

Chapter 15

Dr. Bennett Persecuted Joseph and the Church

After Dr. John C. Bennett was expelled from the Church in 1842 and it became obvious that he could no longer be a prominent and respected person in Nauvoo, he left the city and began a campaign of persecution against Joseph Smith and the Saints which has never been equaled in severity. So many significant events occurred during that spring and summer, which involved the doctor and had such important bearings upon the subject of polygamy, that they need to be kept in mind in the order of their dates. Some of these events were:

- May 6—Lilburn Boggs, ex-governor of Missouri who had issued the order to drive the Saints out of the state in 1838, was shot and wounded in his home in Independence.
- May 7—General Bennett supervised a sham battle of the Nauvoo Legion, in which it was believed that he intended to have Joseph assassinated (see Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith*, 393–394).
- May 11—The Church authorities voted to withdraw the hand of fellowship from Dr. Bennett, and published the fact on June 15 (see *Times and Seasons* 3:830).
- May 17—Bennett resigned as mayor (see *Wasp* 1 [May 21, 1842]: 3). He also made affidavit that Joseph “never did teach to me in private that an illegal illicit intercourse with females was, under any circumstances, justifiable; and that I never knew him so to teach others” (*Times and Seasons* 3 [July 1, 1842]: 840–841).
- May 19—Joseph Smith was elected mayor of Nauvoo and Bennett made an official statement before the City Council in which he stated that Joseph was “strictly virtuous” (*ibid.* [July 1, 1842]: 841; [August 1, 1842]: 872).

- May–June—The Church authorities discovered that Bennett was continuing his illicit activities (*ibid.*, 872).
- June 15—A notice that Bennett had been disfellowshipped appeared in the *Times and Seasons*, volume 3, page 830.
- June 18—Joseph preached a public sermon against Bennett and his false teachings (see *LDS History of the Church* 5:34–35).
- June 22—Bennett went to Springfield, the capital of Illinois, and made an agreement with Editor Simeon Francis to write letters exposing alleged crimes of Joseph Smith for Francis to publish in the *Sangamo Journal* (see *New York Herald* [July 26, 1842], 2).
- June 25—Joseph published a lengthy article detailing Bennett’s sins (see *Wasp* 1 [June 25, 1842]; *Times and Seasons* 3 [July 1, 1842]: 839–843).
- June 27—Bennett returned to Nauvoo from Springfield and stayed at the home of his devoted friend, George W. Robinson, where he had been boarding (see Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 290–291). Robinson, whom Bennett had made a brevet major general in the Nauvoo Legion, was Sidney Rigdon’s son-in-law.
- June 30—Bennett was cashiered out of the Nauvoo Legion (see *LDS History of the Church* 5:49).
- July 1—Bennett went to Carthage (see Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 282). He remained there until July 10, writing some of his infamous six letters against Joseph to be printed in the *Sangamo Journal*.
- July 13—Bennett arrived in St. Louis and met with Martha Brotherton—who in answer to Bennett’s request, made an affidavit charging Joseph with polygamy and related crimes (see Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 236–240). Bennett also met with newspaper editors and sought their support in having Joseph extradited to Missouri for trial in the Boggs case.
- August 8—Joseph went into hiding to avoid extradition to Missouri.
- August 29—While conference was in session, Joseph suddenly appeared on the stand. He requested that elders volunteer “to declare the truth” in the case of Dr. John C. Bennett. Three hundred and eighty elders volunteered (Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith*, 410).

August 31—Joseph defended himself by publishing a broadside entitled *Affidavits and Certificates Disproving Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett's Letters* for the elders to distribute.

August 1842 through 1843—Bennett traveled to the East and gained widespread notoriety by lecturing in New York City, Boston, and elsewhere—charging those who attended his lectures a considerable fee.

October 1842—Bennett's book entitled *History of the Saints; or, an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*, was published (see *New York Herald* [October 21, 1842], 2).

Bennett Continued His Promiscuity

After the intense hearings before members of the High Council, the City Council, and the Masonic Lodge, Dr. Bennett pretended to repent on the one hand, but continued his spiritual wifery on the other. At the same time he was plotting revenge against Joseph. The Prophet and other officials had hoped that their charges and Bennett's admission of guilt would cause him to repent and leave Nauvoo without a public exposure. President William Law tried to persuade him to go to Texas. Law said under oath:

On many occasions I heard him acknowledge his guilt, and beg not to be destroyed in the eyes of the public, and that he would never act so again, "So help him God." From such promises, and oaths, I was induced to bear with him longer than I should have done. . . .

About the time that John C. Bennett was brought before the Masonic Lodge . . . I advised him to go to Texas, and when he returned, if he would behave well we would reinstate him. He said he had no means to take him to Texas, and still insisted on B. Young and myself to intercede for him. (*Times and Seasons* 3 [August 1, 1842]: 873)

Bennett hoped to be forgiven as in previous cases and to stay in Illinois, where he had made a name for himself. After all, he was a candidate for the Illinois House of Representatives, a

position he greatly desired—and a break with Joseph and the Church would mean a loss of the election. But Joseph and Hyrum discovered that Bennett was continuing his illicit activities in spite of the severe reprimands and threats of public exposure. Hyrum testified:

Still after all this we found him guilty of similar crimes again, and it was found to our satisfaction that he was conspiring against the peace and safety of the citizens of this state—after learning these facts we exposed him to the public; he then immediately left the place abruptly; threatening to drink the hearts blood of many citizens of this place. (ibid., 872)

Because of the doctor's continuing promiscuity, Joseph began publishing the truth about him, which made him even more determined to wreak revenge upon the Prophet, and to clear his own name by destroying Joseph's character. The Church officials published a notice in the *Times and Seasons* for June 15, 1842, stating they had withdrawn the hand of fellowship from John C. Bennett.

Bennett Conspired with Editor Francis

When Bennett left Nauvoo, he knew that he could never obtain his goals without a publisher to tell his story. The year of 1842 was an election year and the Whig Party was desperately trying to win over the Democrats. At an earlier date, Editor Simeon Francis of the *Sangamo Journal*, which was published in the state capital at Springfield, had printed an article against the Saints at Nauvoo in order to swing votes in favor of the Whigs. Bennett, who was still mayor when that issue of the *Sangamo Journal* arrived, answered him in a long, scathing letter in the *Wasp* for June 18. (Ironically, it was the same issue of the *Wasp* which announced Bennett's expulsion from the Church. Bennett's letter was probably written days earlier, before he knew he was going to be exposed.)

After the hand of fellowship was withdrawn, the shrewd

doctor devised a diabolical scheme—he traveled to Springfield on June 22 and entered into a pact with Editor Francis. Bennett agreed to write letters against Joseph and the Saints. In turn, Francis would publish the letters to swing votes to the Whig Party, and both the editor and Bennett would profit financially. Therefore, Bennett was able to publish six lengthy letters which still live in infamy.

The truth of this matter was published by the editor of the *Illinois State Register*, a political opponent and competitor of Editor Francis. That paper published:

About two weeks ago Gen. Bennett, a master spirit among the Mormons, was in this city. He was seen in conversation with several of the leaders of the Junto [leaders of the Whig Party], who made arrangements with him to make sundry awful disclosures about the Mormons. (*Illinois State Register*, July 8, 1842)

Two weeks prior to July 8 places this meeting with the Whig politicians around June 22, six days after the notice of Bennett being disfellowshipped was published, and three days after Joseph had preached against him in the Grove near the Temple. The editor of the *Register* explained the purpose of the conspiracy between Bennett and Editor Francis:

We have no confidence in this exposition [by Bennett], because it is designed to affect the approaching gubernatorial election. . . . The Mormon General Bennett is thrust from the temple at Nauvoo as to unclean to mingle with those who minister there and forthwith with the Springfield Junto, a herd of kindred spirits, send for him—they hug him to their bosoms with a grin of infernal joy. Promises, flattery and perhaps money are bestowed upon him. Finally a plan of horrible disclosures is proposed and agreed upon, and the [*Sangamo*] *Journal*, miserable harlot of Junto, is made to bring forth to the world, a litter of crippled and misshapen monsters, to frighten half-witted men, women and children, and divert the attention of the people from a sober consideration of the important interest involved in the election. By such foul means—by such base trickery the managers of the Whig party hope to elect the corrupt Prince of town-lot speculators,

Governor of the State of Illinois. (ibid.; republished in the *New York Herald* [July 26, 1842], 2)

The editor of the *Register* also announced in his paper for July 14 that

Many thousands of copies of Bennett's letters have been struck off at the expense of Gov. Duncan [to sway the election in favor of the Whigs], as we have been credibly informed, and distributed gratuitously everywhere.

The use of Bennett's six letters may have pleased the Whig Party, but it greatly increased the persecution of the Saints. In spite of this, the Democrats won the election.

The Writing of Bennett's Six Letters

When the doctor left Nauvoo, he did not have far to travel to find sympathetic friends. He went sixteen miles southeast to Carthage, where he found enemies of the Saints. Politicians in that village feared that the ever-increasing number of Saints in Nauvoo would vote as a block and control elections. Bennett's first letter, which appeared in the *Sangamo Journal* for July 8, was written on June 27 while he was still in Nauvoo; the second was written in Carthage July 2; and the third one was dated July 4, 1842. His fourth letter was dated July 15 in St. Louis, where he met with Martha Brotherton, who made affidavit that Joseph had tried to get her to become Brigham Young's plural wife. The fifth letter was written on the river steamer *Importer* and was dated July 23. This letter was first published in the *Louisville Journal*. The sixth letter (the most famous of all) was dated August 2, 1842, and written aboard a boat on the Erie Canal, as Bennett was traveling to the East. These letters were published in the *Sangamo Journal* and were couched in the most vehement language, charging Joseph with polygamy, seduction, murder, treason, and other crimes.

Before leaving Carthage, Bennett filed for a divorce from his wife, Mary Barker Bennett, of Ohio. The divorce was

granted October 15, 1842. The record of this divorce, at the Hancock County Courthouse at Carthage, verifies the findings which Bishop George Miller, William Law, and Hyrum Smith reported when they investigated Bennett's background in Ohio—that he was a married man at the time he became engaged to a young Church woman at Nauvoo, “one of our citizens,” and taught and practiced spiritual wifery.

Only a few of the charges which Bennett made against Joseph in his six letters can be treated here.

Bennett's Charge about the Danites

John Bennett returned to Nauvoo on June 27 and as previously mentioned, stayed at the home of his supporter, George W. Robinson. Bennett later wrote in his book that Joseph sent the “Danites” to Robinson's home to kill him. (While the Church headquarters was at Far West, a Dr. Sampson Avard had formed a secret organization, named after Dan in the Old Testament, called Danites. Bennett claimed that Joseph now maintained this group to kill his opponents.) Bennett declared:

We shall have full disclosures [of alleged crimes against Joseph] if the *Danites* don't catch me—they are after me like prowling wolves, by Joseph's special orders. (*Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1842)

Bennett claimed that the Danites tried to kill him during his last night in Nauvoo. He wrote:

on the evening of the 29th of June, the DESTROYING ANGEL approached my boarding-house, (General Robinson's,) in Nauvoo, with their carriage wheels wrapped with blankets, and their horses' feet muffled with cloths, to prevent noise, about ten o'clock, for the purpose of conveying me off for “*sudden destruction*,” or assassination, so as to make me “*silent*,” and thus prevent disclosures. Dead men tell no tales! But, as I had an intimation of the matter in the afternoon, I borrowed two pistols of General Robinson, and one of Mr. Hunter, a merchant, and loaded them with slugs. Besides these, I had two good Bowie-knives, and some of my friends were, likewise, well armed,—well prepared to give

the ANGEL a warm reception. So, after prowling around the house (the lights in which were extinguished) for some time, the “*hand of the Almighty*” withdrew! (Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 290–291)

Joseph and other Church leaders denied the existence of Danites in Nauvoo or that Joseph had used any manner of threat or force against Bennett (see *The Wasp Extra* [July 27, 1842], 2). On July 20, members of the Nauvoo City Council made an affidavit denying Bennett’s accusation by stating, “there is no such thing as a Danite Society in this city” (*Times and Seasons* 3 [August 1, 1842]: 870).

The Charge of Duress

Another charge which the devious doctor made was that Joseph had forced him to make his affidavit on May 17, in which he declared that

he never knew the said Smith to countenance any improper conduct whatever, either in public or private; and that he never did teach to me in private that an illegal illicit intercourse with females was, under any circumstances, justifiable; and that I never knew him so to teach others. (ibid. [July 1, 1842]: 841)

Bennett also claimed that he was under duress when he made a similar statement before the City Council on May 19. In his six letters Bennett published that Joseph had taken him into a room on May 17, locked the door, drew a pistol, and said:

The peace of my family requires that you should sign an affidavit, and [also] make a statement before the next City Council, on the 19th, exonerating me from all participation whatever, either directly or indirectly, in word or deed, in the SPIRITUAL WIFE DOCTRINE, or *private intercourse with females in general*; and if you do not do it *with apparent cheerfulness*, I will make CAT FISH-BAIT of you, or deliver you over to the Danites for execution to-night. (Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 287; *Warsaw Signal* [July 23, 1842], 2)

Upon reading Bennett's charge of duress in the newspapers, Nauvoo Church and civil authorities made affidavits to prove that Bennett was not under duress when he made his affidavit of May 17 and his statement on May 19, in which he stated that Joseph was virtuous. Justice Daniel Wells, who witnessed Bennett's affidavit on May 17, declared that Bennett showed no signs of being under duress. Wells asserted:

The door of the room was open and free for all or any person to pass or repass. . . . During all this time if he was under duress, or fear, he must have had a good faculty for concealing it, for he was at liberty to go and come when and where he pleased. . . . I know that I saw him in different parts of the city, even after he had made these statements, transacting business as usual. (*Times and Seasons* 3 [August 1, 1842]: 873-874)

Wells was a resident of Nauvoo before the Saints located there, and was not a member of the Church at the time he witnessed Bennett sign the affidavit.

Members of the City Council also signed an affidavit in which they declared that Bennett was not under duress at the time he made a statement at their May 19 meeting, stating that Joseph was virtuous (see *ibid.*, 869-870).

The editor of the Nauvoo *Wasp* published:

In fact, until the whole City Council of Nauvoo are *impeached*, the Doctor must stand before the public as a perjured man.—There let him stand. (*Wasp Extra* [July 27, 1842], 2)

One factor that lends evidence toward Bennett not being under duress was that he remained in Nauvoo for over five weeks after he made the affidavit, and went about the city as usual. Being a medical doctor he had patients to see. And Justice Daniel Wells said under oath that Bennett completed some work in the mayor's office, and performed work connected with the streets of Nauvoo (see *Times and Seasons* 3 [August 1, 1842]: 874). If Joseph had threatened to murder Bennett, as he claimed, the doctor surely would have left Nauvoo immediately. The duress charge was a falsehood fabricated by Bennett.

Of course he found it necessary to make the charge of duress in order to convince the public that he was the victim and not the criminal. If he had not made the claim that he was under duress, the public would not have believed any of his charges against Joseph.

Bennett Claimed That Joseph Ordered the Assassination of Boggs

During the same time that Bennett was being tried and disfellowshipped, word came from Missouri that Lilburn Boggs, the former governor of Missouri, had been shot and wounded. Bennett lost no time in proclaiming that he had previously heard Joseph declare that he was sending Orrin Porter Rockwell to Independence to kill Boggs. From Carthage Bennett wrote:

I am now going over to Missouri to have Joe taken to justice; and then I am going to New York to publish a book called "The History of the Saints," in which I shall tell most of the actings and doings at Nauvoo for the last two years, of most of their great men, and some of their great women too; so look out for the breakers. We shall have full disclosures if the Danites don't catch me—they are after me like prowling wolves, by Joe's special orders. (*Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1842)

In order to assist the Missourians in arresting Joseph Smith, Dr. Bennett corresponded with Dr. Joseph O. Boggs of Independence, Missouri, a brother of Lilburn Boggs (see Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 151–152). In July Bennett went to Missouri to promote the prosecution of Joseph. On August 27, 1842, he wrote:

I . . . stand in readiness to obey the mandate of Missouri, to testify in the premises. The Mormon Pontiff [Joseph] shall tremble at the sight of gathering hosts, in the days of his captivity, like an aspen leaf in the wilderness. . . . I will tear the ermine of sanctity from the shoulders of His Pontifical Holiness, and dim the glory of his mitred head. . . . Nothing short of an excision of the cancer of Mormonism will effect a cure of that absorbing delusion, and the strong arm of military

power must perform the operation at the edge of the sword, point of the bayonet, and mouth of the cannon. (ibid., 151)

These statements reveal that Dr. Bennett was so intent on destroying Joseph that he would even call for a military invasion of Nauvoo!

As a result of Bennett's efforts, Missouri authorities sent a requisition to Illinois to have Joseph extradited to Missouri, which made it necessary for the Prophet to avoid capture by going into hiding from August 1842 to January 1843. Orrin Porter Rockwell was captured and imprisoned in Independence. Alexander Doniphan, the attorney who had often aided the Saints, defended him and he was acquitted. In later years RLDS Historian Heman C. Smith wrote:

We were surprised to find that Rockwell was not even indicted for this crime, but the most serious indictment found against him by the grand jury of Jackson County, Missouri, was for "breaking jail." On this indictment he was found guilty as charged, and sentenced to five minutes' imprisonment. That is all there is to the story that has so long been circulated about O. P. Rockwell shooting Ex-Governor Boggs, and Joseph Smith being accessory before the fact. (*Saints' Herald* 66 [July 2, 1919]: 647)

Bennett Charged Joseph with Treason

The Saints were loyal to the United States Government during the lifetime of Joseph Smith. They were mainly law-abiding and peace-loving, and desired that all men might enjoy freedom. In spite of this, John Bennett convinced multitudes that Joseph was guilty of treason. For two years after he left Nauvoo, the doctor proclaimed the treason charge. It was this same charge which held Joseph and Hyrum in Carthage Jail on June 27, 1844—long enough to be murdered.

Bennett taught that the Saints believed in Zion, the Kingdom of God on earth, and purposefully projected it to mean a civil and military kingdom with Joseph Smith as dictator and tyrant-king. The idea of Zion (a spiritual government of the Saints, re-

ligiously speaking) was construed by him to mean that Joseph intended to raise an army and overthrow the American Government by force and establish “a great Mormon empire.” Bennett’s charges struck terror in the hearts of many. He published:

Joe Smith designs to abolish all human laws, and establish a *Theocracy*, in which the word of God, *as spoken by his (Joe’s) mouth*, shall be the only law. (Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 149)

The States of Missouri, and Illinois, and the Territory of Iowa, are the regions to which the Prophet has hitherto chiefly directed his schemes of aggrandizement, and which were to form the NUCLEUS of the great MORMON EMPIRE. The remaining states were to be licked up like salt, and fall into the immense labyrinth of glorious prophetic dominion, like the defenceless lamb before the mighty king of the forest! (*ibid.*, 293)

Bennett Claimed That Joseph Was Practicing Polyamy

In his infamous six letters and his book, Dr. Bennett charged Joseph with other crimes, including polygamy. General Bennett declared that Joseph had introduced “a new degree of masonry [in the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge] called, ‘Order Lodge,’ ” in which leading men of Nauvoo promoted their polygamous activities (*Quincy Whig*, July 16, 1842).

Bennett also went into great detail in describing an alleged women’s lodge, which he said was connected with the Order Lodge. He called it a “seraglio” (harem) and claimed that the women who were in it were classified in three degrees (see Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 220–225). He asserted that the Female Relief Society, of which Emma Smith was president, used devious means to recruit women to become a part of this harem (*ibid.*, 220). Bennett linked Emma with polygamy and used derogatory names to describe her. In referring to her as part of the alleged seraglio, Bennett described her as:

Emma, the *Electa Syria* of the Church, and wife of the Holy

Joe, the male Cassandra of the Mormon Hierarchy. . . the delectable Emma, the Lady Abbess of the Seraglio, or “Mother of the Maids.” (ibid., 227)

Emma and other members of the Ladies Relief Society were furious when they learned that Bennett was telling the world that the members of the Relief Society were engaged in polygamy and recruiting young women for polygamous relationships with the heads of the Church. They took the following action:

The “Ladies Relief Society,” also drew up a petition signed by about one thousand Ladies speaking in the highest terms of the virtue, philanthropy, and benevolence of Joseph Smith. (*Times and Seasons* 3 [August 1, 1842]: 869)

The one thousand women also published a declaration that no system of polygamy existed in the Church. They declared:

We the undersigned members of the ladies’ relief society . . . certify and declare that we know of no system of marriage being practised in the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints save the one contained in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, and we give this certificate to the public to show that J. C. Bennett’s “secret wife system” is a disclosure of his own make.

Emma Smith, President . . .

Eliza R. Snow, Secretary. (ibid. [October 1, 1842]: 940; RLDS *History of the Church* 2:598)

The law in the Doctrine and Covenants, which the women referred to, contained these words:

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. (DC [1835 Edition] 101:4; RLDS DC [1950 Edition] 111:4b)

Bennett Named Women Whom He Claimed Joseph Tried to Seduce

Doctor Bennett charged that Joseph had tried to seduce several women who refused his advances. He named Sarah Pratt, wife of Apostle Orson Pratt; Martha Brotherton; Emeline White, a nonmember; and Nancy Rigdon, daughter of President Sidney Rigdon. The reader needs to remember that Sarah Pratt, Emeline White, and Nancy Rigdon had been subpoenaed by Chauncey Higbee as his witnesses when he was to be tried in the Carthage Circuit Court. Sarah Pratt and Nancy Rigdon had been a part of Bennett's clique in Nauvoo. Their cases, as well as the case of Martha Brotherton, will be treated in a later volume.

Conclusion

Bennett's efforts to have Joseph killed and the Saints scattered by military force failed to bring the Prophet's immediate death, as he had hoped. But those efforts had a lasting influence upon the Restoration Movement—both in the perpetuation of the polygamy doctrine among the Utah Mormons and in the misconception of the origin of polygamy in the Church. Bennett's sixth letter has helped shape the Mormon Church into what it is today. Bennett claimed that it was "Joe Smith's Love Letter To Nancy Rigdon" (*New York Herald* [August 31, 1842], 2). His efforts greatly aided the conspirators who brought about the death of the Prophet only two years later.

It is obvious that Joseph was not a polygamist, because he had no children by any woman other than Emma. The supposed purpose of polygamy was for a man to be the father of as many children as possible, to increase his kingdom and glory in the hereafter (see LDS DC 132:29–31). Bennett compared Joseph to Solomon, who had seven hundred wives (see Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 218). If this were true, Joseph would have had many children by other women. Members of the LDS Church in Utah have searched for over one hundred and fifty years to find a single descendant of Joseph from an alleged

plural wife, and have found none. As Joseph proclaimed a month before his death, “What a thing it is for a man to be accused of . . . having seven wives, when I can only find one” (*LDS History of the Church* 6:411).

