AMERICAN PROPHET

The Story of Joseph Smith

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Based on the documentary by Lee Groberg

Shadow Mountain
Salt Lake City, Utah

1999
The centerpiece of Joseph’s Nauvoo was the temple. It was to be “considerably larger and on [a] more magnificent scale than the one in Kirtland.” The structure would be three stories high, 128 feet long, and 88 feet wide. Its design would include crescent moonstones, sunstones, five-pointed stars, a belfry, and a gold-crowned clock tower. “I have seen in vision the splendid appearance of that building illuminated,” Joseph told the workers, “and will have it built according to the pattern shown me.”

Many saints tithed their time to its construction, yet still the temple drained the economic resources of the already struggling community. The New York Sun observed, “The building of the Mormon Temple under all the troubles by which those people have been surrounded, seems to be carried on with a religious enthusiasm which reminds us of olden times.”

In this temple the saints would be given what Joseph described as sacred priesthood ordinances necessary for eternal life. This holy work, the prophet said, had been revealed to him with a promise, “Whatsoever you seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven; and whatsoever you bind on earth, in my name and by my word . . . it shall be eternally bound in the heavens.”

In anticipation of the temple’s completion, Joseph administered to a selected few the temple ceremony that he called the endowment. “I spent the day in the upper part of the store, that is in my private office (so called because in that room I keep my sacred writings, translate ancient records, and receive revelations) . . . instructing . . . in the principles and order of the Priesthood. . . . All these things . . . are always governed by the principle of revelation.”

He also united families—husbands, wives, and children—in what he promised was a binding covenant for all eternity, called “sealing.” Parley P. Pratt described the experience: “He taught me many great and glorious principles concerning God and the heavenly order of eternity. It was from him that I learned that the wife of my bosom might be secured to me for time and all eternity.”

As an expansion of his teaching that

The temple is the bridge between mortality and eternity. The temple, its doctrines, its significance were the culmination of Joseph’s work.

—ELDER DALLIN H. OAKS, THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS
marriage could last through the eternities, Joseph introduced a few trusted friends to the added concept of a plurality of wives as practiced by Abraham and ancient prophets. What he termed the “new and everlasting covenant” included both monogamous marriage and plural marriage. The plural-marriage aspect sparked accusations of carnal lust and heightened antagonism against the Mormons.

The concept was troubling even to some of the faithful. Bathsheba Smith, a young Virginian recently married to Joseph’s cousin George A. Smith, recorded her feelings about the new teaching: “I met many times with Brother Joseph and others who had received their endowments, in company with my husband. . . . I heard the Prophet give instructions concerning plural marriage. He counseled the sisters not to trouble themselves in consequences of [this law]; that all would be right—and the result would be for their glory and exaltation.”

Those closest to Joseph held fast to their commitment and loyalty, but even Brigham Young wrestled with the new revelation: “I was not desirous of shrinking from any duty, nor of failing the least to do as I was commanded, but it was the first time in my life that I had desired the grave, and I could hardly get over it for a long time. And when I saw a funeral, I felt to envy the corpse its situation, and to regret that I was not in the coffin.”

Joseph’s position was clear: “It mattereth not whether the principle is popular or unpopular. I will always maintain a true principle even if I stand alone in it.”

“What plural marriage did,” says Dr. Jan

**All we know is that everyone who was asked to live it found it a terrible shock. It stung them. And yet the most faithful of his followers went along.**

—DR. RICHARD BUSHMAN, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Shipps of Indiana University, “was make people commit to the church. It drew them in and made them commit. It had a purpose of creating a movement, of creating tradition. . . . Religious traditions come into existence through pain and exhilaration at the same time.”

Dr. Ronald Esplin of Brigham Young University adds: “Folks came eventually to identify Latter-day Saints with polygamy in such a way that even today, sometimes the first question a Mormon man is asked is, ‘How many wives do you have?’ And yet Latter-day Saints have not practiced polygamy for 100 years. It had a powerful impact in separating us, in drawing up boundaries, in making Latter-day Saints a people apart in a way that has persisted as a core part of our identity.”