

Chapter 8

Dr. Bennett and Eliza R. Snow

It has been shown that polygamy did not enter the Church through the Prophet Joseph Smith's teachings, but through other avenues. One of the most devastating roads was the one paved by Doctor Bennett. There is evidence that Bennett seduced Eliza R. Snow and caused her to conceive a child during the Nauvoo period. There is also evidence that because Joseph and Emma Smith both felt that Eliza was a victim of Bennett's deceit, they shielded her from disgrace.

However, after becoming one of Brigham Young's many wives, Eliza allowed the rumor to spread in Utah that she had been a plural wife of Joseph the Prophet and had become pregnant with his child. Brigham sorely needed this type of rumor to be circulated in order to attach Joseph's name to the doctrine, and justify his own plural marriages and those of other church leaders. Therefore, the church officials, which included members of the Snow family (in both the presidency and the historical department), promoted this new rumor with such vigor in Utah that one hardly dared mention that President Brigham Young's wife, Eliza, had apparently been romantically linked with Doctor Bennett.

In order to piece together the account of what really happened at Nauvoo, it is necessary to give more of Dr. Bennett's background:

John Cook Bennett was born in Fairhaven, Bristol County, Massachusetts, August 4, 1804. . . . In 1808 he moved with his parents to Ohio. There . . . he acquired a knowledge of the classical languages and excelled especially in mathematics. Thereafter he was trained for the practice of medicine under

Dr. Samuel Hildreth, a prominent physician of Marietta, Ohio. . . . He had a marked interest in founding colleges and universities and promoted the formation of such institutions in West Virginia, Indiana and Ohio. The last institution he was successful in organizing in Ohio was the medical school of Willoughby University, located only four miles from Kirtland. He was first dean of that college and at the same time professor of Gynecology and the diseases of children. At Willoughby he 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. He moved to Illinois in 1838. . . . He soon won appointment as brigadier general of the Illinois Invincible Dragoons. In 1840 he was made Quartermaster General [of the state militia] of Illinois by Governor Carlin. That same year he joined the Mormon church at Nauvoo in which he had a meteoric career, within eighteen months attaining popularity and power second only to that of Joseph Smith. In addition to his positions of mayor of Nauvoo and "acting counselor" in the First Presidency of the church, he was made Chancellor of the University of Nauvoo, [and] did an excellent job of organizing and training the Nauvoo Legion. (Ralph V. Chamberlin, *The University of Utah: A History of Its First Hundred Years*, 577–578)

The Church headquarters was at Kirtland from 1831 to 1837, which was only four miles from where the doctor lived while in his twenties. Being a medical doctor and a fellow preacher with Sidney Rigdon in the Disciples of Christ Church (Campbellite), he had ample opportunity to hear and accept the gospel. But he chose not to join at that time.

Since he was Sidney Rigdon's close friend and fellow churchman, he was well-known in the five congregations over which Rigdon presided at the time Sidney heard and obeyed the gospel. No doubt Bennett was also well acquainted with many of Rigdon's followers who were baptized into the Church led by Joseph Smith, including Parley P. Pratt, Orson Hyde, Lyman Wight, Newell K. Whitney, and Isaac Morley. All of these last-named later became polygamists.

Bennett also knew the family of Oliver Snow, which in-

cluded his poetic and scholarly daughter, Eliza—who was already noted for her writing ability. Bennett and Eliza Snow had many things in common at Kirtland—they were the same age, both teachers, intellectual, widely read, writers, liked poetry, and both were interested in the war between Greece and Turkey which occurred while the Church headquarters was at Kirtland. Eliza, using the pen name *Narcissa*, wrote a poem about the war, which was published in the *Ravenna Courier*. Dr. Bennett, who “acquired a knowledge of the classical languages,” studied the Turkish practice of polygamy, for he mentioned it in his book, along with the polygamy practiced by Oriental and African rulers (see Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 218–219). His discussion of polygamous rulers and harems in his book demonstrates that he had more than an ordinary interest in the subject, and an extensive knowledge of it being practiced in various places.

When Doctor Bennett arrived in Nauvoo, he claimed to accept the gospel and was baptized by Joseph. Housing was scarce when he arrived, so he roomed for thirty-nine weeks (nine months) with Joseph and Emma and their children in the tiny log cabin with only three rooms, known as the Homestead. The account book for Joseph Smith’s store shows that John C. Bennett owed Joseph \$117 for thirty-nine weeks of board at a charge of three dollars a week (see Joseph Smith’s *Red Brick Store Daybook* [December 8, 1843], account number 59).

Joseph Smith III had some vivid memories of Dr. Bennett. He recalled:

While Doctor Bennett was boarding at our house every effort was made for his comfort, however. Mother would set a loaf of bread down in front of the wood fire until its end would be toasted a pleasing brown. Then she would slice that part off, thinly, and replace the loaf before the fire. In this manner she would get a goodly supply ready for his supper of browned bread and milk, prepared just as he liked it. (*Saints’ Herald* 82 [January 8, 1935]: 49)

At the time Bennett came to Nauvoo, he had a wife and children in the East, but he posed as a single man. Immediately

after arriving in August of 1840, he was dating a young woman in Nauvoo, whom he seduced. Joseph published on June 24, 1842, that “more than twenty months ago [September or October 1840] Bennett went to a lady in the city and began to teach her that promiscuous intercourse between the sexes was lawful and no harm in it” (*LDS History of the Church* 5:42–43). This act, along with other incidents of immorality, made it necessary to expel him from the Church in May 1842.

Joseph Described Bennett’s Adulterous Activities

Joseph published:

It becomes my duty to lay before the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and the public generally, some important facts relative to the conduct and character of DR. JOHN C. BENNETT, who has lately been expelled from the aforesaid church; that the honorable part of [the] community may be aware of his proceedings, and be ready to treat him and regard him as he ought to be regarded, viz: as an imposter and base adulterer.

It is a matter of notoriety that said Dr. J. C. Bennett, became favorable to the doctrines taught by the elders of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and located himself in the city of Nauvoo, about the month of August 1840, and soon after joined the church. . . . He had not been long in Nauvoo before he began to keep company with a young lady, one of our citizens; and she being ignorant of his having a wife living, gave way to his addresses, and became confident, from his behavior towards her, that he intended to marry her; and this he gave her to understand he would do. I, seeing the folly of such an acquaintance, persuaded him to desist; and, on account of his continuing his course, finally threatened to expose him if he did not desist. This, to outward appearance, had the desired effect, and the acquaintance between them was broken off.

But, like one of the most abominable and depraved beings which could possibly exist, he only broke off his publicly wicked actions, to sink deeper into iniquity and hypocrisy [by continuing to date her secretly]. When he saw that I would not submit to any such conduct, he went to some

of the females in the city, who knew nothing of him but as an honorable man, & *began to teach them that promiscuous intercourse between the sexes, was a doctrine believed in by the Latter-Day Saints, and that there was no harm in it*; but this failing, he had recourse to a more influential and desperately wicked course; and that was, to persuade them that myself and others of the authorities of the church not only sanctioned, but practiced the same wicked acts; and when asked why I publicly preached so much against it, said that it was because of the prejudice of the public, and that it would cause trouble in my own house [with Joseph's wife, Emma]. He was well aware of the consequence of such wilful and base falsehoods, if they should come to my knowledge; and consequently endeavored to persuade his dupes to keep it a matter of secrecy, persuading them there would be no harm if they should not make it known. *This proceeding on his part, answered the desired end; he accomplished his wicked purposes; he seduced an innocent female by his lying, and subjected her character to public disgrace, should it ever be known.*

But his depraved heart would not suffer him to stop here. Not being contented with having disgraced one female, he made an attempt upon others; and, by the same plausible tale, overcame them also; evidently not caring whose character was ruined, so that his wicked, lustful appetites might be gratified.

Sometime about the early part of July 1841, I received a letter from Elder H. [Hyrum] Smith and Wm. Law [a member of the First Presidency], who were then at Pittsburgh, Penn. This letter was dated June 15th, and contained the particulars of a conversation betwixt them and a respectable gentleman from the neighborhood where Bennett's wife and children resided. He stated to them that it was a fact that Bennett had a wife and children living, and that she had left him because of his ill-treatment towards her. This letter was read to Bennett, which he did not attempt to deny; but candidly acknowledged the fact.

Soon after this information reached our ears, Dr. Bennett made an attempt at suicide, by taking poison; but he being discovered before it had taken effect, and the proper antidotes being administered, he again recovered; but he very much

resisted when an attempt was made to save him. The public impression was, that he was so much ashamed of his base and wicked conduct, that he had recourse to the above deed to escape the censures of an indignant community.

It might have been supposed that these circumstances transpiring in the manner they did, would have produced a thorough reformation in his conduct; but, alas! like a being totally destitute of common decency, and without any government over his passions, he was soon busily engaged in the same wicked career, and continued until a knowledge of the same reached my ears. I immediately charged him with it, and he admitted that it was true; but in order to put a stop to all such proceedings for the future, I publicly proclaimed against it, and *had those females notified to appear before the proper [Church] officers* that the whole subject might be investigated and thoroughly exposed.

During the course of investigation [by Church officials], the foregoing facts were proved by credible witnesses, and were sworn and subscribed to before an alderman of the city, on the 15th ult. The documents containing the evidence are now in my possession. (*Times and Seasons* 3 [July 1, 1842]: 839–840; RLDS *History of the Church* 2:585–587; italics added)

From the above it is seen that Dr. Bennett “seduced an innocent female by his lying, and subjected her character to public disgrace, should it ever be known.” She was “a young lady, one of our citizens.” He also “went to some of the [other] females in the city” and “accomplished his wicked purposes.”

Lorenzo Wasson Testified of Bennett’s Guilt and Joseph’s Innocence

One of Joseph’s primary witnesses to his fidelity and Bennett’s immorality was Emma’s nephew, Lorenzo D. Wasson, a son of Emma’s sister, Elizabeth Wasson. Lorenzo joined the Church and lived with his Aunt Emma and Uncle Joseph, where Bennett also boarded. During the summer of 1841, Lorenzo was upstairs in Joseph and Emma’s bedroom at the Homestead, and heard Joseph berating Bennett in the room below. The next

summer, on July 30, 1842, while on a missionary journey, Lorenzo wrote Joseph these words:

Uncle, . . . If I can be of any service in this Bennett affair I am ready. I was reading in your chamber last summer—yourself and Bennett came into the lower room, and I heard you give J. C. Bennett a tremendous flagellation for practicing iniquity under the base pretence of authority from the heads of the church—if you recollect I came down just before you were through talking. There are many things I can inform you of, if necessary, in relation to Bennett and his prostitutes. I am satisfied of your virtue and integrity. I have been with you to visit the sick, and time and again to houses where you had business of importance, you requested me to do so—many times I knew not why, but I am satisfied it was that you might not be censured by those that were watching you with a jealous eye, and I now solemnly protest before God and man, I never saw a thing unvirtuous in your conduct. . . . I am your most obedient nephew, L. D. WASSON. (*Times and Seasons* 3 [August 15, 1842]: 892)

Lorenzo was Joseph's faithful attendant in life and in death. In 1843 Joseph was taken prisoner by Sheriff Reynolds of Missouri at the Wasson home in Dixon, Illinois. Lorenzo and his father's quick action provided Joseph with attorneys and prevented Joseph from being taken to Missouri (see *Saints' Herald* 82 [January 22, 1935]: 112). It was Lorenzo who hastened to Nauvoo with a message from Emma, bearing the news to the Saints of Joseph's arrest. And alas, it was Lorenzo that Joseph III remembers seeing "covered with dust, bringing the news" that Joseph and Hyrum had been murdered at Carthage (*ibid.* [January 29, 1935]: 143).

After a mock funeral and entombment for Joseph and Hyrum in June of 1844, Lorenzo and others, carefully chosen by Emma, secretly buried the bodies of the Martyrs in the basement of the Nauvoo House (see George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet*, 529–530). Lorenzo refused to follow the leadership of Brigham Young.

Who Was the “Young Lady” Whom Bennett “Disgraced”?

One of the best-kept secrets in the Church is the identity of the “innocent female” whom Bennett seduced. Joseph revealed the names of other women who were involved with Bennett, but never hers. The young lady’s name was known, of course, to Church officials who tried Bennett’s case, such as members of the Presidency and the High Council. Their official investigation of Bennett’s immorality was reported in the *Times and Seasons* and the *Nauvoo Wasp*; yet her identity was kept secret. Why? Because as Joseph explained, she was “innocent”—she was looked upon as a victim. This was not the case with President Sidney Rigdon’s daughter, Nancy; Apostle Orson Pratt’s wife, Sarah; and several other women whose names were published (see *Affidavits and Certificates Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett’s Letters*, published at Nauvoo, Illinois, August 31, 1842). The reason that their names were made public will be explained in later chapters.

The Snow Family Left Nauvoo Abruptly

Eliza Snow and John Bennett had known each other in Ohio; they were the same age; and both had good educations and were intellectual, as previously noted. Now they were in Nauvoo and were close friends of Joseph and Emma Smith and Sidney and Phebe Rigdon. These facts show a natural relationship between them. During this time an incident occurred which angered Eliza’s father, Oliver Snow. Historian and author, Maureen Urzenbach Beecher, has written:

Spring 1842 was a time of great turmoil for the Snow family. Apostate John C. Bennett was spreading falsehoods, dissension was breaking out among the Saints, and persecution from nearby settlers was mounting. For Oliver Snow, it was more trial than he had faith to match. Purchasing property at Walnut Grove, a settlement some seventy-five miles east of Nauvoo, he moved his family there, those who would go. He

wrote to his brother Franklin that “Eliza cannot leave our Prophet. Mother [Rosetta] did not like to. For my part I am very glad, at present, to be away. Turmoil and confusion, these stalk abroad at noon day.” (*Ensign* 9 [June 1840]: 67)

Oliver Snow had endured all kinds of hardships with the Saints in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Why was the spring of 1842 so much worse that Oliver decided to leave Nauvoo and the Church? The spring of 1842 was the time that Joseph brought Dr. Bennett to trial and exposed those who were involved in his seductive activities by publishing the information. Did those trials reveal to Oliver that Dr. Bennett, one of the heads of the Church, had seduced his daughter, Eliza? Mormon Church authorities insist that Eliza did become pregnant during the Nauvoo period. This may have been between the spring of 1841 when the family moved back to Nauvoo from La Harpe, and the spring of 1842 when Oliver departed so abruptly. This was the same time that Bennett was most involved in his promiscuous activities. If Eliza were that “innocent female,” it would explain Oliver Snow’s abrupt change of allegiance and departure from Nauvoo.

Dr. Wyl Implied Bennett Seduced Eliza

The German author and newspaper correspondent, Dr. W. Wyl, spent nearly five months in Salt Lake City in 1885 collecting material for a book on Mormonism. When the book was published, it contained information which he had acquired from his interviews with approximately eighty individuals, including a number of old-time Saints from the Nauvoo and Kirtland days.

Dr. Wyl implied that Dr. John C. Bennett had seduced Eliza Snow. He did this by quoting from an article by Eliza, published in the *Times and Seasons* of February 1, 1844 (5:430–431), entitled “Missouri,” which spoke of polluting “female virtue.” Wyl then suggested that it was “Joab,” not Missouri, of whom Eliza had written. “Joab” was the pseudonym used by Bennett for some of his articles which were published in the Church paper (see *Times and Seasons* 2 [November 15, 1840]:

222; 2 [December 1, 1840]: 238; 2 [January 1, 1841]: 267).

Wyl, who called Eliza's article a psalm, wrote of Eliza and Bennett:

Sister Snow, in her great psalm . . . says of Missouri: "Thou art a stink in the nostrils of the Goddess of Liberty . . . Thou art already associated with Herod, Nero and the bloody Inquisition—thy name has become synonymous with oppression, cruelty, treachery and blood." Oh, Sappho-Eliza-Roxanna-Snow-Smith-Young! But I think I sniff General Joab in this transcendent psalm. "Thou didst pollute the holy sanctuary of female virtue, and barbarously trample upon the most sacred *gems* of domestic felicity," is Pistol-Bennett, sure. (Dr. W. Wyl, *Mormon Portraits or the Truth About the Mormon Leaders from 1830 to 1886*, 186–187)

Why did Dr. Wyl write, "I sniff" Bennett in Eliza's psalm? Apparently because one or more old-time Saints, who had lived in Nauvoo, had confided to him the closely guarded secret that Eliza had been the "young lady" who was seduced by "Pistol-Bennett, [for] sure."

By applying the name *Sappho* to Eliza, Dr. Wyl was comparing her to the Greek poetess by that name (see *Encyclopedia Americana* 24 [1954]: 291–292). Dr. Wyl was acquainted with the play by Austria's most talented dramatist, Franz Grillparzer, which told the story of Sappho, the sixth century B.C. Greek lyric poet. The drama had received wide acclaim throughout Germany.

Eliza and Sappho had two things in common: each was the greatest poetess in her respective society, and each was rejected by her lover. Sappho was rejected by Phaon, a man who chose a younger woman (*ibid.*; see also Frank N. Magill, *Critical Survey of Drama—Foreign Language Series*, 2371). Eliza was rejected by Dr. Bennett after he promised to marry her, for he went to other women in Nauvoo and "overcame them also" (*Times and Seasons* 3 [July 1, 1842]: 840). He rejected her even further when he divorced his wife, Mary (see Springfield, Illinois, *Sangamo Journal* [July 22, 1842], 2), and did not marry Eliza.

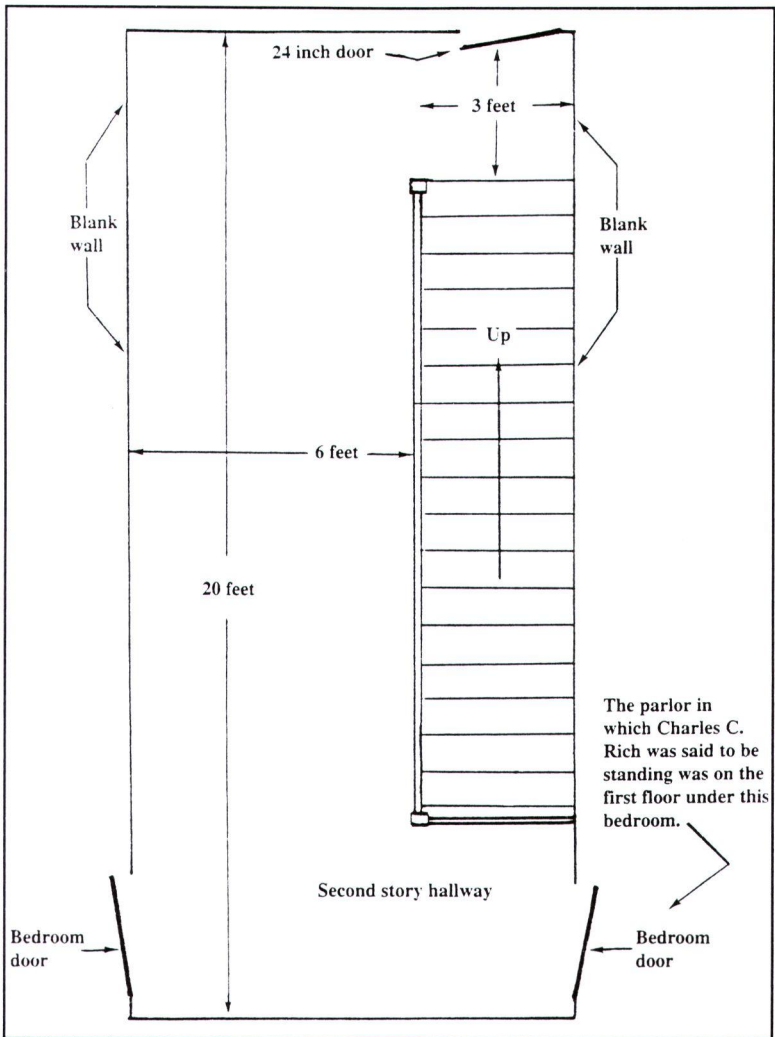
The LDS Church authorities continually claim that the story

of Eliza being pregnant at Nauvoo is true, and there is no reason to doubt that she did conceive a child, but if she did, the child was not born at Nauvoo. However, there is absolutely no foundation for their claim that Joseph Smith was the father.

One month before he died, Joseph the Prophet proclaimed to thousands of Saints gathered for worship on Sunday May 26, 1844, that he was not a polygamist. He declared, “What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one” (*LDS History of the Church* 6:411). Also, the fact that Emma did not push Eliza down the Mansion House stairs (see chapter 9) is proof that the LDS Church’s “tradition” that Joseph was the father, is false. Who then was the father? Dr. Wyl’s book, from which LDS writers have often quoted in their efforts to prove that Joseph was a polygamist, implies that Bennett seduced Eliza—he could have been the father.

Joseph Smith said of Dr. John C. Bennett’s case, “What I have stated I am prepared to prove, having all the documents concerning the matter in my possession” (*Times and Seasons* 3 [July 1, 1842]: 841–842).

At Joseph’s death, those documents pertaining to John C. Bennett’s case, referred to by the Prophet, fell into the possession of Brigham Young and his associates and were taken to Utah. If those records still exist and could be examined and made public, they would no doubt reveal that Dr. John C. Bennett was the father of the child, which the Mormon Church claims Eliza Snow gave birth to prematurely.



A diagram of the Mansion House stairs, showing that Charles C. Rich could not have seen Emma and Joseph coming from one bedroom and Eliza Snow coming from another (see also the photograph on page 126).