heat of battle."¹⁵⁹ While this is possible, I think it more likely that

¹⁵² Richard Price believes that the event described by Joseph occurred when he went to administer to Higbee. If so, I suspect that Joseph was making an unannounced visit; if Higbee had been expecting the prophet, he would not have been found in such a compromising position.

¹⁵³ Joseph Smith testimony in Multiple, "Municipal Court," 538.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, *History of the Church*, 113.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, *History of the Church*, 113.

¹⁵⁶ Smith, *History of the Church*, 148–149.

¹⁵⁷ For devastating critiques of Quinn's risible attempt to homosexualize 19th century Mormons, see Mitton and James, "Homosexual Distortion," 141–263 and Klaus J. Hansen, "Quinn speak (Review of Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example by D. Michael Quinn)," *FARMS Review of books* 10/1 (1998): 132–140.

¹⁵⁸ *Nauvoo Wasp*, Extra (27 July 1842): 2; cited in Mitton and James, "Homosexual Distortion," 157.

¹⁵⁹ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 112.

William had at least heard rumours, though Joseph was not then willing to tell all he knew, and risk alienating Francis Higbee completely. As will be seen, Higbee was close to the Rigdon family, and the charge of buggery against Bennett appeared less than a month after Bennett's accusations regarding Nancy appeared. William's remark is perhaps best seen as a warning to Higbee, who Bennett was encouraging to attack Joseph.

Brigham Young testified that a few days after his return from England in July 1841, Bennett "acknowledged that Higbee had the [a blank is here inserted by the editor, rather than naming the venereal disease] and that he had doctored him, he acknowledged that, and a great deal more."¹⁶⁰ Higbee's immorality was revealed at the same time as the first accusations of seduction against Bennett (see PREVIOUS CHAPTER).¹⁶¹ Anxious to placate Joseph and the other leaders, Bennett betrayed Higbee's confidence and disclosed his medical problem to the prophet. As Hyrum Smith remembered, "Francis did not say any thing about his sickness, but Dr. Bennet[t] made those observations to him [Joseph] that he had doctored him in the time of his sickness." Hyrum later insisted that eventually Higbee too "had confessed to him that he had had the [blank]!"¹⁶²

It seems that Higbee's behaviour came to light at about the time when Bennett's seductions were first discovered in the summer of 1841. Higbee did not, reportedly, fight the charges—like Bennett, he frankly admitted them. Brigham Young recalled how downcast Higbee and Bennett were: "when I came into the room, Francis Higbee rather recoiled and wished to withdraw; he went out and sat upon a pile of wood. He said it is all true, I am sorry for it, I wish it had never happened...."¹⁶³

Higbee's intense shame may give credence to the homosexual charges—while fornication was frowned on, it was at least understood. For nineteenth century Americans—especially religious ones—homosexual behaviour was beyond the pale. Bennett was not shy about accusing Joseph and the Mormons of every imaginary crime. They were supposedly

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; and they have out-heroded Herod, and out-deviled the devil, slandered God Almighty, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Angels.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Brigham Young testimony in Multiple, "Municipal Court," 539.

¹⁶¹ We recall that Joseph had first received a letter warning of Bennett's abandoned family in early July 1841. See Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:42–43.

¹⁶² Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:434–436 (10 June 1844).

¹⁶³ Brigham Young testimony in Multiple, "Municipal Court," 539.

¹⁶⁴ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 257.

Despite this encyclopaedic parade of evil—including rape, incest, and bestiality—Bennett is silent on homosexual issues. Perhaps he knew that topic was best left quiet.

Whatever the truth of the homosexual charges, the matter of Higbee's immorality in 1841 seems to have been handled quietly by Joseph and a few leaders; no formal record of Church discipline has been found. We have already seen the same approach with Bennett and Sarah Pratt (see **PREVIOUS CHAPTER**).

Nancy Rigdon

Matters remained relatively quiet until the following spring, though from then onward "Bennett's influence in official matters steadily diminished."¹⁶⁵ With Bennett's help, a Masonic Lodge was established in Nauvoo in October 1841, and new members were inducted beginning March 15, 1842.¹⁶⁶ In November 1841, the city council approved the destruction of a Nauvoo brothel, perhaps provoked by Francis Higbee's escapades.¹⁶⁷ Joseph continued to privately teach and enter into plural marriages throughout the winter and spring. Bennett would later accuse Joseph of attempting to seduce Nancy Rigdon on April 9, 1842.¹⁶⁸

Bennett's Version

In Bennett's version, Joseph offered Bennett "five hundred dollars or the best lot on Main Street," if he would "assist me in procuring Nancy as one of my spiritual wives." Bennett, never shy of self-aggrandizement, replied nobly that "I cannot agree to it. Elder Rigdon is one of my best friends, and his family are now pure and spotless, and it would be a great pity to approach the truly virtuous."¹⁶⁹

Bennett went on to claim that Joseph had Nancy brought to the printing-office by Mrs. Orson Hyde. Joseph was reportedly unable to see her, and told her to call the next day. It is at this point that Bennett's scheme becomes clear, since he reports that Nancy "communicated the matter to Colonel Francis M. Higbee, who was addressing her, and asked his advice as to the second visit."¹⁷⁰ Francis Higbee was Nancy's boyfriend, as well as Bennett's secret protégé in the seduction of women.

Bennett, ever anxious to present himself the hero, implored Joseph not to touch the daughter of a fellow Mason, but the comic-book Joseph of Bennett's fictions

¹⁶⁵ Flanders, *Nauvoo*, 262.

¹⁶⁶ Stanley B. Kimball, "Heber C. Kimball and Family, the Nauvoo Years," *Brigham Young University Studies* 15/4 (Summer 1975): 457.

¹⁶⁷ See "The Neusance [sic]," *Times and Seasons* 3/2 (15 November 1841): 599–600.

¹⁶⁸ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 241 says it was the day of Ephraim Marks' funeral; see Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:587 for the funeral date; on the dating of this event, see Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 31n36.

¹⁶⁹ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 241.

¹⁷⁰ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 242.

refused to listen. Bennett then claimed that he returned to Higbee, "and told him Joe's designs, and requested him to go immediately and see Miss Rigdon, and tell her the infernal plot...but advise her to go and see for herself what Joe would do."¹⁷¹

Bennett insisted that Joseph took Nancy "into a private room...and LOCKED THE DOOR." Bennett's version had Joseph tell Nancy she would join the fictitious "*Chambered Sisters of Charity*," or "*Cloistered Saints*," promised her she could marry another besides him, and tried to kiss her. Nancy bravely threatened to scream, and was released with the promise that Sister Hyde would explain matters to her more fully. A few days later, Joseph sent his secretary, Willard Richards, with a letter to Nancy, which Bennett reproduced after having it "handed me by Colonel F.M. Higbee."¹⁷²

We can easily dismiss a great deal of this narrative. The idea that Joseph would offer Bennett money for his aid is ridiculous; it is more absurd that Bennett would turn him down if the offer was made. Bennett's concern for purity and virtue is pure fiction, as is his talk of the Chambered Sisters and Cloistered Saints (see **PREVIOUS CHAPTER**). The claim that Joseph used romantic gestures—declaring her the "the idol of his affections," or trying to kiss her—matches little of the more reliable testimony.¹⁷³

More interesting is the apostate Sarah Pratt's later testimony that she "knew Nancy intimately and says that she was a very good, virtuous girl, and that Bennett's tale is true in all essential points."¹⁷⁴ How does Sarah know this? She is nowhere described as being present for these events. In the same late-life reminiscences, Sarah attacked Bennett as "full of low cunning and licentiousness,"¹⁷⁵ and Wyl elsewhere observes that "Mrs. Sarah M. Pratt has given us a portrait of him [Bennett], which shows conclusively that one can be a great man in the world while he would be a very little one in the penitentiary."¹⁷⁶ Yet, she assures us that Bennett's account of an event for which she was not present is accurate.

The intrigue thickens, for in Bennett's work, he portrayed himself as the friend and defender of Mrs. Pratt, willing to risk Joseph's wrath to warn her privately of the prophet's plans for seduction.¹⁷⁷ Bennett went so far to claim that Joseph had told him to have some bogus plates manufactured that he could display as the Book of Mormon record. Bennett insisted that he then "mentioned this proposition to Mrs. Sarah M. Pratt, on the day the Prophet made it, and

¹⁷¹ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 242.

¹⁷² Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 243, 245 (italics and small caps in original).

¹⁷³ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 242–243; see Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 440, 450 on the non-romantic approach favoured by Joseph.

¹⁷⁴ Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 288.

¹⁷⁵ Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 133.

¹⁷⁶ Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 127.

¹⁷⁷ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 229–230.

requested her to keep it in memory, as it might be of much importance."¹⁷⁸ Bennett's report of Joseph's designs on her virtue gave the noble Mrs. Pratt the chance to remind him—and the reader—how "I remember well when you told me of his desiring you to procure the engraving of new plates of the Book of Mormon, for the further and more perfect blinding of the people."¹⁷⁹ This is as unlikely as it is heavy-handed.

In 1842, Bennett seemed confident of Sarah's support for his version, and praises her extravagantly as "one of the most elegant, graceful, amiable, and accomplished women in the place"¹⁸⁰ and claims he "had influence with her."¹⁸¹ By 1886, Sarah had nothing but contempt for Bennett, but still assured us that his version is utterly reliable when it attacks Joseph Smith.

This dynamic strengthens the case for Sarah and Bennett's adultery. In 1842, Bennett had high hopes that Sidney Rigdon and Orson Pratt (whom he also fawned on in print) would support him and Sarah in their attack on Joseph.¹⁸² By 1886, Sarah knew too well that Bennett had used and betrayed her too—their adultery likely alienated Orson: he chose to believe Joseph over her, and ultimately embraced plural marriage. Because of Bennett, Sarah lost her husband, her faith, and her respectability among the Saints.¹⁸³

Calm Before the Storm

Though much of Bennett's account is fabricated, virtually all historians have accepted that the letter attributed to Joseph by Bennett is legitimate, though the only source for the text is Bennett's anti-Mormon works (the letter's contents are discussed in **CHAPTER**).¹⁸⁴ We know little about what was going on between

¹⁷⁸ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 175.

¹⁷⁹ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 230.

¹⁸⁰ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 226.

¹⁸¹ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 228.

¹⁸² See Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 210–211, 231–232.

¹⁸³ Even the anti-Mormon work of John D. Lee reported that Bennett "became intimate with Orson Pratt's wife, while Pratt was on a mission. That he built her a fine frame house, and lodged with her, and used her as his wife...He said that the Prophet gave him permission to do as he had done with Mrs. Pratt." - John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled; or, the Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop, John D. Lee; (Written by Himself) Embracing the History of Mormonism ... With an Exposition of the Secret History, Signs, Symbols and Crimes of the Mormon Church. Also the True History of the Horrible Butchery Known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre* (St. Louis: Bryan, Brand, 1877), 147–148. At the very least, this demonstrates what Mormons thought of Sarah after Joseph's death.

¹⁸⁴ Richard Price is an exception; he argues that the letter to Nancy was written by Willard Richards with no input from Joseph. An RLDS conservative, Price is committed to the stance that Joseph did not teach or practice plural marriage. See Price, *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy [Vol. 2]*, "Bennett's Sixth Letter, or the Essay on 'Happiness'," on-line at <http://restorationbookstore.org/articles/nopoligamy/jsfp-visionarticles/bennett6letter.htm>. On the letter's text, see Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1984), 689: "The earliest known source of this letter is John C. Bennett's publication of it in the *Sangamo Journal* August 19, 1842. Bennett claimed that the original letter

Nancy's receipt of the letter, dated between April 10–15, and the end of the month.¹⁸⁵ That Joseph was troubled by the visit with Nancy, however, is suggested by his sermon the next day: "[I preached in the grove, and pronounced a curse] upon all adulterers and Fornicators, and unvirtuous persons and those who have made use of my name to carry on their iniquitous designs."¹⁸⁶

The prophet's remarks to the Relief Society on April 28 suggest that his concerns grew ever more acute. Joseph

did not know as he should have many opportunities of teaching them -- that they were going to be left to themselves -- they would not long have him to instruct them -- that the church would not have his instruction long, and the world would not be troubled with him a great while, and would not have his teachings. He spoke of delivering the keys to [both] this society and to the Church -- that according to his prayers God had appointed him elsewhere.

He exhorted the sisters always to concentrate their faith and prayers for, and place confidence in those whom God has appointed to honor, whom God has plac'd at the head to lead—that we should arm them with our prayers—that the keys of the kingdom are about to be given to them, that they may be able to detect every thing false—as well as to the Elders...

He said if one member become corrupt and you know it; you must immediately put it away. *The sympathies of the heads of the church have induc'd them to bear with those that were corrupt in consequence of which all become contaminated*—you must put down iniquity and by your good example provoke the Elders to good works....¹⁸⁷

Joseph was clearly tired, and we see one of many intimations of his early death. His preoccupations are clear, however: he and other leaders have allowed their "sympathies...to bear with those that were corrupt." To his dismay, Joseph now

was in his possession and was written by Willard Richards at Joseph Smith's dictation...In November 1855 the letter was copied into the manuscript of Joseph Smith's History under the date of August 27, 1842, by Thomas Bullock, a clerk in the Church Historian's Office. A manuscript copy of the letter in the Joseph Smith Papers places the date of the original writing "about January 1842" and designates it as "Joseph's Letter to Nancy Rigdon." [para] There are slight differences in the punctuation and word usage in Bennett's two publications of the letter in the *Sangamo Journal* and his *History of the Saints*. A comparison shows that the manuscript copy in the Smith papers and its publication in the Joseph Smith History follows the latter source."

¹⁸⁵ Bennett dates the letter to "a day or two" after Joseph's visit on April 9 (Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 243); Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 326–327n318 put it "around 15 April 1842" following Van Hale in "The Purported Letter of Joseph Smith to Nancy Rigdon," unpublished paper in possession of the authors.

¹⁸⁶ Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1987), 244 (10 April 1844), citing "Book of the Law of the Lord"; see also Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:587.

¹⁸⁷ Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 116–117, italics added; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Apr. 28, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow; also in Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:605–607.

feared that the actions of these few could corrupt the entire Church. While urging the sisters to encourage virtue, Joseph also tried to forestall a witch-hunt based on rumour: "Let your labors be confined mostly to those around you to your own circle, as far as knowledge is concerned, it may extend to all the world, but your administrations, should be confin'd to the circle of your immediate acquaintances and more especially to the members of the society." The last thing Joseph wanted was over-zealous Relief Society members accusing others (including him) of impropriety based on rumor or insufficient information, but he also wanted to protect them from the predations of Bennett and his clique.

As we saw in the last chapter, Bennett's repeated seductions were proven after women appeared before the high council and testified against him and Chauncey Higbee in 1842. Yet, the first of these witnesses appeared on May 20; three days earlier, Joseph had told his secretary to allow Bennett to withdraw from the Church if he would do so, and Joseph began having leaders sign a letter withdrawing fellowship from Bennett nine days earlier.¹⁸⁸ It is therefore inescapable that Joseph was already worried about Bennett, and likely others, by at least sometime in April. Otherwise, he would not have spoken as he did to the Relief Society, or prepared to ease Bennett out even before Chauncey Higbee's sins came to light at the end of May.

Willard Richards certainly believed that Bennett was the cause of Joseph's trouble. Richards acted as Joseph's scribe, and kept his journal. The day after the address to the Relief Society, Richards wrote in Joseph's journal that there "was made manifest a conspiracy against the peace of this household."¹⁸⁹ As Dean Jesse notes, the initials "'J.C.B.' written lightly in the margin by Willard Richards no doubt refers to John C. Bennett."¹⁹⁰ When Richards expanded Joseph's journal for the *History of the Church*, he wrote that "it gave me some trouble to counteract the design of certain base individuals, and restore peace. The Lord makes manifest to me many things, which it not wisdom for me to make public, until others can witness the proof of them."¹⁹¹ By late April, Bennett was definitely causing problems, and Joseph had concerns about some other members' behaviour.

Francis Higbee was likely a prominent cause of those concerns. Joseph's later testimony reported that

Bennet[t] said Higbee pointed out the spot where he had seduced a girl, and that he had seduced another. I did not believe it, I felt hurt, and labored with Higbee about it; he swore with uplifted hands, that he had lied about the matter. *I went and told the girl's parents, when Higbee and Bennet[t] made affidavits and both*

¹⁸⁸ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 40–41; *Times and Seasons* 3/15 (15 June 1842): 830.

¹⁸⁹ Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Journal, 1832–1842*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, Co., 1992), 379 (29 April 1842).

¹⁹⁰ Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Journal, 1832–1842*, 379n372.

¹⁹¹ Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:607–608; also published in "Joseph Smith's History," *Millennial Star* 19 (20 June 1857): 390.

perjured themselves, they swore false about me so as to blind the family. I brought Francis M. Higbee before Brigham Young, Hyrum Smith and others; Bennet[t] was present, when they both acknowledged that they had done these things, and asked us to forgive them. I got vexed, my feelings had been hurt; Higbee has been guilty of adulterous communication, perjury...¹⁹²

It is not immediately clear whether this remark applies to the initial problems with Higbee and Bennett (1841, just after Brigham Young's return from England), or whether it refers to 1842. The editor's decision to omit the preceding testimony (which, we recall, possibly addressed Higbee and Bennett's homosexual crimes in 1841) makes the transition into the above paragraph abrupt.

A close look, however, makes it clear that Joseph is here describing a *later* problem with Higbee. "I also preferred charges against Bennett," continued Joseph,

the same charges which I am now telling: and he got up and told them it was the truth, when he pleaded for his life, and begged to be forgiven; this was his own statement before sixty or seventy men; he said the charges were true against him and Higbee. I have been endeavoring to throw out shafts to defend myself, because they were corrupt, and I knew they were determined to ruin me: he has told the public that he was determined to prosecute me, because I slandered him, although I tell nothing but the truth.¹⁹³

These charges were eventually confessed to sixty or seventy men—they are not the immoralities handled quietly in 1841. Instead, Joseph is here describing the confession which Bennett made before the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge on May 26, 1842.¹⁹⁴ Hyrum Smith's testimony recalled "Dr. Bennett asking forgiveness of the Lodge...Francis M. Higbee acknowledged that it was the truth, that he was sorry, and had been a thousand times," with "about sixty [people] present."¹⁹⁵ Heber C. Kimball described the same event in his 1844 testimony:

I think it is near two years [i.e., 1842]: I had some conversation with Francis Higbee, he expressed himself indignant at some things; he expressed himself that he was sorry, he would live a new life, he never would say a word against President Joseph Smith...¹⁹⁶

Higbee, then, was indignant about some things, and confessed himself guilty of seduction along with John C. Bennett at the Nauvoo Lodge. Joseph further noted that when he told the parents the truth, Higbee and Bennett swore false affidavits "to blind the family" of one of the girls Higbee had seduced. The pieces

¹⁹² Joseph Smith testimony in Multiple, "Municipal Court," 539, italics added.

¹⁹³ Joseph Smith testimony in Multiple, "Municipal Court," 539.

¹⁹⁴ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:18–19.

¹⁹⁵ Hyrum Smith testimony in Multiple, "Municipal Court," 539–540.

¹⁹⁶ Heber C. Kimball testimony in Multiple, "Municipal Court," 540–541.

of the puzzle compel us to ask—was the girl Nancy Rigdon?¹⁹⁷ And, if so, is such a charge justified?

The Character of Nancy Rigdon

As with Sarah Pratt, historian Richard Van Wagoner seems determined to defend and rehabilitate Nancy Rigdon while savaging Joseph Smith. For example, he claims that "orthodox Mormon sources provides evidence of the prophet's passion for women,"¹⁹⁸ leading Joseph to create a Nauvoo "where eros and duplicity seemed to subvert the highest moral values."¹⁹⁹ Van Wagoner's Joseph was "slandering [Rigdon's] family" while Nancy's "reputation...[was] impugned by avalanche of slander."²⁰⁰ This is not the language of dispassionate analysis—the reader is cautioned not to ignore the none-too-subtle agenda at work.²⁰¹

Scandalous stories do not make slander—one has to actually demonstrate that such statements are maliciously false. Van Wagoner fails to undertake this analysis; he cites Bennett and other apostates or enemies of the Church without comment,²⁰² and yet says nothing of the sworn testimony from 1844 which we have discussed in the previous section. It will not do to merely label such claims as slander; we must test them.

¹⁹⁷ Richard Price has priority in reaching this conclusion in Price. "Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy [Vol. 1].", chapter 11, <http://restorationbookstore.org/articles/nopoligamy/jsfp-vol1/chp11.htm>. While I was aware of Price's conclusion, I did not initially agree with it. I have, somewhat reluctantly, become inclined to this view, though my analysis here does not rely on Price's treatment.

¹⁹⁸ Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 299.

¹⁹⁹ Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 293.

²⁰⁰ Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 298.

²⁰¹ Van Wagoner frankly admits that his book is intended as a rebuke to the "attraction to prophetic posturing and swagger [which] resides deep in the Mormon psyche" (viii) and declares, "I do not apologize for exposing the warts and double chins of religious leaders...perhaps [through this work]...others will feel more at ease with their own wrinkles" (x). In his zeal to expose such warts he forgets that not every wart reported by an enemy is, in fact, a blemish. Van Wagoner concludes that Rigdon demonstrates that "we must ultimately think for ourselves rather than surrender decision-making to others, especially to those who dictate what God would have us do" (457). Ironically, he gives scant decision-making ability to his readers, since he spends little time on issues of historical source criticism and internal consistency. One is given few tools to evaluate Van Wagoner's framing of the narrative without considerable leg-work. His ham-fisted and ill-informed approach to psychiatric issues also mars this volume—see Howard K. Harper *et al.*, "Van Wagoner's Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Biographical Excess," *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1 (2002): 261–274.

²⁰² See for example his use of Emma's cousin Hiel Lewis (291), Benjamin F. Winchester, an apostate enemy described as "a close friend of the prophet" (291), apostate apostle William McLellin (291), Oliverly Olney (298), the anti-Mormon Catherine Lewis who claims to be citing Helen Mar Kimball (294), George W. Robinson (295, 296, 298), and Bennett repeatedly (294, 298). We have already seen Van Wagoner's tendency to credit hostile sources without close analysis in his previous book on Mormon polygamy—see **CHAPTER WOMANIZING** of the present work.

"The bedeviling paradox for many regarding the Nancy Rigdon incident," claims Van Wagoner, "is that while Smith's fame as a prophet of God makes the charges against him hard to believe, her steadfast reputation makes them difficult to dismiss."²⁰³ This argument fails to acknowledge, however, that it may be true that Joseph approached Nancy about being a plural wife, but this does not mean that Nancy was otherwise pure or innocent.²⁰⁴

Van Wagoner makes much of the affidavits attesting Nancy Rigdon's purity. At best, such affidavits only prove that some believed Nancy to be chaste. Bennett, of course, managed to have multiple affairs for months without public outcry, and taught both Higbee brothers to do likewise. Affidavits attesting to Joseph Smith's "high moral character" were also produced, and yet Van Wagoner clearly sees them as mistaken.²⁰⁵

Is it surprising, then, that Nancy's reputation might well have been unblemished, even if she was guilty? This is, after all, the point of conducting clandestine seduction—the public remains unaware.²⁰⁶ One notes too that despite Bennett's urging in the press,²⁰⁷ there was no statement from Francis Higbee affirming Nancy's innocence—strange indeed for a boyfriend not to rush to his beloved's defence.

Bennett would claim that Nancy showed Francis Higbee the letter from Joseph, and eventually to her family. Subsequent events demonstrate that, for once, Bennett was correct.

The Rigdon Family Version of Joseph's Proposal

George Robinson, Sidney's son-in-law, provided his understanding of Joseph's first interview with Nancy, during which "[Joseph claimed] he had got a REVELATION on the subject, and God had given him all the *blessings of Jacob*, &c., &c., and that there was no sin in it whatever; but if she had any scruples of conscience about the matter, *he would marry her* PRIVATELY, and enjoined her to secrecy...." Robinson claimed that Nancy "repulsed him...and she left him with disgust, and came home and told her father."²⁰⁸

²⁰³ Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 299.

²⁰⁴ It is a failure to accept the existence of Joseph's plural marriages that fatally flaws Richard Price's work, for example.

²⁰⁵ Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 299; citing *The Wasp* (20 July 1843).

²⁰⁶ Witnesses supporting Nancy include Sarah Pratt (Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 288), Oliver Olney (*Sangamo Journal*, 7 October 1842), Joseph H. Jackson (NEED CITE), and several collected by Bennett: George W. Robinson (248–249, 252), John F. Olney (249–250), Carlos Gove (251), Sidney Rigdon (251–252), Henry Marks (252).

²⁰⁷ John C. Bennett, *Sangamo Journal* (7 July 1842); cited in Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy*, 57.

²⁰⁸ George W. Robinson to General James Arlington Bennet, "Dear Sir," (27 July 1842); cited in Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 246 (small caps and italics in original).

Robinson has some credibility, though he is only a second-hand witness of what Joseph told Nancy in their first private meeting. Even the hostile Nancy's version, filtered through Robinson, affirms that Joseph framed his proposal as a matter of revelation. The use of the phrase "blessings of Jacob" also resonates authentically, since Joseph saw plural marriage as a culmination of promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The "&c., &c." describing Joseph's theological justification is likely intended to be dismissive by Robinson, but it demonstrates that a good deal more was probably said, which Nancy ignored or did not understand. Joseph also mentioned marrying Nancy privately—i.e., without her parents' knowledge—which is also consistent with his proposals to other adult women. Joseph's emphasis on secrecy is likewise authentic.

How did Nancy explain matters? The only direct account from her is from 1884. This account has its problems: it was reported by RLDS elders, who were always keen to prove that plural marriage was an invention of Brigham Young, not Joseph. They reported Nancy saying, "I never heard of [polygamy] until after we came to Pittsburg [sic], and some time after." She did admit to hearing about "sealing," in 1842, but said, "I can not say that I ever understood it fully. Can not give the object." The elders then asked, "Was it a state of marriage and did it contemplate living together as husband and wife?" Nancy replied, "I never so understood it." Nancy also added that Joseph "seemed entirely different" in "the last year or two" of his life, "but I never knew or even heard that he had more than one wife."²⁰⁹

Either Nancy or the RLDS elders were lying in 1884, or Robinson and Bennett were lying in 1842. Nancy's remarks may be technically correct: Joseph may have been offering more of a sealing than a marriage in which they would live "together as husband and wife," and Nancy rejected it because she did not appreciate the offer or theology which underlay it. Alternately, she may simply have wished not to get dragged back into the plural marriage debate, and so misled the RLDS elders, who were happy to have their beliefs confirmed.

It is difficult to know if Nancy was as insulted and dramatic as Robinson claims. It serves Bennett's purposes to portray her as outraged female innocence, and her family would have had an equal investment in believing that Nancy fearlessly defended her virtue. Their natural concern with clearing Nancy's name affects how we read other accounts from the Rigdon family. Long after her death, Nancy's son wrote "some one is wrong, BUT I KNOW MY MOTHER IS NOT. FOR SHE WAS THE PERSON MOST CONCERNED.... I would believe her, above any person living or dead.... SHE [WAS] NOT MISINFORMED OF THE

²⁰⁹ William H. Kelley and E. L. Kelley, Interview with Nancy Rigdon Ellis (14 May 1844), Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; reported in Joseph Smith *et al.*, *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Independence, Mo: Herald House, 1967), 4:452–453; citing *The Saints' Herald*, vol. 31, p. 339; portions also cited in Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 295n242.

CIRCUMSTANCES."²¹⁰ His passion and certitude are clear, but would we expect a son to feel otherwise? Joseph Smith, III, had equally passionate views on Joseph Smith, Jr.'s plural marriages, because he trusted his mother. Yet, young Joseph was entirely misled.

Having decided to reject the prophet's offer—whatever its nature—Nancy herself would have wanted to appear righteously indignant for the benefit of her family and Francis Higbee. Given Joseph's concern for secrecy, however, if Nancy had left hostile and belligerent it would seem strange for him to commit his ideas to paper. If she did rebuke him as strongly as Robinson claims, why would Joseph provide her with written evidence of his offer and then trust that Nancy would destroy it unread by others?

If, however, Joseph confronted Nancy with a reprimand for immoral behaviour, she may have been ashamed and taken aback. A proposal of plural marriage would only have surprised her further, and she may have then left in a much more subdued—or ambiguous—manner. As with Sarah Pratt, Joseph may have hoped to both tie himself closer to a prominent leader while also redeeming a wayward relation. (If we grant Nancy the benefit of the doubt, we might conclude that Joseph only cautioned her about closer attachment to Francis Higbee, and urged plural marriage as a better option than pursuing a relationship with Francis. Such a marriage would have protected Nancy and also bound Joseph to Sidney. In either scenario, plural marriage could have been astonishing enough to send Nancy away thinking, rather than shouting.)

"Despite the drama of these events," Van Wagoner tells us, "neither [Nancy] Rigdon [or Sarah] Pratt...stood to gain from exposing the prophet's prurience; none had obvious political motives to hurt him."²¹¹ This is sheer nonsense—if Sarah or Nancy was guilty of sin, as Joseph and others claimed, then they had every reason to undercut Joseph. Political considerations are irrelevant. Having made the decision to share the letter with Francis, Nancy effectively informed Bennett, who knew exactly what use to make of this gift the prophet had handed them. Under the influence of Bennett and Higbee, Nancy had several days to tell and retell her story. Memory is fickle and fluid. If Nancy had been immoral with Higbee, she had a motive to paint the man who could unmask her in the worst light. If Nancy had done nothing wrong, Bennett and Higbee likely did little to encourage her to seek the revelatory guidance to which other plural wives had recourse (see **CHAPTER**).

Private Visit With Sidney Rigdon

It seems clear that tensions were high between the Rigdons and Joseph before May. Joseph presented his first address to those who would receive the full

²¹⁰ S. M. Ellis to L. J. Nuffer, letter (17 November 1933); cited in Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 299n273, the emphatic capitals are in the original.

²¹¹ Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 299.

endowment on May 1, but Sidney and Bennett "were conspicuously absent."²¹² On the 11th, Joseph drafted the letter to withdraw Church fellowship from Bennett, "he having been labored with from time to time, to persuade him to amend his conduct, apparently to no good effect."²¹³ The next day, Joseph "[d]ictated a letter to Elder Rigdon concerning certain difficulties, or surmises which existed" between them.²¹⁴ Rigdon replied the following day, but the text of neither letter is available.²¹⁵ This exchange of views led to a visit the next night, during which Joseph "walked with Elder Richards to the post office, and had an interview with Elder Rigdon concerning certain evil reports put in circulation by Francis M. Higbee, about some of Elder Rigdon's family, and others; much apparent satisfaction was manifested at the conversation, by Elder Rigdon."²¹⁶

This entry is telegraphic, but it is again significant that Higbee's name is mentioned. Joseph had already taken steps to deal with Bennett, and more would follow.

Bennett's Fall From Grace

The private interview with Sidney Rigdon likely reminded Joseph of Francis Higbee and his past involvement with prostitution. He may also have concluded that Bennett needed to be publicly opposed. At the city council meeting the next day, Joseph

advocated strongly the necessity of some active measures being taken to suppress houses and acts of infamy in the city; for the protection of the innocent and virtuous, and the good of public morals; showing clearly that there were certain characters in the place, who were disposed to corrupt the morals and chastity of our citizens, and that houses of infamy did exist, upon which a city ordinance concerning brothels and disorderly characters was passed, to prohibit such things.²¹⁷

It was later remembered that Bennett opposed a city council effort to suppress brothels;²¹⁸ if so, it was likely on this occasion, and he doubtless understood it to be the shot across his bow that it was. Within three days, Bennett was encouraged to withdraw from the Church, and forced to resign as mayor.²¹⁹

The remainder of May saw the collapse of Bennett's hopes. The high council cases involving Chauncey Higbee concluded, and Bennett was soon pleading for mercy at the Masonic Lodge he had helped found. By mid-June, he had been

²¹² Ehat, "1844 Mormon Succession", 40.

²¹³ *Times and Seasons* 3/15 (15 June 1842): 830.

²¹⁴ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:6.

²¹⁵ Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 297n260. Van Wagoner complains of the Church's refusal to let him examine the originals upon which the *History of the Church* is based, but his treatment of Joseph makes it unsurprising that the Church would not want to facilitate his efforts.

²¹⁶ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:8.

²¹⁷ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:8.

²¹⁸ *The Wasp* 1 (2 October 1842): 2.

²¹⁹ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:12, 38.

publicly shamed and excommunicated, and left Nauvoo on June 21. He traveled to Springfield, where he concluded an arrangement to print anti-Mormon exposés. By prior agreement, the *Sangamo Journal* called for Bennett to "come out NOW."²²⁰ Since Bennett had no other income during this period, it is thought that he was paid for his anti-Mormon letters, of which he had written three before being urged to do so by the press.²²¹ Bennett had discovered a fifth con: pretending to risk his life writing religious exposés he was urged to write after agreeing to write them for pay.

George W. Robinson and John C. Bennett

If Joseph had ever satisfied Sidney, it did not last. "[I]n company with Bishop [George] Miller, I visited Elder Rigdon and his family, and had much conversation about John C. Bennett, and others, much unpleasant feeling was manifested by Elder Rigdon's family, who were confounded and put to silence by the truth."²²² Miller had been responsible for uncovering Bennett's serial infidelities, and was probably along to back up Joseph's account of Bennett's wicked ways (see **CHAPTER**).

Unsurprisingly for such a contested tale, other versions of this visit exist. The most immediate is George Robinson's, who claimed to be present. We recall that he provided Nancy's version of Joseph's proposal, discussed above. His account, however, was not yet written. In evaluating it, we must remember that his statement was not made until July 27—a month after the family meeting, and more than three months after Joseph's discussion with Nancy. During that time, despite all the disclosures made about Bennett's actions and character, Robinson continued to associate with him as a friend. In fact, after having arranged to be paid for his anti-Mormon letters to the *Sangamo Journal*, Bennett returned to the Nauvoo home of none other than George W. Robinson.²²³ Bennett arrived the day prior to Joseph's family meeting; we cannot ignore, then, the possibility that Robinson's first-person account was distorted or doctored because of his relationship with Bennett, who was immediately on-hand to counter anything Joseph told them.

Robinson's attitude and memory would also have been affected by the charges and rumours swirling around Joseph as Bennett published his exposés, since his letter was written after the publication of four of Bennett's letters.²²⁴

Our reading of Joseph's meeting with Sidney's family will, then, be greatly influenced by the decisions we make about even this single source. Too many authors, anxious to smear Joseph or tell an exciting tale, have used Robinson (a

²²⁰ *Sangamo Journal* (1 July 1842); cited in Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 98, caps in original.

²²¹ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 99.

²²² Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:46; see also Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 245.

²²³ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 290.

²²⁴ Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 98–99.

first hand source, holy grail of historiography) incautiously, without informing their readers of the evidentiary pitfalls which await the unwary. Robinson should not be discarded, but nor should he receive our unbounded trust.

Joseph Meets with the Rigdon Family

Of the meeting, Robinson wrote

[Nancy] told the tale in the presence of all the family, and to Smith's face. *I was present.* Smith attempted to deny it *at first, and face her down with the lie;* but she told the facts with so much earnestness, and THE FACT OF A LETTER BEING PRESENT, WHICH HE HAD CAUSED TO BE WRITTEN TO HER, ON THE SAME SUBJECT, the day after the attempt made on her virtue, *breathing the same spirit,* and *which he had fondly hoped was DESTROYED,*—all came with such force that he could not withstand the testimony; and he then and there *acknowledged that every word of Miss Rigdon's testimony was true.*²²⁵

If Nancy had left their interview in a hostile mood, Joseph would be a fool to meet with the entire family, which again makes that part of the Bennett/Robinson tale implausible. Bennett, unable to appreciate that others might have motives radically different from his own, had no qualms about portraying Joseph as a master of calculation and exploitation. To walk into the family bear trap and deny everything, as Joseph reportedly did, shows naiveté, not calculation.

Robinson saved the greatest part of his ire for Joseph's explanation of the plural marriage offer: "Now for his *excuse*, which he made for such a *base attempt*, and for using the name of the Lord in vain, on that occasion. HE WISHED TO ASCERTAIN WHETHER SHE WAS VIRTUOUS OR NOT, AND TOOK THAT COURSE TO LEARN THE FACTS!!!"²²⁶ If accurate, this is strong evidence that Joseph said at least something about Nancy's virtue. As we will see below, Francis Higbee was also almost certainly mentioned. One son remembered Rigdon insisting afterward that Joseph "could never be sealed to one of his daughters with his consent as he did not believe in the doctrine."²²⁷

It is possible, then, that Joseph's meeting with the Rigdon extended family was a serious miscalculation. Confident that Sidney was upset only because he did not understand Higbee's (and, potentially, Nancy's) moral failings, Joseph arrived and was blindsided. Expecting to help parents call sinners to repentance, Joseph was suddenly on trial. Gone was the Nancy ashamed before a prophet's rebuke or astonished at his proposal; in her place stood a woman who could, merely by emphasizing different aspects of their conversation or omitting

²²⁵ George W. Robinson to General James Arlington Bennet, "Dear Sir," (27 July 1842); cited in Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 246 (small caps and italics in original).

²²⁶ George W. Robinson to General James Arlington Bennet, "Dear Sir," (27 July 1842); cited in Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 246 (small caps and italics in original).

²²⁷ Wickliffe Rigdon, "Life Story of Sidney Rigdon," 167; cited in Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 297.

information about herself, use the truth to lie. Taken aback, Joseph may well have temporized and back-peddled furiously, knowing that the charged situation was ill-suited to persuading the Rigdons to consider his plural marriage teachings as anything but lasciviousness.

The production of his letter would have been one more nail in the coffin, at which point Joseph may have hoped that a frank exposition of the doctrine might soften them. I suspect that he down-played the "marriage" component, and emphasized "sealing" and blessings. This scenario is most consistent with Robinson's version. Joseph ultimately admitted to mentioning plural marriage, but denied doing so with intent to seduce Nancy. Given his earlier denials, those present saw this as clear evidence of deception. Deception implied ill intent. If so, one can sympathize with the Rigdons' situation—many others who were taught about plural marriage under more benign circumstances were stunned and repulsed. This is one plausible reading of the data.

A second approach would read the matter as the *History of the Church* entry does—the Rigdons were upset, but Joseph's explanations finally reassured everyone. Sidney likely did not accept everything Joseph had to say, but (as when he first encountered the Book of Mormon) would not reject the ideas out of hand without prayer and reflection.²²⁸ In this reading, Joseph left confident that revelation would settle the matter.

The third—and, to my mind, most likely scenario—is essentially a blend of the first two. Joseph arrived into an explosive situation, as described in the first case. He was able, however, to defend his actions and his teachings far more ably than the hapless bumbler portrayed by Robinson and Bennett. Joseph may have left believing that he had done what was necessary to resolve the issue, but doubts lingered. Sidney's angry reaction following the prophet's departure would have decided the issue for any fence-sitters.

Francis Higbee: Post-Bennett

Whatever else happened at the Rigdon household, Joseph seems to have named names. His journal for the following day records that "I held a long conversation with Francis M. Higbee. Francis found fault with being exposed, but I told him I spoke of him in self defense. Francis was, or appeared, humble, and promised to reform."²²⁹ Francis was upset that Joseph has revealed his present—and perhaps past—crimes. Joseph explained that he was placed in a position where he could not protect Higbee without harming himself and the Church. Any humility on Higbee's part was likely short-lived; within a few days he

²²⁸ John Wickliffe Rigdon, "The Life and Testimony of Sidney Rigdon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1/4 (Winter 1966): 23.

²²⁹ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:49 (29 June 1842). One suspects that Van Wagoner's desire to clear Nancy of any immorality—the better to condemn Joseph—leads him to avoid mentioning Higbee in this context.

provided Bennett with an affidavit claiming Joseph Smith had told him that Bennett could easily be killed with no one the wiser. This is implausible on two grounds. First, given Joseph's clear antipathy to Higbee, he is the last to whom Joseph would make such a remark "about the time of Bennett's withdrawal from the Church, or a short time before."²³⁰ Secondly, Bennett was never shy about self-preservation, and he returned repeatedly to Nauvoo even after his break with Joseph. Bennett didn't believe the affidavit, and neither should we.²³¹

Matters between Joseph and Sidney continued to smoulder. Sidney wrote Joseph, "in the greatest confidence to yourself and for your own eye and no other...I am your friend and not your enemy as I am afraid you suppose. I want you to take your horse and carriage on tomorrow and take a ride with me out to the Prairie...Say not a word to any person living but to Hiram only. [A]nd no man shall know it from me."²³² Even if he could not support Joseph's plural marriage teaching, Sidney strove to repair their relationship.

Either during the family meeting or during the ride, Sidney and family believed Joseph had agreed to stop speaking ill of them. On July 3, George Robinson wrote Bennett. After reporting that Francis Higbee had Joseph's letter to Nancy, he promised to have Chauncey Higbee retrieve it, presumably for Bennett to publish. Outraged, Robinson insisted that Joseph had promised to "take back what he said about us," but reported that Joseph instead announced from the pulpit that "he had agreed to take back what was said, but, on thinking it over, he could not do it, for any man that would suffer *Bennett* to come into their houses, was just as bad as he." Though Joseph "did not say much about [Francis] Higbee," he did say "that a young man came down to see him the other day, and wanted to know why he came out on him; but...'I have settled all matters with him, and shall not mention his name, for he confessed his sins to me, and begged I would not mention him.'" [Added Robinson,] *Francis will roar*.²³³

Francis seems to have been less committed to Joseph's downfall than his brother or Bennett. On July 6, he purportedly wrote Bennett claiming that Nancy Rigdon would give her affidavit—which she never did. "As it respects my affidavit, sir," wrote Francis,

for God's sake, my sake, and the sake of my people, do not show it to any one on earth, *as yet*, never, until I give you liberty...I am yet true as death, and intend

²³⁰ Francis M. Higbee, affidavit (30 June 1842); cited in Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 288–289; also in Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy*, 64, italics removed. Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 97 gives the date as July 1.

²³¹ The affidavit was sworn to non-member Hiram Kimball, who nevertheless went to Utah with the Saints. It is unlikely that he found Higbee persuasive either.

²³² Sidney Rigdon to Joseph Smith, 1 July 1842, Joseph Smith Collection; cited in Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 298 and Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 31n36.

²³³ Geo[rge] W. Robinson to General [John C.] Bennett, "Sir," Nauvoo (3 July 1842); cited in Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 44–45, italics in original. Friendly sources say only that Joseph spoke on the "prophecies of Daniel" and "the Kingdom of God set up in the last days & said many things which were truly edifying." (Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 125–126).

to stick or die, but you must keep my name back, because I am not ready as yet to leave; *and as soon as you bring my name out, they are certain to take my life...*²³⁴

I am torn between presuming this is a forgery by Bennett, and concluding that Higbee was unbalanced. His behaviour does not seem consistent with fear for his life, and Bennett would publish a letter the very next day calling on Higbee and Robinson "to state what they know upon this subject...[for they] can tell some astounding facts in relation to this matter."²³⁵ Bennett feigned fear that "the Danites...[might] murder me," but said nothing of the risk to which he was supposedly subjecting Higbee and Robinson. Bennett would not have scrupled to publish Higbee's affidavit eventually—but, since one never appeared, it seems unlikely that Higbee had given it to Bennett, as the letter claims. Given "Higbee's" anxiety in the letter, it seems unlikely that he would be mistaken. Forgery it is, then.

Nothing was forthcoming from the supposedly eager but frightened Francis. On 22 July, his name appeared on an affidavit sustained by his father's; both insisted that claims about Mormons murdering a Missouri prisoner were unfounded.²³⁶ Bennett would then claim to receive a letter from Higbee about three weeks after the affidavits' publication, in which Higbee wrote "Statements have been forced from several [in Nauvoo]; you have seen *mine*; but *great God!* That's all from this child!"²³⁷

Despite promises—all made, significantly, via Bennett—that he and Nancy had bombshells that would destroy Joseph Smith, Francis Higbee never delivered. He disappears from the narrative, only to reappear as Joseph's determined enemy in 1844. Heber C. Kimball recalled how "[Francis] had an inclination to write that what he published was false. I exhorted him to go and recall what he had said. I afterwards saw him in Cincinnati, when he promised by every thing sacred that he would come home, reform...He said he would study at Cincinnati, for his character was ruined here."²³⁸ Kimball's story is complimented by Robinson, who on September 16, 1842 wrote Bennett that "Frank Higbee [Colonel Francis M. Higbee] has gone to Ohio." One can sense the disappointment in Higbee's performance: "He did not intend to contradict your statements," he assured Bennett, "but he knew of no prisoner *killed*...Frank is

²³⁴ Francis M. Higbee to General John C. Bennett, "Dear Sir," Nauvoo (6 July 1842); cited in Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 46, italics in original.

²³⁵ John C. Bennett, *Sangamo Journal* (7 July 1842); cited in Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy*, 57.

²³⁶ Elias and Francis M. Higbee, "Certificats," *The Wasp* (Extra), (27 July 1842). <<http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/LDS/wasp1.htm#072342>>; see also "Certificate of Elias and F.M. Higbee [22 July 1842]," *Times and Seasons* 3/19 :(1 August 1842): 874; see also Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:78.

²³⁷ Francis M. Higbee to General [John C.] Bennett, "Dear Sir," Nauvoo (16 August 1842); cited in Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 261.

²³⁸ Heber C. Kimball testimony in Multiple, "Municipal Court," 540–541.

true blue; but, I fear, like some others here, *he lacks* MORAL COURAGE!!"²³⁹ One sees how Bennett's clique may have worked on Higbee's sense of honor and pride—if he would not act against Joseph, he was branded a coward.

Not coincidentally, the next we hear of Higbee is a letter published in the *Times and Seasons* on Christmas day. Higbee's father asserts that the letter was written "upon the subject of two letters purporting to be written by him to J. C. Bennett and published in his book." Bennett's *History of the Saints* was published in October,²⁴⁰ and the letter rebutting it was written by Francis on November 28, from "Cary's Academy, Pleasant Hill."²⁴¹ Of the two letters printed by Bennett, Higbee insisted "such a thing has no foundation in truth." Bennett had nothing from him, claimed Higbee, "except the affidavit that fell into his hands."

Higbee is far too modest: the affidavit in which Joseph supposedly told Higbee that Bennett could be easily killed had to be prepared and sworn; it only fell into Bennett's hands because Higbee wished it so. But, he seems to have quickly had second thoughts, and distanced himself from Bennett. That Bennett printed nothing else proves he had nothing else. No stranger to forgery, Bennett did not let an absence of documents deter him. (It is possible, of course, that Joseph or Higbee's parents forged his November confessional letter. This is unlikely, given that Francis never denounced the letter, and given that the letters printed by Bennett are clearly forgeries on forensic grounds.) Francis' only material contribution to Bennett's campaign against Joseph was the affidavit about a murder plot, which was almost certainly false.

We can now draw some firm conclusions. From 1841 onward, Higbee flirted with sin, and when eventually found out, was manipulated and betrayed by his mentor, Bennett. Alternating between tearful remorse and belligerence, he waffled repeatedly between correcting his life and attacking those who exposed him. For a time, he seems to have decided to reform himself. Higbee was upset at Joseph for making his sins known and disgracing him before at least sixty men at the Nauvoo Lodge. He seems to have lost his connection with Nancy, and eventually left town.

²³⁹ George W. Robinson to General [John C.] Bennett, "Dear Sir," Nauvoo (16 September 1842); cited in Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 248, italics and small caps in original. The interpolation which identifies "Frank" as Francis Higbee is Bennett's in the original.

²⁴⁰ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 463. Note that Bennett's work contains reproductions of material dated 30 Aug (150), 17 Sept (233), and 7 Oct (259), so publication must follow these dates.

²⁴¹ There is a "Pleasant Hill, Ohio" located about 80 miles NNE of Cincinnati, Ohio. I suspect that this was Higbee's location. Robinson places him in Ohio, and Kimball at or near Cincinnati. Furthermore, the Cincinnati Historical Society's "Morgan Bibliography of Ohio Imprints, 1796–1850" contains *A Catalogue of the Course of Study, Principles of Government, etc. of Cary's Academy, Pleasant Hill, Millcreek Township, Ohio March 1834* (Cincinnati: Printed by F.S. Benton, 1834), demonstrating that such an academy was already functioning before 1842. Online at < <http://olc7.ohiolink.edu/morgan/view.php?id=2659> > (accessed 5 May 2008).

Even his commitment to truth-telling at the end of November 1842 was short-lived: by January 1844 he was back in Nauvoo. The old problems had not died away. On January 5, Joseph made a veiled but pointed reference to Higbee's past indiscretions:

Mayor referred to Francis Higbee's testimony. Thought Francis Higbee had better stay at home and hold his tongue, lest rumor turn upon him and disclose some private matters which he would prefer kept hid. Did not believe there was any rumor of the kind afloat, or he could have told some of the names of his informants. Thought the young men of the city had better withdraw from his society, and let him stand on his own merits. I by no means consider him the standard of the city.²⁴²

The intervening months had made Higbee bolder. "I received a long equivocating letter from Francis M. Higbee," reads Joseph's history, "charging me with having slandered his character and demanding a public trial before the Church. It contains no denial of the charges which he accuses me of having spoken against him, but is full of bombast."²⁴³ Higbee's tendency to vacillate revealed itself. Within the week, Joseph learned that Higbee was going to sue him for \$10,000 "for speaking against him."²⁴⁴ A reconciliation was effected the next day. Francis "had written a slanderous letter concerning me, and said many hard things, which he acknowledged; and I forgave him. I went before the Council and stated that all difficulties between me and F. M. Higbee were eternally buried, and I was to be his friend for ever. To which F. M. Higbee replied, "I will be his friend for ever, and his right-hand man."²⁴⁵

It was not to be. Higbee may have acquired some of Bennett's talent for dissembling; he certainly cannot have reconciled with Joseph out of fear, for he remained in Nauvoo and would eventually hound Joseph ceaselessly. A month later, Joseph faulted Higbee's intent to appeal a court case to Carthage, believing his intent was "to stir up the mob and bring them upon us."²⁴⁶ By May, Higbee was suing Joseph again. If Higbee was concerned about his good name, its value had dropped, for he now was demanding only \$5,000.²⁴⁷ In an ironic twist, it was these attacks that led Joseph and other church leaders to report Higbee's actions of the last three years in open court. Higbee's zeal for revenge provided the clues necessary to untangle the Nancy Rigdon affair.

On May 18, 1844, Francis M. Higbee was excommunicated.²⁴⁸ He was to play a prominent role in the assassination of Joseph and Hyrum.

²⁴² Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:169 (5 Jan 1844).

²⁴³ Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:174 (10 Jan 1844).

²⁴⁴ Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:174 (15 Jan 1844).

²⁴⁵ Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:178 (16 Jan 1844).

²⁴⁶ Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:225 (26 Feb 1844).

²⁴⁷ Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:356 (6 May 1844).

²⁴⁸ *Times and Seasons* 5/10 (15 May 1844): 543.

Stephen Markham's Affidavit

If Francis Higbee was unwilling to provide affidavits about Nancy Rigdon, Stephen Markham was not. Born in 1800, Markham joined the Church near Kirtland, Ohio, in 1837.²⁴⁹ A faithful member, Markham would later play a key role in rescuing Joseph from an illegal effort to extradite him to Missouri.²⁵⁰ Fiercely loyal to Joseph, he helped prepare Carthage Jail against possible assault; he left and was not permitted to return, thus sparing him the assault that killed Joseph and Hyrum.²⁵¹

Markham provided an affidavit published in *The Wasp* on July 27, 1843. Several of Bennett's letters had been published, and the Nancy Rigdon charges swirled around Nauvoo. Markham claimed that sometime in 1842,

he was at the house of Sidney Rigdon in the city of Nauvoo, where he saw Miss Nancy Rigdon laying on a bed, and John C. Bennett was sitting by the side of the bed, near the foot, in close conversation with her: [he] also saw many vulgar, unbecoming and indecent sayings and motions pass between them, which satisfied [him] that they were guilty of unlawful and illicit intercourse, with each other.²⁵²

The reaction was furious. Several Nauvoo citizens published counter-affidavits, claiming that Markham had only testified "to help Smith out of his dilemma." Markham was, they said, "a man of little or no reputation," since he was "a liar, disturber of the peace, and what may justly be termed a loafer." George Robinson insisted that Markham's "character for truth and veracity is not good, and that I could not believe him under oath...I am personally knowing to his lying, and that his character in general is that of a loafer, disturber of the peace, liar, &c." Robinson further insisted that he had been present on the occasion referred to: "Miss Rigdon was then sick, and Dr John C. Bennett was the attending physician."²⁵³ Sidney Rigdon published a refutation, and hired an attorney to sue Markham.²⁵⁴

On September 3, an unusual notice appeared in *The Wasp*: "We are authorized to say, by Gen. Joseph Smith, that the affidavit of Stephen Markham, relative to Miss Nancy Rigdon, as published in the handbill of affidavits, was unauthorized

²⁴⁹ Juliana Markham Crowe, Excerpts from the "History of the Life of Stephen Markham," (n.p., n.d.), New Mormon Studies CD-ROM, Smith Research Associates and Signature Books, 1998.

²⁵⁰ Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:439–443.

²⁵¹ Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:592–616.

²⁵² *The Wasp* (Extra), (27 July 1842). <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/LDS/wasp1.htm#072342>. Van Wagoner mentions the reprinting of the Affidavits against Bennett on 31 August, but not the initial publication in the *Wasp*. See Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 301, Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 34n12.

²⁵³ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 250–252.

²⁵⁴ Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 34n12.

by him; the certificate of Elder Rigdon relative to the letter, being satisfactory."²⁵⁵ The editor of the *Sangamo Journal* was sceptical, and declared Markham "putrid and corrupt" for helping Joseph "further his infamous designs."²⁵⁶ The statement was specific in its phrasing—Joseph did not admit that Markham's affidavit was false, he merely disclaimed responsibility for its publication. This would have been enough to allow the majority of members to disregard it if they chose to do so: it would have been harder to ignore an affidavit which was widely believed to have Joseph's tacit approval.

What are we to make of Markham's affidavit? Was he merely a loyal foot-soldier, willing to perjure himself to save Joseph Smith, and then take the heat when their scheme back-fired? Or, did he honestly see an exchange between Bennett and Nancy which—especially in retrospect when other charges appeared—troubled him, leading him to honestly misinterpret an innocent situation? Or, were Bennett and Nancy enmeshed more tightly than we have thought?

The out-pouring of support for Nancy in the face of the Markham affidavit is striking when compared to the silence which greeted the initial charges against her. Sidney did not swear an affidavit in her support before Markham published his charges; Bennett could not even produce affidavits from Francis Higbee or Nancy about Joseph, much as he wanted them. Sarah Pratt was likewise not defended by charges of slander until decades later. I suspect that Markham made an honest mistake—what he had learned about Bennett and Nancy led him to misinterpret, in retrospect, an innocent medical visit. His false charge persuaded Joseph's enemies that the Prophet really would stoop to anything to avoid having his own crimes revealed.

Joseph distanced himself from the affidavit for two reasons. Firstly, he had no other evidence that Bennett and Nancy were having an affair, while he reportedly had testimony from Bennett and Higbee about Nancy and Francis. Secondly, as the notice indicates, Joseph had what he wanted from Sidney—there was nothing to be gained for the Rigdons, Joseph, or the Church in pursuing the issue raised by Markham. By distancing himself from Markham's charge, Joseph could offer an olive branch to Sidney, and attempt to put the issue behind them.

What had Sidney done to placate Joseph? And why did he do it?

Divine Intervention

Joseph's letter to Nancy Rigdon was published by Bennett in the *Sangamo Journal* on August 20.²⁵⁷ The most striking event in the whole saga occurred the following day. Sidney no doubt stunned the crowd by announcing that "never

²⁵⁵ *The Wasp* 1/20 (3 September 1842)

<<http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/LDS/wasp1.htm#100142>>

²⁵⁶ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 250.

²⁵⁷ Bachman, "Mormon Practice of Polygamy", 232, 242; Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings*, 689.

before had he seen the dead raised; yet this was a thing that had actually taken place in his own family." His daughter Eliza had been gravely ill, and was pronounced dead by the physicians. Eliza suddenly "rose up in bed," and informed her family that God had sent her back to deliver a message, and then she would return to Him. She insisted that "the Lord had said to her the very words she should relate, -- and so particular was she in her relation, that she would not suffer any person to leave out a word, or add one."

Eliza called each family member and spoke to them. She told Nancy, "It is in your heart to deny this work, and if you do, the Lord says it will be the damnation of your soul...She said concerning Geo[rge] W. Robinson, as he had denied the faith, the Lord had taken away one of his eye-teeth, and unless he repented, he would take away another. And concerning Dr. Bennett, that he was a wicked man, and that the Lord would tread him under his feet. Such is a small portion of what she related."

Sidney's daughter did not die. After laying as cold "as when laid in the grave" for thirty six hours, she called Rigdon and told him

that the Lord had said to her, if he would cease weeping for his sick daughter, and dry up his tears, that he should have all the desires of his heart; and that if he would go to bed and rest, he should be comforted over his sick daughter, for in the morning she should be getting better, and should get well. That the Lord had said unto her, because that her father had dedicated her to God, and prayed to him for her, that he would give her back again.²⁵⁸

When faced with such an account, a sceptic can only marvel at Joseph Smith's extraordinary luck. Not only was a patient declared dead returned to life, but she brought messages which specifically targeted all those who were causing such difficulty. No prophetic charisma was brought to bear, and Rigdon made his own decision to make the events known. The Latter-day Saint who encounters this report will likely conclude that whatever the details of Joseph's interaction with Nancy, which we can only approximate, any fault or condemnation lay with others, not the prophet.

Sidney was not the only one moved by these events. Five days later, Eliza R. Snow's personal diary reported that Joseph "said he had some good news, viz. that George W. Robinson had declar'd his determination to forsake his evil deeds and return to the church. If he does return, I hope it may be for his soul's salvation: not to act the part of Hinkle and betray the innocent, in the time of danger."²⁵⁹ Sister Snow's hopes were not rewarded, but her account is a potent argument: it was not produced for public consumption, and one cannot accuse it of being designed for propaganda purposes. Joseph's remark was made in

²⁵⁸ *Times and Seasons* 3/22 (15 September 1842): 922–923; see also Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:121–123.

²⁵⁹ Maureen Ursenbach, "Eliza R. Snow's Nauvoo Journal," *Brigham Young University Studies* 15/4 (Summer 1975): 397.

private to intimates who did not need to be persuaded to support him. If Robinson had persevered in his return, we might read his affidavits—which are supposedly so damning—with a great deal more perspective.

Nancy seems to have been likewise persuaded by her sister's message from the Lord. She never again accused Joseph, and even late in life refrained from charging him with any impropriety. Sidney issued a statement two days later in behalf of Nancy and himself:

I am fully authorized by my daughter, Nancy, to say to the public through the medium of your paper, that the letter which has appeared in the Sangamo Journal, making part of General Bennett's letters to said paper, purporting to have been written by Mr. Joseph Smith to her, was unauthorised by her, and that she never said to Gen. Bennett or any other person, that said letter was written by said Mr. Smith, nor in his hand writing, but by another person, and in another persons' hand writing.

This statement is also carefully crafted. Nancy denied that she gave Bennett permission to publish her letter, which was likely true since she had given the letter to Francis, and Chauncey set out to obtain a copy.²⁶⁰ Sidney also drew a careful distinction: since Joseph had not written the letter himself (he had used Richards as a scribe) Nancy could legitimately claim that Joseph had not "written" it. This careful parsing of the facts to protect the Church was characteristic of how the confidentiality of plural marriage was protected in Nauvoo. Joseph and others realized that any statement made publicly had to withstand the scrutiny of a hostile and violent anti-Mormon element (see **CHAPTER SECRECY/"LYING"** for a more in-depth discussion).

The letter from Sidney continued:

She further wishes me to say, that she never at any time authorised Gen. Bennett to use her name in the public papers, as he has done, which has been greatly to the wounding of her feelings, and she considers the obtruding of her name before the public in the manner in which it has been done, to say the least of it, as a flagrant violation of the rules of gallantry, and cannot avoid to insult her feelings, which she wishes the public to know. I would further state that Mr. Smith denied to me the authorship of that letter.²⁶¹

Nancy denied authorizing Bennett's actions, which was likely true—even Bennett the forger had only produced letters from Robinson and the Higbees indicating Nancy's support. (I suspect she merely wanted the issue to go away.) Sidney's careful hair-splitting again shows in the last sentence, reporting that Joseph "denied to me the authorship." This also was likely true—during the meeting with

²⁶⁰ Geo[rge] W. Robinson to General [John C.] Bennett, "Sir," Nauvoo (3 July 1842); cited in Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 44–45.

²⁶¹ *The Wasp* 1/20 (3 September 1842) <
<http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/LDS/wasp1.htm#100142>>

Rigdon's family, Joseph probably sought to distance himself from the letter, before finally admitting his proposal and teachings. Rigdon does not say that Joseph "denies" (in the present tense) the authorship, only that he "denied" (past tense).

We have already seen that Joseph reciprocated Sidney's nuanced letter by distancing himself from Markham's affidavit. Eliza's message from beyond the grave seems to have been sufficient to settle Sidney's concerns about Joseph—at the least, it prevented an open rupture between the two men. It did not, however, restore Rigdon to Joseph's confidence. The prophet was well aware that Sidney remained skeptical about plural marriage, and he would remain suspicious of his counselor in the First Presidency for the rest of his life. For Joseph, Sidney had faced a great test, and been found wanting.

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