

## Chapter 7

### Dr. Bennett Laid the Foundation of Polygamy at Nauvoo

Though the Church was exposed to polygamy by the Cochranites, the practice of that evil doctrine at Nauvoo had its beginning through the instrumentality of a young medical doctor named John Cook Bennett.

Doctor Bennett taught that Joseph had received revelations from God on the subject of polygamy, and that “it was one of the mysteries of God, which was to be revealed when the people was strong enough in the faith to bear such mysteries” (see *Times and Seasons* 3 [August 1, 1842]: 870). This is the same doctrine that the Mormon Church uses as its basis for the practice of polygamy. It is also the doctrine which Jacob Cochran used twenty-five years earlier when he founded the Cochranite sect at Saco, Maine—which is proof that Utah Mormon polygamy originated with Jacob Cochran and not with Joseph Smith. Jacob Cochran provided material for Bennett to use in laying his polygamous foundation, and Brigham Young built upon it.

#### A Chronology of Events Which Led to Bennett’s Coming to Nauvoo

Many have supposed that when Dr. Bennett arrived at Nauvoo in August 1840 he was an unknown stranger, but this was not true. Bennett and the Church leaders were acquainted. At the time the Church headquarters was in Kirtland in the early 1830s, Bennett was a young medical doctor living at Willoughby, Ohio, only three miles away. He was also a minister in Alexander Campbell’s Christian Disciples Church, along with

Sidney Rigdon.

One biographer has written:

At Willoughby he [Bennett] became acquainted with the Mormon leaders and knew Sidney Rigdon very well as he was for a time a licensed preacher in the Christian sect along with Rigdon. (Ralph V. Chamberlin, *The University of Utah: A History of Its First Hundred Years, 1850–1950*, Appendix Q, Biographical Notes, 577)

Other Saints at Kirtland knew Bennett, for they also had been members of the Christian Church prior to being converted to the Restored Gospel. The baptizing of one hundred and twenty-seven individuals in the fall of 1830, many of them Rigdon's followers, caused great excitement and resulted in Sidney and Campbell becoming bitter enemies. They proclaimed their differences publicly in the pulpits and the press. In the years which followed, Bennett kept a watchful eye upon the Saints and their problems, and joined the Church at Nauvoo in 1840 with a knowledge of its history and persecutions.

The following chronology traces the geographic movements of both the Church leaders and Bennett—the movements which helped bring them together at Nauvoo:

January 11, 1832: Elder William McLellin recorded in his journal that January 11 was “mostly spent” in talking with “Bennett a Campbellite Priest.” McLellin had been baptized and ordained an elder the previous August, and was busily engaged in missionary work. The “Campbellite Priest” with whom he conversed was Dr. John C. Bennett. As McLellin and Bennett talked they agreed that on the following day McLellin would take Dr. Bennett to meet with Joseph and Sidney Rigdon, who were then living at Hiram, Ohio, about thirty miles southeast of Kirtland (see Jan Shippo and John W. Welch, editors, *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836*, 69). At the time, Joseph and Sidney were engaged in correcting the Holy Scriptures to produce the Inspired Version. They had found it impossible to work without interruption in busy Kirtland, so they had moved to Hiram, hoping to find a quiet retreat. John and Elsa

Johnson, a Church couple who had a large, comfortable, colonial-style home at Hiram, provided Joseph and Emma and their adopted twin babies, Joseph and Julia, with a private bedroom in their home. They provided Sidney and his family with a log cabin on the farm (see Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess*, 109). The Johnsons also made available a large, comfortable room for Joseph and Sidney to use while they worked on the Inspired Version.

January 12, 1832: McLellin recorded in his journal that he took Bennett in his sleigh to the Johnson home on that day. The meeting between Joseph and Bennett took place only one year and nine months after the Church was organized. Bennett stayed at Hiram long enough to hear Joseph, Sidney, and others expound the gospel. According to McLellin's journal, on the evening of January 13 Joseph and Bennett "talked considerable" (see Shipps and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 69). Bennett was not baptized at that time, which must have been disappointing to McLellin, Joseph, and Sidney. However, Bennett kept a watchful eye on the Saints from January 1832 until 1840, when he was baptized at Nauvoo. He later wrote:

My attention had been long turned towards the movements and designs of the Mormons, with whom I had become pretty well acquainted, years before, in the state of Ohio; and after the formation of their establishment at Nauvoo, in 1839. (John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints; or, An Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*, 5)

Don Carlos Smith, editor of the *Times and Seasons* and brother of the Prophet, substantiated Bennett's statement by publishing, "He [Bennett] has, likewise, been favorably known for upwards of eight years by some of the authorities of the church" (*Times and Seasons* 2 [June 1, 1841]: 432).

February 21, 1835: Dr. Bennett was serving as "President of our Medical Faculty, and Professor of the Principles and Practice of Midwifery, and the Diseases of Women and Children" at the Willoughby University of Lake Erie at Willoughby, Ohio

(Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 13). His presence there as a medical doctor and a minister in the church headed by Alexander Campbell brought him into contact with many Saints in Kirtland and vicinity.

March 14, 1838: Joseph Smith moved his family from Kirtland to Missouri, leaving behind many acquaintances, including Dr. John Bennett. Joseph and Emma made their home at Far West, Missouri, the headquarters for the Church (RLDS *History of the Church* 2:137; LDS *History of the Church* 3:8–9).

June 1838: Dr. Bennett moved from Ohio to Fairfield, Wayne County, Illinois (Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 14, 17). Fairfield is east of St. Louis in the southern part of Illinois. He had settled in a state adjacent to Missouri, where he had access to the Springfield *Sangamo Journal* and other newspapers which gave frequent reports concerning the Saints.

October 31, 1838: Joseph, Hyrum, Sidney, and other Church officials were arrested by the Missouri State Militia and imprisoned at Richmond, Missouri, which quickly became national news.

November 4, 1838: General Clark of the state of Missouri arrived at Far West, and informed the Saints:

“The orders of the Governor to me were, that you should be exterminated, and not allowed to remain in the State. . . . [Y]ou must not think of staying here another season . . . . If I am called here again . . . you need not expect any mercy, but extermination, for I am determined the Governor’s order shall be executed.” (RLDS *History of the Church* 2:265–266; LDS *History of the Church* 3:203)

December 1, 1838: Joseph, Hyrum, Sidney, and three others were moved from the Richmond Jail to Liberty, Missouri. Dr. Bennett soon learned where they were imprisoned.

December 16, 1838: Joseph struggled to survive in the cold,

dark dungeon of the jail. He learned rumors were circulating that he was guilty of adultery and that the Saints believed in polygamy. He assured the Saints that he had not committed adultery and that polygamy was an abomination in the sight of God. Joseph wrote:

*Liberty Jail, Missouri, Dec. 16, 1838.*

To the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Caldwell county . . . who are persecuted and made desolate, and who are afflicted in divers manners, for Christ's sake . . . . [T]he world hated us. . . . And why? . . . Was it for committing adultery? We are aware that false and slanderous reports have gone abroad, which have reached our ears, respecting this thing, which have been started by renagadoes, and spread by dissenters. . . . Some have reported that we not only dedicated our property, but likewise our families to the Lord, and Satan taking advantage of this has transfigured it into lasciviousness, a *community of wives [polygamy]*, which *things are an abomination in the sight of God.*

When we consecrate our property to the Lord, it is to administer to the wants of the poor and needy according to the laws of God, and when a man consecrates or dedicates his wife and children to the Lord, he does not give them to his brother or to his neighbor; *which is contrary to the law of God*, which says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not covet thy neighbors wife" "He that looketh upon a woman to lust after her has committed adultery already in his heart."—Now for a man to consecrate his property, his wife and children to the Lord is nothing more nor less than to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit the widows and fatherless, the sick and afflicted; and do all he can to administer to their relief in their afflictions, and for himself and his house to serve the Lord. . . . Now if any person, has represented any thing otherwise than what we now write they have willfully misrepresented us. . . . JOSEPH SMITH, Jr. (*Times and Seasons* 1 [April 1840]: 82–85; italics added)

February 20, 1839: Governor Thomas Carlin of Illinois issued a statement that J. C. Bennett had been "duly elected to the office of Brigadier-General of the Invincible Dragoons of the 2d Division of the Militia of the State of Illinois" (Bennett,

*History of the Saints*, 14). While holding this position Bennett offered assistance to free Joseph and the others from prison. He wrote letters to Joseph and Sidney which were encouraging, for he stated, “at that time I . . . proffered you my entire energies for your deliverance” (*LDS History of the Church* 4:168). Even though he was not specific concerning what kind of assistance, it was an important offer coming from a brigadier general of a division of the Illinois Militia.

April 1839: Sidney was discharged from prison because of ill health. Joseph, Hyrum, and other prisoners were taken to Gallatin, Missouri, for trial. Their attorney, General Alexander Doniphan, became convinced that the prisoners could not get a fair trial in Gallatin and secured a change of venue to Boone County. On the way there the sheriff, in collusion with unknown authorities, allowed the prisoners to escape. Joseph and Hyrum made their way to Quincy, Illinois, where they found their families. Thousands of Saints had also gathered to Quincy and the surrounding area.

Shortly thereafter the Church leaders purchased the deserted village of Commerce, Illinois, as a gathering place for the Saints. It was located at a beautiful bend on the east bank of the Mississippi River, about forty-six miles north of Quincy. The deserted land had a hidden menace—its swampy lowlands were malaria-ridden, which would cause the death of many of the Saints.

May 1839: Joseph moved his family to Commerce and the Saints began to gather. The name Commerce was soon changed to Nauvoo. Dr. Bennett was closely following the news and these movements of the Saints.

July 25, 1840: Bennett wrote to Joseph and Sidney with the news that he had resigned his office of brigadier general of the Invincible Dragoons, and had accepted an appointment by the governor to the office of quartermaster general of Illinois (*ibid.*, 168–169). He had moved to a higher military rank.

July 27, 1840: Bennett wrote still another letter to Joseph and Sidney explaining that he had attended a meeting of the Saints at Springfield, Illinois, and he expressed hope that the time “will soon come when your people will become my people, and your God my God” (ibid., 169).

August 15, 1840: Bennett sent Joseph and Sidney another letter informing them that in about two weeks he would be with them at Nauvoo (ibid., 179). Joseph wrote, “Dr. J. C. Bennett . . . located himself in the city of Nauvoo, about the month of August 1840, and soon after joined the church” (*Times and Seasons* 3 [July 1, 1842]: 839). The history of the Church was changed forever!

### **Bennett Arrived When the Saints Were in Need of Leadership**

Dr. Bennett’s arrival at Nauvoo was very timely for his own climb up the social, political, economic, and religious ladders. The Saints at Nauvoo were in a weakened and critical condition, being physically and economically drained. Joseph and Hyrum and other Church leaders were shackled by threats from Missouri and Illinois law officials, who were seeking to seize and return them to Missouri to be tried on charges of treason. Several thousand destitute Saints were without homes and employment, and many were seriously ill because of malnutrition, exposure, and disease.

Even the Prophet was not exempt from losing members of his family and strong men upon whom he was depending. Some closest to him who died were: James Mulholland, Joseph’s clerk, November 3, 1839 (*Times and Seasons* 1 [December 1839]: 32); Bishop Edward Partridge, May 27, 1840 (ibid. 1 [June 1840]: 127–128); Joseph Smith, Sr., the Prophet’s father, September 14, 1840 (ibid. 1 [September 1840]: 170); Mary Smith, wife of Samuel, the Prophet’s brother, January 25, 1841 (ibid. 2 [February 15, 1841]: 324); Don Carlos Smith, Joseph’s brother and editor of the *Times and Seasons*, August 7, 1841 (ibid. 2 [August 16, 1841]: 503); Don Carlos, the Prophet’s

fourteen-month-old son, August 15, 1841 (ibid. 2 [September 1, 1841]: 533); Robert B. Thompson, Church clerk and another editor of the *Times and Seasons*, August 27, 1841 (ibid. 2 [September 1, 1841]: 519); and six-year-old Hyrum Smith, son of Joseph's brother, Hyrum, September 25, 1841 (ibid. 3 [November 1, 1841]: 592).

No doubt Joseph's personal losses and the suffering of other Saints weighed heavily upon him. A number of the members of the Twelve were in England as missionaries and therefore could not provide leadership. So Joseph welcomed the assistance of Dr. Bennett, who came prescribing a miracle medicine, quinine, for the malaria which was killing the Saints; and also bringing great visions and expertise in city planning, schools, a university, commerce, a militia, a Masonic Lodge, and political stability.

On January 15, 1841, Joseph, Hyrum, and Sidney, presidents of the Church, issued "A Proclamation to the Saints Scattered Abroad," in which they revealed that Dr. Bennett had been instrumental "in effecting our . . . deliverance from the . . . authorities of Missouri." They wrote:

several of the principal men of Illinois . . . have become obedient to the faith . . . among whom is John C. Bennett, M.D., Quarter Master General of Illinois. . . . [D]uring our persecutions in Missouri, he became acquainted with the violence we were suffering, while in that State, on account of our religion—his sympathies for us were aroused, and his indignation kindled against our persecutors for the cruelties practised upon us. . . . [H]e addressed us a letter, tendering to us his assistance in delivering us out of the hands of our enemies, and restoring us again to our privileges, and only required at our hands to point out the way, and he would be forthcoming, with all the [military] forces he could raise for that purpose—He has been one of the principal instruments, in effecting our safety and deliverance from the unjust persecutions and demands of the authorities of Missouri, and also in procuring the [Nauvoo] city charter—He is a man of enterprize, extensive acquirements, and of independant mind, and is calculated to be a great blessing to our community. (*Times and Seasons* 2 [January 15, 1841]: 275)



## **Lucy Smith Asserted That Bennett Devised a Plan to Help Nauvoo**

Lucy Smith, mother of the Prophet, referred to a “scheme” devised by Bennett which was to bring safety and peace to Joseph and other men who were being sought for prosecution by Missouri and Illinois law officers. She recalled:

About this time [1840], John C. Bennett came into the city, and undertook to devise a scheme whereby Joseph and Hyrum, besides other brethren who were persecuted in like manner, might remain at home in peace. I do not know what he did, I only know that he seemed to be engaged in the law, as well as the gospel. My heart was then too full of anxiety about my husband [who died the month Bennett arrived], for me to inquire much into matters which I did not understand; however, the result was, that Joseph returned from Iowa [where he had been hiding from law officials]. . . . Joseph came in and told his father that he should not be troubled any more for the present with the Missourians. (Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations*, 336)

Mother Smith did not know what comprised Bennett’s scheme. However, it can be pieced together by observing the things which Bennett the politician and statesman negotiated in his early months in Nauvoo. His plan would bring security to the city and the Saints by obtaining:

1. A city charter that made Nauvoo virtually independent of the state and county governments;
2. The Nauvoo city charter made provisions for a municipal court, which provided that the Saints could be tried by Church men in Nauvoo, rather than being judged by non-members at Carthage, the county seat;
3. Establishing of the Nauvoo Legion, with Joseph being its leader and the highest-ranking militia officer in the state;
4. Establishing the Masonic Lodge in Nauvoo, and making it large and strong by having the majority of men in the city join

it. In this way, the Nauvoo Lodge would be the largest in Illinois.

Dr. Bennett, as the quartermaster general of the state militia, with training in military leadership and with his shrewdness in political matters, was able to put the program into place. However, the plan was plagued with pitfalls, for it made the nonmember citizens throughout the state jealous. Soon they began to express fear that the Saints were beyond the law with their extraordinary charter and court, and with a militia that was so large and well trained that it was dangerous. Even the Masons feared being overwhelmed. But the greatest danger of all—and one which Joseph became aware of only after it had taken root—was that the unscrupulous doctor was building himself an empire, and that his actions would bring destruction upon the Saints.

### **Bennett Began His Spiritual Wifery Soon after Arriving in Nauvoo**

The young doctor came to Nauvoo posing as a single man and was soon engaged in secret illicit sexual activity. Quickly he gathered a group around him (the majority were young men and women) and secretly taught them that “promiscuous intercourse between the sexes was a doctrine believed in by the Latter Day Saints.” When they asked how such could be possible when they had heard Joseph preach much against polygamy, Bennett had a ready answer. He claimed that he was in a position to know exactly what was going on because he was boarding at Joseph’s home—and was acting as a temporary member of the First Presidency in place of Sidney Rigdon, who was ill. He explained to them that Joseph was preaching so much against polygamy because of the prejudice of the public and Emma’s strong opposition to that doctrine. (Emma’s opposition to polygamy was well-known by the Saints.) Bennett’s assurances were so convincing that his secret circle of friends accepted his lies as truth, and they began practicing spiritual wifery. Among those ensnared in his web were Sarah Pratt, wife of Apostle

Orson Pratt; Nancy Rigdon, daughter of Sidney; Chauncey and Francis Higbee, sons of Church Historian Elias Higbee; and others.

After Joseph, Emma, and Hyrum discovered this underground clique, they worked feverishly to eradicate Bennett's falsehood that Joseph had received a polygamous revelation and was practicing polygamy. But its roots had already gone too deep. When Apostle Brigham Young and others, who favored polygamy, returned to Nauvoo from their missions to the British Isles in the summer of 1841, they found Bennett's foundation in place. After Bennett left Nauvoo, his foundation served as a base for Brigham and others of the Twelve to secretly continue that false doctrine and practice. Between then and the time they left Nauvoo in 1846, Brigham and his many relatives and friends created their own secret inner circle wherein polygamy was practiced. They used Bennett's same wicked claim that Joseph had received polygamous revelations and was practicing polygamy, but was publicly denouncing it because of the prejudice of the public and Emma's opposition. Without Bennett's groundwork, Brigham could not have introduced polygamy into the Church as an official doctrine.

After August 1852, when Brigham made public his polygamous document (now Section 132 of the LDS Doctrine and Covenants) and claimed it had originally been received by Joseph, Brigham faced the enormous task of giving proof that Joseph was its author. Therefore, Bennett's claim of polygamous "revelations" to Joseph (see "Affidavit of Hyrum Smith" in *Times and Seasons* 3 [August 1, 1842]: 870) and charges that Joseph had plural wives, became the main defense for Brigham and his followers.

### **Joseph's Sons Declared the Secrecy Theory Absurd**

The belief that Joseph taught and practiced polygamy, but did it secretly because he feared opposition, is a ridiculous, weak belief according to Joseph's sons, Joseph III, Alexander, and David.

Joseph Smith III was eleven and a half years old at the time

of his father's death. The young lad had a deep respect for, and a close relationship with, his father. He was intelligent and studious, and knew more about the polygamy conspiracy against his father than most Saints, because he often witnessed his mother and father's joint work to counteract the false polygamous charges which Bennett had made. He had the opportunity to observe his father's behavior, language, and mindset in public and private, both in the Prophet's office and home. As an example, the father required that Joseph III sometimes accompany him upon the rostrum during worship services; and the boy stayed at least once with his father while the Prophet was in hiding. Joseph III had this to say in answer to Brigham Young and others' claims that his father kept a polygamous revelation and polygamous marriages secret because of fear of the public:

To assert that Joseph Smith was afraid to promulgate that doctrine [polygamy], if the command to do so had come from God, is to charge him with a moral cowardice to which his whole life gives the lie. Nor does it charge him alone with cowardice, but brands his compeers with the same undeserved approbrium. The very fact that men are now found who dare to present and defend it, is proof positive that Joseph and Hyrum Smith would have dared to do the same thing had they been commanded so to do.

The danger to the lives of those men would have been no more imminent, nor any greater in the preaching of "Celestial Marriage," than it was in preaching the "Golden Bible" and the doctrine that Joseph Smith was a prophet blessed with divine revelation. For the preaching of these tenets many lost their lives; Joseph and Hyrum Smith were repeatedly mobbed, were imprisoned and finally died, in the faith originally promulgated, but—if we may judge from their public records,—not believers in polygamy. (Joseph Smith III, *Reply to Orson Pratt* [tract], 4)

Alexander Hale Smith, a son of the Prophet, was six years old when his father was slain. After studying the polygamous charges against his father he wrote:

We also learn another fact: . . . That in the brain of J. C. Bennett was conceived the idea, and in his practice was

the principle first introduced into the church; and from this hellish egg was hatched the present degrading, debasing, and destructive polygamic system, known as “spiritual wifery,” or the “celestial marriage,” so called.

It is said that Joseph Smith, the martyr, received a revelation revealing the “celestial marriage” and instituting “plurality of wives.” I have already examined the testimony of Joseph Smith, concerning the marriage ceremony; and he declares that he knew of no other system of marriage than the one quoted from the Book of Doctrine and Covenants [1835 Kirtland Edition, 101; 1844 Nauvoo Edition, 109; 1866 Liverpool Edition, 109; RLDS DC, 111]. . . .

But says one, “that was only a sham to blind the eyes of our enemies.” Shame on the man, or set of men, who will thus wilfully charge the two best men of the nineteenth century, the two Prophets of the most high God, with publishing to the church and the public at large a lie, and signing their names to it.

“Oh! but it was done to save their lives.” A very likely story, when those two men had faced death and the world for fourteen long years, preaching the word of God to a sin-cursed generation. No, no, it will not do, you must meet the truth with better weapons than that, if you expect to make much of a battle. Besides all that, Is it not written, that “He who seeketh to save his life shall lose it, and he who loseth his life for my sake shall find it,” and did not they know this. Yes, a thousand times yes; it was their hope, their consolation in times of danger. (Alexander H. Smith, *Polygamy: Was It an Original Tenet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints?* [tract], 6)

### **Joseph’s Fight against Polygamy Is Being Ignored by the LDS Church**

In spite of all that Joseph did to proclaim that he was not lying when he said he had not had a polygamous revelation, and that he was honest in his condemning of polygamy, members of the LDS Church proclaim even to this day that Joseph did receive Section 132 and was a polygamist. Joseph’s side of the story has been, and is being, purposefully ignored by the LDS

Church. They never give Joseph credit for having spoken the truth on this subject. In fact, they consider it was necessary and acceptable for the Prophet to lie, even though the Scriptures teach that lying is a major sin. It is ridiculous to believe that Joseph lied about polygamy because he feared a prejudiced public—for even the Mormons publish that Joseph bravely faced death at Carthage, saying, “I am calm as a summer’s morning” (*Times and Seasons* 5 [July 15, 1844]: 585; RLDS DC 113:4b; LDS DC 135:4). When Joseph’s statements against polygamy are taken at face value and are read with the realization that he was not a cowardly liar—an astounding fact becomes obvious—that it was Brigham and his pro-polygamist party that palmed a fraudulent polygamy conspiracy upon the Saints, which has blighted the Latter Day Saint Movement for over a century and a half.