far beyond racism, beyond political inequities and ecclesiastical injustices; far beyond fear, beyond despair, for everyone, regardless. Hopefully, he no longer remains a mere curiosity, a minor footnote in LDS history; I hope to have shown that his life was not incidental but central to the solidification of Mormon priesthood denial based solely on ancestry. William I. Appleby was correct; Walker Lewis was, in every sense, an example for his white brothers to follow. And they utterly failed to do so. The highest rank of Mormon leaders had a monumental opportunity to join Walker’s vision of an unprejudiced faith and an unbiased polity. Instead, his existence and everything he stood for caused LDS leaders to increase their anti-black sentiments publicly, to uphold unjust and bigoted laws, and to diminish officially the role of blacks in the church for nearly 130 sorrowful years.

Joseph Smith, Jr., and “The Notorious Case of Aaron Lyon”: Evidence of Earlier Doctrinal Development of Salvation for the Dead and a Trigger for the Practice of Polyandry?

Michael S. Riggs and John E. Thompson

Introduction¹

Eight miles east of the Mormons’ principal city of Far West, a small community called Guymon’s Mill had been well established as the first permanent white settlement in the county.² In Mid-March of 1838, the small hamlet entertained their prophet-leader Joseph Smith overnight as he prepared to make his formal entrance among the Missouri Saints in Far West. A little more than a month later, however, Joseph Smith became involved again with this small group of Mormons. They had stripped away the membership rights of their leading High Priest in a local Elder’s Church court and the case was appealed to the Far West High Council and, as it turned out, Joseph Smith himself. Some of these same Saints were called upon to testify at the trial about the events that led to the downfall of their former local leader.

This study critically examines the Aaron Lyon case in April 1838, for both the insights it provides as a snapshot of conditions in the Mormon Church at Far West, as well as the religious life and group dynamics of remote Mormon settlements (like Guymon’s Mill) during this period of Latter Day Saint history. Also included is an outline of the spiritually abusive offence that led to Aaron Lyon’s trial. In the context of other period High Council meetings, serious irregularities become apparent in relation to the Lyon case that put Joseph Smith in position to defend Aaron. We will argue that the incident

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association held at Omaha, Nebraska on May 23, 1997 under the title, “Thomas Guymon’s Horse Mill and The Notorious Case of Aaron Lyon.”

² Archaeological evidence recently excavated at the 1830s LDS hamlet of Haun’s Mill in present-day Eastern Caldwell County, Missouri (property owned by the Community of Christ) conducted under the direction of Paul DeBarthe and Michael S. Riggs has, however, revealed the existence of a much earlier Middle-Woodland (2,000 year old) village. See <http://www.farwesthistory.com/arch.asp> for more information on this exciting find.
which brought this case to light was the logical trigger that prompted Joseph Smith's initial practice of polyandry. This case also brought to light an earlier than expected Mormon theological innovation. More than three years before Joseph Smith's funeral sermon for Seymour Brunson introducing the doctrine of salvation for the dead, the residents of Guymon's Mill had begun to discuss the concept of LDS members dying and "preaching to the spirits in prison."

The Offence

Aaron C. Lyon was a man of property and influence among his local brethren, but for over a year he had been without a wife. Roxanna Lyon had died in late August of 1836, shortly after they moved from Willoughby, Ohio to the new county named Caldwell. Leaving "the partner of her youthful days, a family of children and a circle of friends to deplore her loss," they laid her to rest on a peaceful hillside overlooking Shool Creek.

Undeterred, Aaron and his sons Windsor P. and Charles continued to acquire and develop property in and around what would become known as contemporaneously as the Guymon's Mill branch. Non Mormons had originally developed the area as early as 1831, but sold out to the Saints as part of an agreement reached by the Missouri State Legislature which made Caldwell County the new Mormon homeland.

In November of 1837, the community of Saints at Guymon's Mill became unsettled as the "word of the Lord" began flowing anew through Aaron Lyon. Sarah Jackson and her husband had recently converted to the Mormon faith while living in Alton, Illinois. Her husband sent Sarah to Missouri and promised to join her there when he was able. Why Sister Jackson chose to settle in the Guymon's Mill Branch is not known. She resided in the home of a Brother Best.

Five months after arriving in Missouri and with no word of her husband, Sarah took it upon herself to seek out the village seer. "I, believing Elder Lyon to be a man of God, asked him to inquire of the Lord concerning my husband and what was the cause of his not coming." Not long afterwards, Aaron organized a prayer meeting which they held at Brother [John] Wheeler's house. This meeting became a forum for Lyon to prophesy publicly as he had done on previous occasions, including the death of his own wife. Lyon rose with power and declared that "some one now in the room shall be led to mourn before three weeks unless there was a speedy repentance, & who it was he did not know." Aaron knew the prophecy would be confirmed shortly as he was the source of the grief for the unnamed individual. He also knew perfectly well the one to mourn was going to be the young and attractive Sarah Jackson.

The groundwork having been laid, Aaron moved quickly to the next stage

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3 *Latter Day Saints' Messenger & Advocate*, Kirtland, Ohio, vol. III (January 1837) 447-448. (hereafter M&A). "Died at Shool Creek Mo. On the 28 of August last [1836] Roxanna, consort of A.C. Lyon formerly a resident of Willoughby, Cuyahoga, Co. O. Sister Lyon was far on thedeclivity of life and has left the partner of her youthful days, a family of children and a circle off friends to deplore her loss." The last sentence of her death notice bordered on the prophetic, "Surely the destroyer executes his office reckless of consequences."

4 Cannon and Cook identify "Br. Best" as Henry Best; see Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook ed., *The Far West Record* (hereafter, FWR), (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1982), 186n4. Although Henry Best was a Far West era Mormon, he did not live at Guymon's Mill. According to his Missouri Redress petition he lived in Daviess County during his entire stay in the State. See Clark V. Johnson ed., *Mormon Redress Petitions*, (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992). 420. We have, however, not been able to distinguish the various "Br. Best" options.

5 *FWR*, 206.
of his plan. According to Sarah, "on returning from the meeting, he told me, that he had inquired of the Lord, and that my husband was dead and preaching to the spirits in prison, and that I was the one that should be led to mourn." Having eliminated her husband as an earthly rival, Aaron Lyon moved quickly to secure his prey. The next morning he came to Sarah and told her "that the Lord had appointed him a wife, by revelation, and he knew her name, and if he did not have her in less than six months he would never prophesy in the name of Jesus again." Lyon’s executions of his plan nearly complete when he returned shortly thereafter and told Sister Jackson "the whole of his mind." Sarah was the one appointed by God to be his wife. "Lord is it so?" she exclaimed. Aaron’s answer was quick and with absolute authority, "Yes for I know all things." He told her that he had gone twice to the Lord on the matter and when she was presented to him he cried out "Why Lord she won’t have me. "Yes she will" was the divine response, "and if she don’t I’ll place another in her stead that shall be more beautiful to the eye than she is."

The snare was sprung, but the game was still struggling, so Lyon resorted to the basest form of spiritual abuse. Aaron told her he was a "man of truth" (in a prophetical sense) and if she failed to yield to the Lord’s will, she would be forever miserable. Lyon related to her how Joseph Smith himself had once warned him to beware of whom he cursed as it could result in the death of that individual. Lyon added that he was in the "same spirit" that inspired him toward her that he once had when he cursed a man who did die and when he saw the death of his wife Roxanna. He followed the veiled threat of eternal punishment with a plea for trust, "I would not tell you anything to injure you, for them that are ordained to this high authority are ordained of God and you have as much right to believe me as to believe Paul; yes, and better right for it is not handed down so far."

Broken by grief, trodden down by spiritual abuse, and confirmed by what she took for personal testimony, Sarah Jackson at long last consented to become Aaron Lyon’s next wife.

The Mormon leadership model had prevailed, a prophecy had been received by one in authority, the one intended had received a testimony of truthfulness, and finally, obedience to council was to be acted upon. So, what went wrong? Simply put, Sarah’s husband showed up at Guymon’s Mill looking for his wife and he had not been preaching to the spirits in prison. The disconfirmation of Lyon’s prophecy produced what Durkheim would have termed a "collective reality," and resulted in the local branch Priesthood (an Elder’s quorum), cutting Aaron off from the LDS Church. Lyon’s only hope ultimately redemption in the Mormon Kingdom was to appeal his case to the Far West High Council. Fortunately for Lyon, a more skillful ecclesiastical leader, Joseph Smith, took an active interest in his defense.

### Pre-Trial Irregularities

There are three primary source records for the Far West High Council’s trial of Aaron Lyon: 1) a signed affidavit by Sarah Jackson written the day before the case was heard in the High Council and read at the proceedings, 2) the official minutes of the Far West High Council kept by the Ebenezer Robinson during the trial, and finally 3) the diary of Joseph Smith as recorded by his scribe George W. Robinson (hereafter called the "Scriptory Book") who was also an eyewitness. Each of these three documents represents contemporaneous independent views of the trial proceedings. In comparison, the excommunication of Oliver Cowdery, only two weeks before the Lyon case, filled less than a page of the Scriptory Book. The Lyon trial filled up four times that many. This made the Aaron Lyon case one of the best documented events in official records during the Far West, Missouri period.

As dramatic as the local events that brought about the hearing before the High Council in the first place, a close examination of the trial proceedings raises even more controversial issues. The irregularities began with the sitting of the High Council that Saturday morning in April 1838. George W. Robinson began his account by stating Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and himself were invited to attend the High Council. As the meeting was about to start, it was determined that vacancies needed to be filled for two council members. As no other High Priests were readily available, Smith and Rigdon were invited to sit instead. Uncharacteristically (and contrary to an earlier revelation), Joseph decided against taking the leadership position on this occasion, placing himself and Sidney in the lesser role as high councilors. "The Council was organized" with Rigdon as number five and Smith in the sixth position, however, strangely, it was voted that they "act in the place of NO. 9 & 10." Despite being asked to only temporarily fill in, Joseph and Sidney were, nevertheless, immediately pressed into service. Joseph was appointed along with his friend and current

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8 FWR, 206. It will be further demonstrated below through statements made by witnesses during his High Council trial that Aaron had predetermined to find a new wife and had fixated on Sarah Jackson to fulfill that purpose.

9 FWR, 206.

10 All of these quotations for from Sarah Jackson’s written account of Aaron Lyon’s actions prepared the day before the Far West High Council met to consider the case. FWR, 206-207.

11 For an excellent summary of the difference between the importances of group dynamics in the

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view of Emile Durkheim compared with what William James saw as the more salient aspects of individual religious experience, see Ann Taves, Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 277.

12 Joseph Smith Jr., et. al. compilers, Doctrine and Covenants, (Kirtland, OH: F. G. Williams & Co., 1835), 96, verse 6. (hereafter D&C)

13 FWR, p. 183.
house host, George W. Harris to speak in favor of Aaron Lyon and Sidney was paired with George M. Hinkle to act as prosecutors.

It is hard to believe Joseph got up that Saturday morning with nothing else to do and just happened to land right in the middle of this "difficult" case by accident. Beyond citing overt coincidence, however, the following procedural abnormalities also lead us to conclude that Joseph Smith engineered himself a place on the Aaron Lyon defense team. To begin with, the vacant seats Joseph and Sidney filled were for council members nine (George M. Hinkle) and ten (George W. Harris) who were in fact, present and also participated in the case. The following instructions for how High Councils were to be organized are contained in section five of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants:

Whenever a high council of the church of Christ is regularly organized, according to the foregoing pattern, it shall be the duty of the twelve counselors to cast lots by numbers, and thereby ascertain who, of the twelve, shall speak first, commencing with number 1; and so in succession to number 12.  

By being appointed councilors numbers nine and ten, Joseph and Sidney were not supposed to be in line to speak in the case. While the practice of drawing lots was consistently used in the Kirtland High Council, beginning in August of 1837, in Far West the formality was discontinued without explanation. Except when filling either temporary or permanent vacancies in the quorum, the same positions were occupied by their respective members (a statistically impossible feat if lots were actually being drawn). Also, suspended was a strict adherence to selection of councilors to speak according to lot drawn order. In all cases, however, whichever councilor who was selected on the even side spoke for the accused and was paired against the corresponding odd numbered prosecutor.

This was significant because the Far West Record states that Smith and Rigdon were to "act in the places of NO. 9 & 10." If Joseph Smith was in the ninth position, then he should not have been speaking for the accused. This was clearly indicated in the following verse, "Those counsellors who draw even numbers, ... are the individuals who are to stand up in the behalf of the accused, and prevent insult or injustice." The most striking atypical action taken on Joseph's part, however, was his decision to act as a councillor and not preside over the meeting. Section 5, verse six of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants states,

The president of the church, who is also the president of the [High] council, is appointed by revelation, and acknowledged, in his administration, by the voice of the church; and it is according to the dignity of his office, that he should preside over the high council of the church.

President Smith attended five High Council meetings (four of which involved membership courts), after his mid-March 1836 return to Far West from Ohio, up to and including the April 28 case of Aaron Lyon. Joseph, as proscribed, presided at all of them except, the Lyon's case.

Lastly we are faced with the question of why Joseph? Four other potential councilors were available that morning. Yet, it was Joseph along with George W. Harris whom they assigned to defend Lyon. Concluding that this situation was at the behest of Smith, we are left to wonder why the Prophet went so far out of his way to defend a man accused, of among other things, trying to marry another man's wife?

**Damage Control**

Joseph Smith's removal to Far West from Kirtland was much the same as an admiral being forced to change flag ships in the middle of an engagement. Kirtland was fast sinking, so for the survival of the movement, it became necessary for Joseph and his remaining loyalists to reestablish his command elsewhere. Upon arriving in the new promise land, however, Smith found that some of his fiercest Ohio enemies had also relocated to Caldwell County.

The leading antagonist was former "Second Elder," and close associate Oliver Cowdery. With Oliver came dark rumors from Kirtland involving Joseph's extramarital involvement with Fanny Alger. Somehow, widespread circulation of this disastrous development had been largely confined to Kirtland, but now the news was about to be leaked in Far West. Only two weeks before the Lyon case, Oliver Cowdery was excommunicated from the LDS Church. During his trial, a graphic picture was painted respecting what was termed the "adultery scrape." Testifying against Cowdery, Joseph reportedly "gave a history respecting the girl business" to the assembled High Council members. It was not clear what spin Smith put on the story as the specifics were omitted. As no mass apostasy followed, however, it can be assumed that whatever was necessary was said to mitigate the possible concerns of the Missouri faithful.

As damaging as full disclosure of the Fanny Alger incident might have been to the progress of Mormonism in Missouri, Joseph Smith had only recently pushed the envelope even farther. Moving beyond polygamy, shortly after his arrival in Far West, Joseph Smith entered a polyandrous relationship with his
good friend George W. Harris' wife Lucinda. Lucinda and her first husband (William Morgan) lived in upstate New York where as a dissenting Mason, he was abducted and presumably murdered for publishing the secrets of the craft. Lucinda next married one time Mason George W. Harris and together they converted to Mormonism in 1834. It was into the Harris home that Joseph and his very pregnant wife Emma moved in when they came to Far West in March 1838. They lived with the Harris' for a couple of months until a home was provided for Joseph and his family within the Far West town plat.

It was while in route to Far West that Joseph would have probably first heard of Aaron Lyon's failed attempt at seducing the already married Sarah Jackson. On February 24, 1838, a joint committee consisting of Edward Partridge, George W. Harris, and Isaac Morley was tasked with seeing to it that someone was sent to Huntsville, Missouri to meet Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon and provide them with adequate money and transportation to conclude their journey to Far West. John P. Barnard, a resident of Guymon's Mill, was the person selected to fulfill the assignment. Huntsville was a good three day journey from Far West, so John Barnard (later a witness in the Lyon Far West High Council case) would have had more than enough time to inform Joseph Smith about the situation in his settlement. Even if the conversation never turned toward that topic during their trip, Joseph and his party stayed the night at Barnard's house in Guymon's Mill before proceeding on to Far West the next day. It would stretch the bounds of reason to believe an event so devastating to such a community would not have been mentioned to Joseph given the number of opportunities presented.

It has long been recognized that questions relating to current events surrounding his life preceded many, if not most, of Joseph Smith's religious innovations. We would argue that his contact with the Lyon/Jackson incident was the trigger that prompted him to first consider the merits of (in Joseph's case) sharing another man's wife. We would agree with LDS historian Andrew Jensen who in listing the plural wives of Joseph Smith placed Lucinda (Morgan) Harris next after Fanny Alger, and stated that she was "one of the first."

The problem that confronted Joseph in late April 1838 was this, "his bosom friend" Oliver Cowdery, while having been excommunicated only two weeks previously, was still in town and fuming. Joseph said at Oliver's trial, concerning the Fanny Alger episode in Kirtland, "he instilled him with many things." Besides that, Joseph had clandestinely entered yet another even more daring relationship since moving to Far West with Lucinda (Morgan) Harris. The Lyon case (which had triggered his polyandrous actions) was now coming to trial and if his involvement with Lucinda was disclosed simultaneously, it would have probably been a disaster. The Saints might ask, for example, "what is the difference between Aaron Lyon and Joseph Smith, both were seeking the favors of another man's woman?" To amplify this point, consider Michel Foucault's reflection of the duality represented in the "prestige of Don Juan, which three centuries have not erased," which it could be argued similarly apply to the erotic aspects of Joseph Smith's character.

Underneath the great violator of the rules of marriage — stealer of wives, seducer of virgins, the shame of families, and an insult to husbands and fathers — another personage can be glimpsed; the individual driven, in spite of himself, by the somber madness of sex. Underneath the libertine, the pervert. He deliberately breaks the law, but at the same time, something like a nature gone awry transports him far from all nature; his death is the moment when the supernatural return of the crime and its retribution thwarts the flight into counternature. There are two great systems conceived by the West for governing sex; the law of marriage and the order of desires — and the life of Don Juan [and Joseph Smith] overturned them both.


F. W. R., 6:233.

F. W. R., 168.

Joseph’s extraordinary pre-trial actions and consideration of what he had at stake if exposed, therefore, lead us to the reasonable conclusion Smith having been paired with Lucinda’s husband George W. Harris to defend Aaron Lyon before the High Council, was a skillfully (and successfully) engineered effort to achieve damage control in the face of a potential public relations debacle.

The Notorious Case of Aaron Lyon

Both accounts recorded during the trial refer to the case as being an appeal. No extant records exist for the original proceedings held at Guymon’s Mill. The Far West Record references minutes being read of an “Elder’s meeting” from which the “case had been tried, also the charges and the appeal.” Since it was an appeal, assuming Lyon did not prevail is safe. Interesting questions are raised about this first trial, for example, if Lyon was the branch leader, by what authority were the Elders organized? This community was never designated a Stake, so in the absence of a standing local High Council, the Elders apparently were structured into a functioning quorum. It seems logical depending on how far a branch was from Far West determined what degree of autonomy they exercised. The Rich branch (headed by later LDS Apostle Charles C. Rich), for example, was less than half the distance from headquarters as Guymon’s Mill. In the beginning, Sunday church services and weeknight “candlelight” meetings were held in homes or at the Log Creek neighborhood schoolhouse, but after Joseph Smith relocated to Missouri, members of the Rich Branch began to attend meetings every Sunday in Far West and no longer locally. It seems this behavior was less at the behest of their Prophet leader, than as an overwhelming desire to be closer to the charismatic Smith. Whether deliberately designed or not, Smith’s structurally dividing priesthood quorums was an effective means of retaining faithful church members. By compartmentalizing group members, dissemination of negative information was limited in periods of potential disaffection. For those living in Guymon’s Mill branch, however, the distance to attend church services in Far West was not practical.

After the charges against Lyon were read, the accused made confession to five of the eleven counts. Some discussion took place on whether the witness

58 See Richard Lyman Bushman, Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 333. Kirtland, for example, Wilford Woodruff kept “more involved with the Seventies who met on Tuesday evenings through the winter [1836],” than with Joseph Smith. As this was a critical time of ever dissent in Ohio, keeping church members in smaller, more manageable sub-groups could be helpful.

should be allowed to testify along with Sarah Jackson’s written statement. It was concluded that they should hear them. At this point the Council adjourned for one hour. This allowed Joseph Smith who would be defending Lyon against the able orator, Sidney Rigdon, time to prepare his defense.

Upon reconvening the meeting, the hymn “This earth was once a garden place” was sung and President David W. Patton offered a prayer. Following the adjournment Peter Dusdan replaced Jared Carter as the number two High Councilor. After they transacted a quick matter of old business, what George W. Robinson penned, “the notorious case of Aaron Lyon” was begun in earnest.

To understand the hostile tone of the Scriptory Book account of this trial, recognition of the scribe George W. Robinson’s background is important. Within two months after this trial, Robinson would become a Danite Colonol and become actively involved in the expulsion of Mormon dissenters. While being very close to his Prophet leader (and scribe of his personal journal), he was also a son-in-law of Sidney Rigdon. Later in Nauvoo, George would become a dissenter himself largely because of Joseph Smith’s advances toward his sister-in-law, Nancy Rigdon and later attempts to defame her character. George W. Robinson proved in Missouri and later in Nauvoo, to be a bitter opponent of plural marriage in any form. It did not matter whether it was a local branch leader like Aaron Lyon or the Prophet himself. Little wonder then, that George began his account of the trial with a scathing attack on Lyon. He wrote: “Now as to this man Lyon, it is a well known fact and without contradiction, that he has been in transgression ever since he first came into Kirtland, which is some four, or five years since....” In reviewing available Kirtland, Ohio sources, however, only items that presented Aaron Lyon in positive terms have been found and none adverse. A Non-Mormon named in New York did write a troubling letter to his Gentile relative Timothy Bancroft in Clay County about Lyon well before this trial. Bancroft was informed Lyon had left New York and was likely going to relocate soon to Clay County and accused Aaron of having “been in years past expelled from other churches.” There is no evidence that George W. Robinson’s ad hominem arguments against Lyon for his pre-
Missouri activities were informed by either Aaron’s proto-Mormon activities or by his time spent in Ohio before migrating to Caldwell County. The Far West Record was kept by Ebenezer Robinson (no relation to George W. Robinson). While Ebenezer’s later membership in the RLDS Church signified a similar disapproval of plural marriage, his account of the Lyon trial was much less biased than the Sciptory Book.

After naming the witnesses which were to testify, the Sciptory Book explained that her husband sent Sarah Jackson from their home in Alton, Illinois, “as he himself could not come, at that time.” Brother Jackson’s final departure from Illinois to rejoin his wife Sarah in November 1837 may have been linked to the highly publicized killing of abolitionist and journalist, Rev. Elijah Lovejoy. Widely considered today a martyr to freedom of expression in our new republic, Lovejoy was first warned out of St. Louis before relocating across the Mississippi River to establish his press at Alton. Slavery was illegal in Illinois, but tolerance for abolitionism was not very high among the mostly southern extracted populace. That is not to say that all people in Illinois opposed him. After a mob threw his press into the river for a second time, future “Mormon benefactor,” Isaac Galland34 of Commerce, Illinois, wrote Lovejoy that, “It is truly mortifying to the feelings of every honorable minded American citizen to learn that any portion of this community are so lost to every sense of propriety and self-respect, as to disgrace themselves by such acts.”

Upon his third attempt to set up a press in Alton, a mob shot and killed him the evening of November 7, 1837.35 Sarah’s overdue husband would have left Alton just after the death of Lovejoy. According to Historian (and former Senator) Paul Simon,

> The [economic] panic of 1837 had already hit Alton when the news of the Lovejoy slaying spread everywhere. Alton became known as a town of lawlessness. River traffic went to St. Louis and other towns. Instead of passing St. Louis in growth, as seemed likely, Alton started losing ground … Real estate values plunged. One twenty-five-thousand-dollar piece of property soon sold for two thousand dollars. Overnight, Alton changed from being almost the largest city in the Midwest to a town losing its population and its economic base.36

The radical overnight change in economic conditions in Alton following Lovejoy’s death, may well have facilitated Brother Jackson’s departure for

Missouri. In a morbidly ironic sense, Lovejoy’s murder probably saved the Jackson’s marriage.

After the court heard the written statement of Sarah Jackson, Aaron Lyon’s neighbors were next summoned to testify against their former ecclesiastical leader. First on the stand was Brother Best who had been Sarah Jackson’s host during her time at Guymon’s Mill. His account was the longest of all the witnesses and agreed with Sarah’s written statement. His version does show that Aaron and Sarah were more familiar with one another than her story would suggest. Best said he “was knowing to Lyons walking to and from meetings with her, both in night and day time, as she lived at his house.” We are also indebted to Best for providing the information that allows us to date the events. The length of time Brother and Sister Jackson were separated was “about five months, but he returned soon after, which was sometime in November last [1837].”38

Next to speak was Shadrach Roundy. He suggested Lyon’s alleged revelation was merely a self-fulfilled prophecy. Lyon had shared with Roundy his belief that the Lord was going to give him a wife “by revelation … with whom he could live in peace.” This may have been the way Shadrach recalled the situation in hindsight, but at the time he did not question his branch High Priest’s actions. Roundy further testified that,

> At another time Lyons told him that he enquired of the Lord respecting a companion, when Sister Jackson was presented before him, when he said to the Lord “She is pregnant by another man;” when the Lord replied “wait my time & it will all come right.”39

Mention of her being with a child was absent in Sarah’s statement and her husband stated at the end of the testimony that she “was not pregnant when he returned.” If she had been pregnant, she would have been well into her second trimester at the time of Aaron’s advances on her. This coupled with the stress of worrying about the welfare of her missing husband, may have induced a miscarriage.

John P. Barnard agreed with Shadrach Roundy’s comment that “Lyons generally took the lead of meetings in that branch” and added, “when he [Lyon] spoke in the name of the Lord, the brethren had great confidence in it.” Barnard’s testimony, along with most of the others, illustrated how comfortable Lyon was speaking in the name of the Lord, especially in the first person. This John Barnard, it will be recalled, was the same man who went to meet Joseph Smith in Huntsville, Missouri and instructed to convey him to Far West in March of 1838.40

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34 For information on Galland and the Mormons, see Lyndon W. Cook, “Isaac Galland-Mormon Benefactor,” BYU Studies, Spring 1979, vol. 19, no. 3.
36 Reid’s Brochure of a Notable American City: Alton Illinois (St. Louis: James Allan Reid, Book Maker, 1912), 84.
37 Simon, 140.
38 FWR, 206-208.
39 FWR, 184.
40 FWR, 184.
Thomas Guymon (for whose Mill the branch was most often referenced) testified next. He stressed the fear Sarah Jackson had of Lyon and his warnings of curses if she did not submit to his (or rather, the Lord's) will. He told of the faint hope she held that her husband might yet be alive. She even continued to ask the members of the branch to pray for his return. Over time, however, she lost faith and "expressed her fears that he was dead & was inclined to think she had a testimony to that effect." Guymon also related that Lyon had "told him that Brother Best had given him liberty to come to his house and see Sister Jackson."^41

The testimony of all these witnesses demonstrated that the community was well informed of the actions of Aaron Lyon toward Sarah Jackson and it was perfectly acceptable to them until Brother Jackson arrived. There did not seem to be any critical analysis by the local church members regarding Lyon's prophetic role in their community. They believed in his revelations and therefore did not question his motives until they failed. What if Brother Jackson had died in Alton or on his way to Missouri? Would that have justified Aaron Lyon's behavior toward Sarah? No doubt, based on the trial testimony, the marriage between them would have occurred if her husband would not have returned. If this had happened, the lives of the Saints at Guymon's Mill would not have been altered by the local scandal. When word did reach them of Brother Jackson's death, would they have been just in praising God for the confirmation of a great prophet in their midst?

A Brother Benjamin was the last witness called before the appointed High Councilors took a center stage. Although short, Brother Benjamin's statement was especially intriguing for the theological issue it raised. He testified that, "Calvin Reed, a boy of about 15 years of age, said he had a revelation or vision, in which he saw, Br Jackson dead or preaching to the spirits in prison." Several aspects of his testimony warrant further examination before we continue."^42

Preaching to the Spirits in Prison

Sarah Jackson's aforementioned written statement, contained a reference to Aaron Lyon's revelation about her husband's other worldly mission. Young Calvin Reed's vision was taken as a confirmation and validation of Lyon's claim. Here were two individuals, who supposedly had visions relating to a dead man they had never met, and yet were each able positively to identify him as Mr. Jackson. Clearly, young Reed^43 was caught in the enthusiasm of the moment, probably during one of the groups "prayer meetings" which they held in the branch. The use of the phrases "dead" in conjunction with "preaching to the spirits in prison," was quite significant, particularly in an early 1837 context.

In 1879, William Smith (Joseph Smith's younger brother) as a member of the Reorganized Church, preached a sermon on baptism for the dead, at the Far West Temple site. On that occasion, he observed that;

this ordinance would again be restored to the Church. It was for this reason also, that these Saints of latter days build temples, in order to prepare a place for the administration of ordinances that belong in the order of the holy priesthood. And it was for this object also, that this corner stone was planted in this town of Far West, under the direction and superintendency of Joseph, the Martyr in 1836-37 [1838].^43

This may be simply example of revisionist history by William Smith, but it may not be too unbelievable after all. In a question first posed in November of 1837, the issue was raised, "If the Mormon doctrine is true what will become of all those who have died since the days of the Apostles?" The answer printed in the July 1838 edition of the Elders' Journal printed in Far West, was, "All those who have not had an opportunity of hearing the gospel, and being administered to by an inspired man in the flesh, must have it hereafter, before they can be finally judged."

Speaking of the gap in time between Joseph Smith's 1836 vision of his unbaptized brother Alvin in the Celestial kingdom, and the August 1840 funeral sermon for Seymour Brunson, Historian M. Guy Bishop noted "We have been left with scant evidence of how Joseph Smith formulated the Mormon plan of baptism for the dead."^44 It was not a quantum leap that occurred in those intervening years. Rather, it was an evolutionary process. By 1840, Joseph's plan finally crystallized, but (as with the Saints at Guymon's Mill) the subject had been more widely discussed throughout the Church than previously thought.

In a wider context, the theological relationship of the living, their dead and the thinness of the veil that separates them was also a topic outside of Mormonism. In May 1837, for example, Unitarian divine, Rev. William Ellery Channing, wrote to a grieving friend, the Rev. William Brooks, who had recently lost a wife in the prime of her life, "You were one of the most privileged men in possessing as you did the love, confidence, society of such a pure, celestial Spirit... How slight is the partition between this & the spiritual world & how

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43 Many years later, while living in the Mormon settlement at San Bernardino, California, Calvin Reed would again dabble in communication with the dead as a Spiritualist Medium during the 1850s. See Edward Leo Lyman, San Bernardino: The Rise and Fall of a California Community (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1996), 117-118.
short the time of separation between us & the departed!"

Within the LDS movement, concern for preaching to the departed was not isolated to just those at Guymon’s Mill. In December of 1836 Lorenzo Snow, in a Joseph Smith, Sr.-given Patriarchal Blessing, was told, “Thou shalt have power to translate thyself from one planet to another; and power to go to the moon if thou so desire; power to preach to the spirits in prison.” When Zebedee Coltrin ordained Wilford Woodruff a Seventy in January 1837, he remembered being told he “should visit COLUB [Kolob] & Preach to the spirits in Prison.”

The concept, and phraseology were likely brought down to Missouri and cross-pollinated to the local branch by Aaron Lyon when he left Kirtland in 1836. Considering these accounts of an earlier evolving salvation for the dead cosmology, William Smith’s retrospective memory of the Far West Temple as the place where ordinances for the dead were to be first performed as opposed to Nauvoo is more intriguing.

Mercy Robs Justice

The final portion of the trial consisted of the statements made for and against Lyon by of the selected high councilors. The Far West Record provided more information on the testimony of the witnesses and only summarized the words of the councilors as “some lengthy remarks” with “very good instruction given by councillor Smith.” The Sciprietary Book, however, amalgamated the testimony of the witnesses, but provided greater detail for the Smith/Harris and Rigdon/Hinkle discussion. Fortunately, yet ironically, the two varied perspectives provide a much more comprehensive picture of the trial. As the testimony taken from the Guymon’s Mill residents concluded, George Robinson began his graphically violent tirade of metaphors consistent with his upcoming Danite leadership position.

But, alas! too late for the old man, the testimony, being closed, and the Second of Justice, began to be unsheathed, which fell upon the old man like a scourgine of ten thousand lashes, wielded by the hand of President S. Rigdon & George M. Hinkle, inspired by the spirit of justice, accompanied with a flow of eloquence, which searched for the feelings, like the sting of so many scorpions, which served

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48 Scott G. Kenney, editor, Wilford Woodruff’s Journal: 1833-1898 Typescript, volume 1. (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983), 119. We are indebted to Michael Marquardt for providing us with the Snow and Woodruff citations.

49 See John E. Thompson’s essay on Danite Leadership also in this volume.

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RIGGS and THOMPSON: The Notorious Case of Aaron Lyon

After Rigdon and Hinkle had completed probing and exposing all the intimate details of the incident, it was Joseph Smith’s turn to speak. Again the literary style of George Robinson,

After justice had ceased to wield its sword, Mercy then advanced to rescue it victim, which inspired the heart of President J. Smith Jr., & Geo W. Harris who, with profound eloquence with a deep & sublime thought, with dexterity of feeling, spoke in favour of the defendant.

Joseph had been persuasive, but each side was given another chance to plead their side of the debate. With his closing comments, Rigdon, ...levied a volley of darts, which came upon the old man, like a hurricane upon the mountain tops, which seemingly, was about to sweep the victim entirely out of the reach of mercy, but amidst the clashing of the sword of justice, mercy still clutched the victim.

Robinson extolled the greatness of repentance, and the fact that Lyon could yet “be saved in the Kingdom of our God.” Lyon’s church membership was saved, but he was not to be trusted as a Priesthood holder. His license was revoked as a High Priest “in consequence of his being considered not capable of dignifying that office.”

Thus, concluded the “notorious case of Aaron Lyon.” Joseph Smith did not attempt contracting any new plural marriages for several more years. When his attentions did again turn to polyandry later in Nauvoo, however, one of his chosen wives was Sylvia (Sessions) Lyon. She was the wife of Aaron’s son Windsor P. Lyon. It would have been interesting to know Aaron’s thoughts on Joseph’s relationship with his daughter-in-law, but that was not to be. Aaron Lyon died in Hancock County, Illinois, at the age of fifty-eight, only a year and five months following his Far West High Council trial.

Thomas Guymon’s son, Thomas Noah and his wife Mary Dickerson (Dudley) named their second child born in September 1840 Lucinda Harris. After the surrender of Far West, some of those who lived in the branch returned to their lands until the next spring when the bulk of the Mormons relocated to Illinois. Several were arrested and taken to Richmond, but were released several days later. Most of them likewise returned to their farms at Guymon’s Mill. Dissenting Mormons like Samuel Richey and others tried to continue the branch as a town following the exodus, but this failed due to the growth of nearby Kingston. The mill and a store along with a blacksmith shop operated for sometime even after the establishment of Kingston as the new county seat.

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50 Sciprietary Book, 176.
51 Sciprietary Book, 179.
52 Sciprietary Book, 179.
53 Sciprietary Book, 179.
All that remains today are some stone foundations and potsherds in an area the locals remember as old “Salemtown.”

Conclusions

In the same year [1837] John Humphrey Noyes began his experimentations with what he called the "complex marriage system" in upstate New York, and saw published his belief that even if a woman was another man's wife under the law, she could also be his "in spirit." By rejecting societal norms, "Noyes lost a substantial portion of his small band of followers in the subsequent furor."53 After migrating to Far West in 1838, Joseph Smith was skillful in his covert attempts to avoid disclosure of his provocative marital practices, regarding either Fanny Alger or Lucinda Morgan Harris. The incident between Aaron Lyon and Sarah Jackson was the likely trigger that stimulated Joseph Smith's receptiveness to consider "taking another man's wife." The reaction to the disconfirmation of Lyon's revelation concerning the death of Brother Jackson by the local LDS community, however, threatened dissonance of his own practices if revealed. This necessitated Smith's action to work through the ecclesiastical structure he created (the High Council) and subvert it for his own purposes. As Max Weber so aptly wrote; "It is characteristic of the prophets that they do not receive their mission from any human agency, but seize it, as it were."55

The comparisons made between Mormonism's founder and Mohammed have been repeated many times, but as Philip Jenkins points out, "Joseph Smith himself drew the Muslim analogy, warning in 1838 that he 'will be to this generation a second Mohammed, whose motto for treating for peace was The Alcoran or the sword.'" Smith's bold, yet clandestine, taking of Lucinda Morgan Harris as a polyandrous wife reflected an expanded image of himself as a "second Mohammed" beyond a Prophet of just political/military conquest. His aggressive experimentations with doctrines such as provisions for Christian salvation for even dead relatives, also like Mohammed, unapologetically pushed the bounds of orthodoxy in his day. Aaron Lyon may have only become a obscure footnote in LDS history, but the impact of his prophetic attempts to "take another man's wife," triggered what would become an enduring effect on the movement's founder and his church. Ultimately, Joseph's Don Juanistic qualities, while long since revealed did not result in the mass disaffections he must have feared would be the case in Far West. Perhaps Smith underestimated the capacity of his people for the faithful rationalization58 the majority of them

56 The "modes of adaptation" typical of religious movements subjected to prophetic non-confirmations or disconfirmations are discussed in Joseph F. Zygmont, "When Prophecies Fail: A

would later exhibit in the late Nauvoo period. Maybe "Brother Joseph" knew his followers, like his personal scribe George W. Robinson, well enough to realize they were not yet able to accept, in the words of Aaron Lyon, "the whole of his mind."

It has not been our intention to be guilty of what William James called, "pooh-poohing" sociologically or otherwise Mormon "hero-worshiping" of their movement's founder.57 We will leave it to the reader to decide if they want to pass judgment(s) on the moral implications of "the notorious case of Aaron Lyon." Our purpose has been to explain how two significant doctrinal shifts (salvation for the dead and the origins of Smith's practice of polyandry) developed sooner than once thought on the prairies of Northwest Missouri well in advance of the previously credited Nauvoo period.

58 According to Martin Marty, a recent biographer of the father of Evangelical Christianity, Martin Luther, "With so many in his time, he considered that because the husband had a strong sexual drive, he needed to satisfy it by entering his wife, but Luther advocated the rights of both and encouraged both to find pleasure. In two theoretical but dystic situations he counseled first that if a woman persistently denied her man, the husband might then turn to the housemaid or someone else for sexual relations. He balanced that provocative and patriarchal advice with its counterpart: A woman who was wed to an impotent man but who desired to have children or was unable to remain continent, 'with the consent of the man (who is not really her husband, but only a dweller under the same roof with her),' should have intercourse with another, for example her husband's brother. They were to keep this 'marriage' secret and ascribe any children to the 'so-called putative father.' Such a woman would be in a saved state and would not be displeasing God," Martin Marty, Martin Luther (New York: A Lippert/Viking Book, 2004), 108.