JOSEPH AND MARRIAGE

Richard Van Wagoner

QUESTION: In his practice of plural marriage, why was Joseph Smith sealed to women who had a living husband?

COMMENT: In a Utah sermon delivered on February 19, 1854, Jedediah Grant, second counselor to Brigham Young and father of Church President Heber J. Grant, said:

When the family organization was revealed from heaven—the patriarchal order of God, and Joseph began, on the right and on the left, to add to his family, what a quasi was there in Israel. Says one brother to another, "Joseph says all covenants are done away, and none are binding but the new covenants: now suppose Joseph should come and say he wanted your wife, what would you say to that?" I would tell him to go to hell.

This was the spirit of many in the early days of this church. Did the Prophet Joseph want every man's wife he asked for? He did not but in that living was the grand thread of the Priesthood developed. The grand object in view was to try the people of God, to see what was in them. (Journal of Discourses, 2:13-14.)

In some instances, however, the Prophet's intent went beyond "trying the people," for he apparently did want the wives of some men. Despite a canonized statement in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants which recognized that "all legal contracts of marriage made before a person is baptized into this church, should be held sacred and fulfilled," the Prophet in the 1840s viewed as invalid those marriages not sealed by his blessing. As God's earthly agent, he believed he had been given powers that transcended civil law. Claiming sole responsibility for binding and unbinding marriages on earth and in heaven, he did not view it necessary to obtain civil marriage licenses or divorce decrees. Whenever he deemed it appropriate he could release a woman from her earthly marriage and seal her to himself or another, thus eliminating in his mind any stigma of adultery. In an unusual polyandrous twist to such relationships, the Prophet advised each of these married women to continue living with her husband.

Mary Elizabeth Rollins, married to non-Mormon Adam Lightner since August 11, 1835, was one of the first women to accept such teachings of the Prophet. Brigham Young secretly sealed the two in February 1842 when Mary was eight-months pregnant with her son, George Algermon Lightner. She continued to live with Adam until his death in Utah many years later. In an 1880 letter to Emmeline B. Wells, Mary explained: "I could tell you why I stayed with Mr. Lightner. Things the leaders of the church does not know anything about. I did just as Joseph told me to do, as he knew what troubles I would have to contend with." She added in an 1892 letter to Brigham Young's son John A. Young: "I could explain some things in regard to my living with Mr. L. after becoming the Wife of Another, which would throw light, on what now seems mysterious—and you would be perfectly satisfied with me. I write this; because I have heard that it had been commented on to my injury."

Sarah M. Kimball, married to non-Mormon Hiram Kimball in 1840, later recalled that she was secretly approached by Joseph Smith with a polygamous proposal in early 1842. She asked him to "teach it to someone else." He evidently did. Marinda Nancy Johnson, sister of Apostles Luke and Lyman Johnson, married Orson Hyde in 1834. Before Hyde returned from Jerusalem in May 1843, she was sealed to Joseph in February 1842 though she lived with Orson until their divorce in 1870.

Another such relationship was related by Josephine Lyon Fisher. She was born to Windsor F. Lyon and Sylvia P. Sessions on February 8, 1844. In a 1915 statement Josephine related:

Just prior to my mother's death in 1882, she called me to her bedside and told me that her days on earth were about numbered and before she passed away from mortality she desired to tell me something which she had kept as an entire secret from me and all others but which she now desired to communicate to me. She then told me that I was the daughter of the Prophet Joseph Smith, she having been sealed to the Prophet at the time that her husband Mr. Lyon was out of fellowship with the Church.

Two sisters, Zina D. and Prescindia Huntington, were sealings of Nauvoo women. Prescindia had married Norman Buell in 1827 and had two sons by him before joining Mormonism in 1836. She was sealed to Joseph Smith by her brother Dimick on December 11, 1841, though she continued to live with Buell until 1846, when she left him to marry Heber C. Kimball. In a April 1, 1881, letter to her "eldest grand-daughter living" she explained that Norman Buell had left the Church in 1839, but that "the Lord gave me strength to Stand alone & keep the faith amid heavy persecution."

Beautiful Zina D. Huntington lived in the Joseph Smith home. Henry B. Jacobs married twenty-year-old Zina in March 1841. According to family records, when the Jacobs asked the Prophet why he had not honored them by performing their marriage, sending John C. Bennett instead, he replied that "the Lord had made it known to him that she [Zina] was to be his Celestial wife." Believing that "whatever the Prophet did was right, without making the wisdom of God's authorities bend to the reasoning of any man," the devout Henry Jacobs consented for six-months-pregnant Zina to be sealed to Joseph Smith on October 27, 1841. Though sealed to Joseph for eternity, she continued her connubial relationship with Henry. On February 2, 1846, pregnant with Henry's second son, Zina was resealed by proxy to the murdered Joseph Smith and in that same session was "sealed for time" to Brigham Young. Faithful
Henry B. Jacobs stood by as an official witness to both ceremonies.

"Gentile Law," with its civil marriage, was publicly denounced as early as 1847 by Orson Pratt in a sermon recorded by Wilford Woodruff:

As all the ordinances of the gospel Administered by the world since the Apostacy of the Church was illegal, in like manner was the marriage Ceremony illegal and all the world who had been betrothed through the illegal marriage were bastards not Sons & hence they had to enter into the lave of adoption & be adopted into the Priesthood in order to become sons & legal heirs to salvation.

Pratt further explained in his 1852 Church-sponsored periodical, The Seer:

Marriages, then among all nations, though legal according to the laws of men, have been illegal according to the laws, authority, and institutions of Heaven. All the children born during that long period, though legitimate according to the customs and laws of nations, are illegitimate according to the order and authority of Heaven.

Even Mormon marriages prior to the fall of 1835, when priesthood authority began to be evoked in marriage ceremonies, were pronounced invalid. John D. Lee, member of the secret Council of Fifty and an adopted son of Brigham Young, remembered:

About the same time the doctrine of "sealing" was introduced. . . . the Saints were given to understand that their marriage relations with each other were not valid. That those who had solemnized the rites of matrimony had no authority of God to do so. That the true priesthood was taken from the earth with the death of the Apostles and inspired men of God. That they were married to each other only by their own covenants, and that if their marriage relations had not been productive of blessing and peace, and they felt it oppressive to remain together, they were at liberty to make their own choice, as much as if they had not been married.

Married women such as Mary Elizabeth Lightner, Marinaa Hyde, Sylvia Sessions, Prescendia Buell, Zina D. H. Jacobs, and others were likely persuaded by Joseph Smith himself that even though their marriages may have been "productive of blessing and peace," he, a prophet of God, could take them to the highest degree of the coveted celestial kingdom whereas their legal husband might not.

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A SMALL BUT STANDARD DEVIATION

Marvin Rytting

When I was at Brigham Young University during the height of the spy ring operation, one of my favorite rumors was that Ernest Wilkinson had written two books: 1. The People and Free Agency and How to Enforce It. Although BYU's style of conformity was annoying at the time, I did not imagine that from a distance of 1800 miles and 10 years, it would continue to haunt me in a strange way.

During my graduate work, I had acquired a modicum of skill with sophisticated statistical techniques, and I loved the ease with which I could apply them with the help of my friendly neighborhood computer. I had also become a little proud of my ability to manipulate data in various ways to tease out every possible interpretation ("milking the data" is what we call it in the farm belt). So I persuaded Harold T. Christensen to let me analyze some data on religious attitudes that he and Ken Cannon had collected at BYU in 1973. I expected to distill them and discover great truths therein.

I was frustrated beyond belief. My attempts to find a reliable scale for measuring orthodoxy were totally unsuccessful. The scaling procedure is designed to discover within the data a few meaningful patterns which can be interpreted more clearly and with more confidence than is possible with a mass of individual responses. Within the BYU data, however, there were no meaningful patterns. I had bumped up against the limitations of both the techniques and the data.

The reliability of our imprecise measurement tools in the social sciences is dependent upon both consistency and variability. It is easier to make a consistent judgment when we have some differences to work with. The technical reasons for this counterintuitive principle are not obvious (most of my students miss this question on exams), but one example of its operation is that it is more difficult to divide a group of people into the categories of short and tall if they are all between 56' and 57' than it would be if they ranged from 4'6" to 6'6". If everyone agrees about everything, it is impossible to find patterns in the ways in which they differ. This leaves the researcher with very little to write about without a great deal of ingenuity.

The most disturbing thing about this 1973 BYU data was the lack of variability. More than 90% of the students agreed with the orthodox opinion on two-thirds of the questions asked, and 95% agreed on half of them. There was an incredible 98% agreement on more than one-third of the items, including the immorality of intoxication. This overwhelming conformity to orthodox beliefs and practices (both were included) was even more striking when compared to