"Guilty of Such Folly?": Accusations of Adultery and Polygamy Against Oliver Cowdery

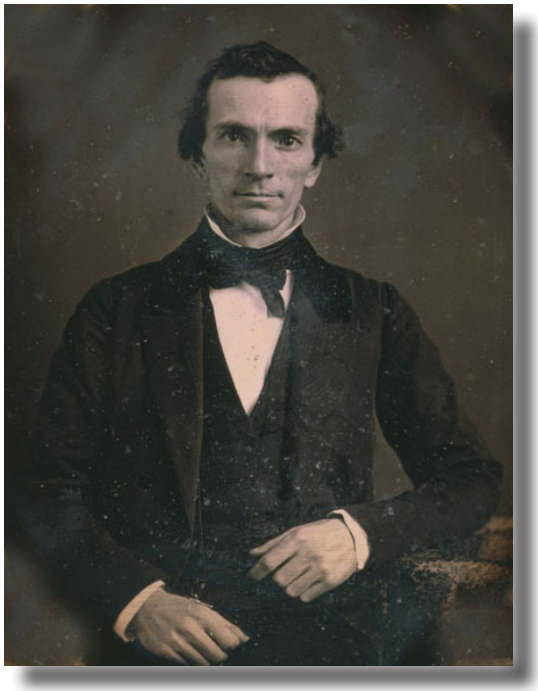
Brian C. Hales

Historians have different views regarding the possibility that Oliver Cowdery was ever involved in unauthorized plural marriage during the period of his close association with Joseph Smith (1829–1838). Danel Bachman wrote: "Before the close of the Kirtland period, Smith and Cowdery both began polygamous households."[1] Glen M. Leonard, author of *Nauvoo: a Place of Peace, a People of Promise*, penned: "In Kirtland, Oliver Cowdery knew of the revelation on marriage but was denied permission to take a plural wife. He proceeded anyway and engaged in an illicit relationship."[2]

Several nineteenth-century Church leaders accused Oliver Cowdery of either unauthorized polygamy or adultery. It appears that the first mention was by Brigham Young in 1857. On August 26, Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal: "President Young stayed three-plus hours in compiling his history. He remarked that the revelation upon a plurality of wives was given to Joseph Smith. He revealed it to Oliver Cowdery alone upon the solemn pledge that he would not reveal it or act upon it. But he did act upon it in a secret manner and that was the cause of his overthrow.[3] In 1872, President Young also reportedly taught:

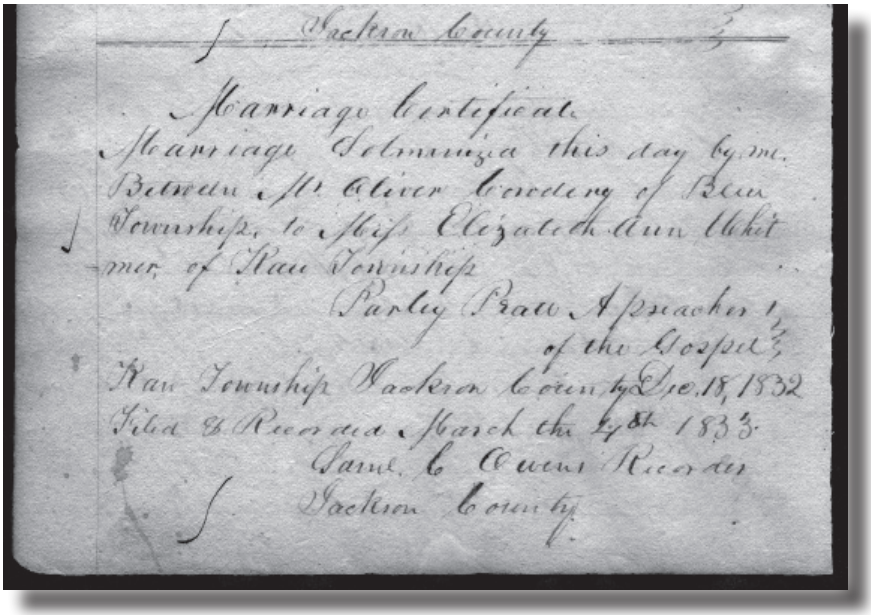
Brian C. Hales (brianhales@msn.com) works as an anesthesiologist at Davis Hospital and Medical Center in Layton, Utah, and is the president of the Davis County Medical Society in 2009. As the author of *Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations After the Manifesto* (Greg Kofford Books, 2006), he received the "Best Book of 2007 Award" from the John Whitmer Historical Association. He is the webmaster of www.mormonfundamentalism.com and is currently working on a two-volume treatise of Joseph Smith's polygamy.

> While Joseph and Oliver were translating the Book of Mormon, they had a revelation that the order of Patriarchal Marriage and sealing was right. Oliver said unto Joseph, "Brother Joseph, why don't we go into the order of polygamy, and practice it as the ancients did? We know it is true, then why delay?" Joseph's reply was "I know that we know it is true, and from God, but the time has not yet come." This did not seem to suit Oliver, who expressed a determination to go into the order of plural marriage anyhow, although he was ignorant of the order and pattern and the results. Joseph Said, "Oliver if you go into this thing it is not with my faith or consent." Disregarding the counsel of Joseph, Oliver Cowdery took to wife Miss Annie Lyman,[4] cousin to George A. Smith. From that time he went into darkness and lost the spirit.[5]



Daguerrotype believed to be that of Oliver Cowdery, date unknown, ca. 1846. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

The timetable regarding Brigham Young's statement about Oliver Cowdery allegedly entering into plural marriage is extremely problematic. Richard Van Wagoner observes that "it would have been impossible for Cowdery to have been living polygamously during the period charged by Young (1827–30). Cowdery's marriage to Elizabeth Ann Whitmer did not occur until December 18, 1832, in Jackson County, Missouri.[6] In addition, Brigham Young was not positioned in the early 1830s to know about Oliver's personal activities, although he could have learned about them second hand at a later date. In 1874, Brigham recalled that before his leaving for England in 1839, "Joseph had never mentioned [plural marriage], there had never been a thought of it in the Church that I knew anything about at that time."[7] This suggests that Brigham was entirely unaware of Joseph Smith's marriage to Fanny Alger in Kirtland and therefore probably unaware of any polygamous-related dealings of Oliver Cowdery as well. Other Church leaders in the Utah territory were also critical of Oliver Cowdery's behavior. In 1878, speaking of polygamy, Joseph F. Smith denounced Oliver for "running before he was


Jackson County

Marriage Certificate

Marriage Solemnized this day by me. Between Mr Oliver Cowdery of Kaw Township to Miss Elizabeth Ann Whitmer of Kaw Township

Parley Pratt A Preacher of the Gospel

Kaw Township Jackson County Dec. 18, 1832

Filed & Recorded March the 4th 1833.

Same & Owens Recorder

Jackson County

Marriage record of Oliver Cowdery and Elizabeth Ann Whitmer. The marriage was performed by Parley P. Pratt on December 18, 1832, in Jackson County, Missouri. Jackson County Marriage Record Book, Volume 1, page 44.

sent," and "taking liberties without license."[8] However, Smith, born in 1838, could not have been privy to any first hand knowledge of Cowdery's activities; he had obviously accepted Brigham Young's accusations as factual.

Of all the General Authorities, George Q. Cannon's criticisms against Oliver Cowdery were the sharpest. He wrote that Oliver "committed adultery," adding that "the Spirit of God withdrew from him, and he, the second elder in the Church, was excommunicated from the Church."[9] And "[Oliver's conduct] was a grievous sin and was doubtless the cause of his losing the Spirit of the Lord, and of being cut off from the Church."[10] Cannon's accusation places Oliver's indiscretion shortly before his 1838 excommunication, which would have made him a blatant hypocrite, since immediately preceding his being cut off, he severely criticized Joseph Smith for his involvement with Fanny Alger.[11]

Reviewing the significant events in Oliver's life identifies three time periods, between his 1832 monogamist marriage to Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery and his 1838 excommunication, when perhaps a polygamous union (or adulterous relationship) might have occurred. The three spans are separated by two events. The first is Oliver's December 5, 1834, ordination as Associate President of the Church.[12] The second occurred on April 3, 1836,

when in a vision the Savior told both Joseph and Oliver: "Behold, your sins are forgiven you; you are clean before me; therefore, lift up your heads and rejoice" (D&C 11:5). Both of these experiences imply that at those times, Oliver's position and standing in the Church were not in question.[13]

The most likely period for Oliver Cowdery to have entered into a polygamous marriage would have been between January 1832 and December 1834. D. Michael Quinn lists Mary Ann Lyman as a plural wife for Oliver, dating the marriage in 1833, with the union dissolving the next year. [14] Robert G. Mouritsen concurred, writing in 1972: "The evidence does suggest, then, that the Second Elder entered upon his unauthorized course sometime between January 14, and late July, 1833, probably in the forepart of 1833."[15] Supporting this possibility, William McLellin wrote in 1848: "We attended a general conference, called at the instance of Joseph Smith in Clay County, Mo., on the 8th day of July 1834, at the residence of Elder Lyman Wight. And while the conference was in session, Joseph Smith presiding, he arose and said that the time had come when he must appoint his successor in office. Some have supposed that it would be Oliver Cowdery; but, said he, Oliver has lost that privilege in consequence of transgression."[16] Despite these observations, no other evidence seems to support Oliver Cowdery's involvement in unauthorized polygamy during that time period. His later behavior also seems inconsistent with that conclusion; as mentioned above, he was ordained as associate president five months later in December. The other two time periods are even more problematic (see Figure 1).

Oliver Cowdery Timeline for a Possible Plural Marriage or Adulterous Relationship		
Pre-1832	Impossible	The Book of Mormon translation was complete in June, 1829. At that time, the unmarried Oliver could not have been involved with polygamy. However, he was implicated in a minor misconduct when, after becoming engaged in 1830, he behaved as if he were not betrothed on his missionary trip to the Indians later that year.
1832	January 22	Oliver Cowdery married Elizabeth Ann Whitmer, at Kaw, Jackson County, Missouri.
Period #1	Possible.	William McLellin recalled that Cowdery had been censured for some offense in July 1834.
1834	December 5	Oliver was set apart as Associate Church President.
Period #2	Unlikely	Sometime before August 1835, Oliver wrote an "Article on Marriage," which specifies monogamy as part of the Doctrine and Covenants. This may have been at Joseph Smith's request, or as a censure to Joseph Smith, or in order to cover up Oliver's own polygamy.
1836	April 3	Joseph and Oliver receive a vision in the Kirtland Temple. Jesus Christ says, "Behold, your sins are forgiven you; you are clean before me; therefore, lift up your heads and rejoice" (D&C 11:5).
Period #3	Unlikely	During this two-year period Oliver was vocal in his criticisms of Joseph Smith's involvement with Fanny Alger. His accusations were one of the reasons Oliver was ultimately excommunicated.
1838	April 12	Oliver is excommunicated but no charges of sexual misconduct are made.

Figure 1.

One possible explanation that does not square precisely with the described timing arises from Oliver's behavior after he had become engaged in 1830. In October of that year he, along with Peter Whitmer, Ziba Peterson, and Parley P. Pratt, was called to visit the Indian tribes in the West. Before leaving New York, Oliver became engaged to Elizabeth Ann Whitmer, the youngest daugh-

ter of Peter Sr. and Mary Mussellman Whitmer.[17] According to Ezra Booth (Booth became disaffected from Mormonism in 1831), during the journey, Oliver apparently turned his attention to another young woman:

> While descending the Missouri river . . . two of my company, divulged a secret respecting Oliver, which placed his conduct on a parallel with Ziba [Peterson's who had transgressed]. . . . These two persons stated, that had they known previous to their journey to Missouri, what they then knew, they never should have accompanied Oliver thither. . . .
>
> If a pure and pleasant fountain can send forth corrupt and bitter streams, then may the heart of that man [Oliver Cowdery] be pure, who enters into a matrimonial contract with the young lady, and obtains the consent of her parents; but as soon as his back is turned upon her, he violates his engagements, and prostitutes his honor by becoming the gallant of another, and resolved in his *heart*, and expresses resolutions to marry her.[18]

Ezra Booth's criticism of Cowdery must be understood in context. Following his disaffection from Mormonism, Booth hoped to expose what he saw were the faults and frailties of the leading elders, Cowdery included, so he accused Oliver of violating his engagement agreement while on the mission to the Lamanites. The fact is, Cowdery was still single, free to court other women, regardless of his engagement to Elizabeth. Booth nevertheless sensationalized Cowdery's actions, even though, at worst, they constituted a minor infraction. Perhaps it was this incident that prompted a council of Missouri high priests to convene on May 26, 1832, to investigate Oliver's activities eighteen months earlier. The minutes of the meeting read:

> To take into consideration a certain transgression of our br. Oliver committed in the fall of 1830 in the Township of Mayfield Cuyahoga County State of Ohio.
>
> Which after some discussion he having frankly confessed the same to the satisfaction of all present; it was resolved that these proceedings be recorded for the benefit & satisfaction of the Church of Christ.
>
> The reason why the above case was not taken into consideration by proper authority in the Church previous this day, is that some of the Elders supposed that the *affair* had been adjusted last year when brother Oliver made his confession to the individuals injured & received their forgiveness.[19]

Oliver's so-called "questionable" behavior in 1830 may be at the root of later accusations of adultery or polygamy by individuals who were not personally aware of the circumstances, nor knowledgeable about the 1832 Missouri Church proceedings in which he was exonerated. The earliest of the allegations was made at least twenty years after their reported occurrence and several years after Oliver's death. In addition, we note that Oliver "made his confession" on at least two occasions for a comparatively mild mistake, suggesting that perhaps he would be less likely to commit a greater transgres-

sion at a later date. Noteworthy is the fact that no accusations of sexual impropriety were included in the list of nine offenses against Oliver during the trial for his membership before the Far West high council in April, 1838.[20] Lawrence Foster concluded: "If Cowdery's character in this regard had been anything but spotless, there can be little doubt that he would have been thoroughly vilified for his indiscretions."[21]

Portrait of Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery. This painting is believed to have been painted in 1837 as part of a series of portraits of the presidents of the Church and their wives, and was intended to hang in the Kirtland Temple. Oliver Cowdery may have brought the portrait when the family moved from Kirtland to Far West in late 1837. The original painting is housed in the Community of Christ International Museum, Independence, Missouri.

Oliver's personal writings indicate he believed in complete monogamous fidelity. An entry in his 1835 Kirtland, Ohio "Sketch Book" reads: "Settled with James M. Carrel who left the office. I gave him a reproof for urging himself into the society of a young female while he yet had a wife living, but he disliked my admonition: he however confessed his impropriety.'"[22] His feelings against polygamy were apparently even stronger. On July 24, 1846, eight years after his excommunication from the Church while living in Ohio, Oliver responded to his sister who had earlier mentioned the practice of plural marriage by Church members:

> I can hardly think it possible that you have written us the truth—that though there may be individuals who are guilty of the iniquities spoken of,—yet no such practice can be preached or adhered to as a public doctrine. Such may do for the followers of Mohamet; it may have done some thousands of years ago; but no people professing to be governed by the pure and holy principles of the Lord Jesus, can hold up their heads before the world at this distance of time, and be guilty of such folly—such wrong—such abomination.[23]

In an 1884 reminiscence of Cowdery's former law partner, W. Lang said, "Cowdery never gave me a full history of the troubles of the Mormons in Mis-

souri and Illinois but I am sure that the doctrine of polygamy was advocated by Smith and opposed by Cowdery."[24]

A key to resolving the accusations surrounding Oliver's so-called plural marriage activity in the early 1830s is the publication of the article on "Marriage," which he wrote sometime prior to August 17, 1835. The article was first published in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants as Section 101 and remained there until 1876. It was issued in part as a response to accusations of polygamy, a charge first leveled against Church members in 1831 secondary to the belief that the law of consecration included a "community of wives."[25] Note the following statement: "Inasmuch as this church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy: we declare that we believe, that one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband, except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again."[26] This statement appears to reflect his personal views and position on the practice.

Critics of polygamy during the decades before 1876 would often refer to the article to demonstrate that Church members did not follow their own scriptures and laws. The RLDS Church was also aggressive, referring to the "Marriage" article as "Joseph Smith's marital standard," proclaiming polygamy was Brigham Young's creation.[27] Over time the article on "Marriage" became a small embarrassment to Church leaders who were practicing plural marriage between 1852 and 1890. It appears that they sought to place some distance between it and Joseph Smith.[28] Starting in 1869 with the visit of Joseph Smith's sons David and Alexander to Salt Lake City, Brigham Young reported to the Prophet's sons that the article was written by Oliver Cowdery without Joseph's approval or as an attempt to quell rumors that Oliver himself had started through his own polygamous activity.[29] Wilford Woodruff recalled in 1892: "I have heard representations that the doctrine [on "Marriage"] as put into the book of doctrine and covenants . . . by Oliver Cowdery . . . was represented as being contrary to the wishes of Joseph smith, but I couldn't swear that that was the fact."[30]

Concerning the possibility of Cowdery practicing plural marriage, Todd Compton summarized: "Evidence of a plural marriage for Cowdery in Kirtland is not persuasive." [31] A review of contemporary documents regarding Oliver's personal views and behavior is less than conclusive regarding any possible involvement in or acceptance of plural marriage at any time. In short, to assert that Oliver Cowdery ever accepted or practiced polygamy is a conclusion that goes beyond available evidence.

Notes

1. Danel Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith" (MA thesis, Purdue University, 1975), 76.

2. Glen Leonard, *Nauvoo: a Place of Peace, a People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 344.

3. Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833-1898 Typescript*, Scott G. Kenny, ed., 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–84), 5:84. See also Journal History of the Church, August 26, 1857, LDS Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

4. Scott Faulring wrote: "The identification of 'Annie Lyman' is somewhat problematic. Our identification is tentative[,] based on the brief details President Young provided[:] 1) her name and 2) her relationship to George A. Smith. We think that Mary A. [Ann?] Lyman is possibly who B[righam Young] was referring to. She was the daughter of Asa and Sarah Davis Lyman and was born in February 1817. Her father was a brother to George A. Smith's mother[,] Clarissa Lyman Smith. Thus Mary Ann Lyman was a first cousin to George A. Smith. Exactly when Mary Ann arrived in Kirtland is difficult to date. From the MS we know that her father, Asa Lyman, was in Kirtland in May 1833. There is the possibility that Mary Ann arrived sometime between May 1833 and mid-1834." Scott H. Faulring, "Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery," unpublished manuscript (preliminary draft, unpaginated), J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah.

5. Andrew Karl Larson and Katharine Miles Larson, eds. *The Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, 2 vols. (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1980), 1:349, entry for July 26, 1872.

6. Jackson County Marriage Record Book, Volume 1, Jackson County Annex Building, Independence, Missouri. Cowdery's marriage was performed by Parley P. Pratt. See Scott H. Faulring, "Early Marriages Performed by the Latter-day Saint Elders in Jackson County, Missouri, 1832–1834," *Mormon Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 197–210.

7. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–1886), 18: 241, June 23, 1874.

8. Joseph F. Smith, *Journal of Discourses*, 20:29, July 7, 1878. See also comments of Joseph F. Smith at quarterly conference held March 3–4, 1883, 271, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City, Utah.

9. George Q. Cannon, *Juvenile Instructor* 20, no. 18 (December 1, 1885): 360.

10. George Q. Cannon, "History of the Church," *Juvenile Instructor*, 21, no. 23 (September 15, 1881): 206. An 1881 entry in Heber J. Grants journal stated: "Bro. Lysander Gee went with me. . . . Coming home Bro Gee told me that he had known Oliver Cowdery personally & that to his knowledge Cowdrey [sic] had committed adultry [sic] had committed adultry [sic] before he lost his faith." Heber J. Grant Journal, March-July 1881 [no date], in D. Michael Quinn Papers, Beinecke Library Special Collections, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

11. See Oliver Cowdery to Warren Cowdery, January 21, 1838, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

12. See Manuscript History of the Church, A-1, 17, Church History Library. See also Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev. 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 2:176.

13. A chart, "Chronology on Oliver Cowdery and Polygamy," by an unidentified author found in the Scott Faulring papers posits a marriage between Oliver and Anne Lyman "between January and July 1833." Scott H. Faulring, unpublished paper, Marriott Special

Collections. Evidence cited in the paper includes the quotations from Brigham Young and George Q. Cannon as quoted in the text above. No more contemporaneous documentation is referenced.

14. D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 544. Quinn also asserts: "Smith had ignored Oliver Cowdery when he chose his counselors apparently because of Cowdery's sexual transgressions before and after his 1832 marriage. . . . [Cowdery's] alienation during the Kirtland apostasy of 1837. . . indicates his long-smoldering bitterness at Smith's double standard condemnations of Cowdery's 'evils' while the prophet at the same time was in a polygamous relationship with Alger." Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy*, 43, 45. Quinn does not substantiate this extreme interpretation of available evidence. Furthermore, his endnote references also do not seem to support this view.

15. Robert G. Mouritsen, "The Office of Associate President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (MA thesis, Brigham Young University, 1972), 84, n. 121. In support of this thesis, Mouritsen previously explained: "Oliver Cowdery was set apart as Associate President of the Church, December 5, 1834 . . . . The probable reason that Oliver did not receive his setting apart, January 25, or April 26, 1832, was not because he 'was absent in Missouri,' but rather because he was at odds with the Prophet regarding the proper time for his entry into plural marriage." Mouritsen, "The Office of Associate President," 83, n. 118.

16. McLellin, William E. "Writings," *The Ensign of Liberty, of the Church of Christ* 1 (December 1847): 43. McLellin's memory is usually reliable, but his recollections often reflected exaggeration and his personal biases.

17. See discussion in Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery: Second Elder and Scribe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 211–12.

18. Ezra Booth, as cited in E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed* (Painesville, Ohio: E. D. Howe, 1834), 208, 218; italics in original.

19. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1830–1841* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 49, italics added.

20. Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 163.

21. Foster, Lawrence. *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 300, n. 35.

22. Leonard J. Arrington, Oliver Cowdery's Kirtland, Ohio, 'Sketch Book,'" *BYU Studies* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1972): 420. See also, Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 16.

23. Oliver Cowdery to Daniel and Phebe Jackson, July 24, 1846, M. Wilford Poulson Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. See also *Saints' Herald* 55 (January 15, 1908): 56–57.

24. Stanley S. Ivins, Ivins Collection, Notebook 2, 33–34, Utah State Historical Society.

25. The *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, published in Utica, New York, reported in their February 5, 1831 issue: "They [the Mormons] have all things in common, and dispense with the marriage covenant."

26. "Marriage," Section CI, *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints* (Kirtland, Ohio: Printed by F. G. Williams & Co., 1835), 251.

27. This theme was repeated over and over in by RLDS attorneys E. L. Kelly and P. P. Kelly in the 1892 Temple Lot Case. A microfilm of the complete transcript is on file in the Church History Library.

28. See the discussion in Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols. (Salt

Lake City: Bookcraft, 1981), 3:195.

29. Richard and Pamela Price, "LDS Leaders Accused Oliver Cowdery of Polygamy," in *Vision* 48 (December 2004): 25–27. See also T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1873), 193–94.

30. Wilford Woodruff, Testimony given at the Temple Lot Case, Part 3, Question 769, 70 (complete transcript).

31. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 645. See also Max H. Parkin, "Conflict at Kirtland: A Study of the Nature and Causes of External and Internal Conflict of the Mormons in Ohio between 1830 and 1838" (MA thesis, Brigham Young University, 1966), 169–72, especially 172, n. 100.