

Chapter 17

Isaac Sheen Was Not a Credible Witness Concerning Polygamy

Writers in the Mormon Church often use statements by RLDS Editor Isaac Sheen in an effort to prove that Joseph Smith taught and practiced polygamy. Isaac Sheen, editor of the *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* for January 1860, indicated that it was his (Sheen's) opinion that Joseph had been involved in polygamy, but had "repented of his connection with this doctrine" before his death.

Editor Sheen's statement has no foundation, however, because:

1. He gave no evidence nor documentation to support his allegations;
2. He did not live close enough to Joseph to know personally whether or not the Prophet practiced polygamy;
3. He had associated with polygamists and had received his information from them;
4. The leaders of the Reorganized Church, who were sponsoring Editor Sheen and the *Herald*, believed that Joseph was not a polygamist—therefore Sheen's statement did not represent the official beliefs of the Church, then or now. Joseph Smith III had not yet taken his place as prophet of the Church. There was no Church presidency, no presiding bishop; nor had all the quorums been set in order. Therefore, Sheen expressed only his own undocumented opinion.

Editor Sheen's Statement in the *Herald*

Isaac Sheen learned that a group of Saints were having a

conference in October 1859 at the home of Israel Rogers near Plano, Illinois. Sheen attended the conference and was pleased to find the Saints preaching and teaching the original gospel, and enjoying the spiritual gifts. He also found them eager to publish a Church paper and in need of an editor. Among the Saints at that conference, Isaac, no doubt, was the most qualified person for the editorial position. Accordingly, he was chosen to edit the *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* (see *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* 21 [April 15, 1874]: 240–241). He published the first issue in January 1860 in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The Saints read the little *Herald* and rejoiced about most of its contents. However, they were shocked to find that Editor Sheen had reprinted a letter which he had written and published seven years earlier concerning the Mormon Church in Utah and plural marriage. What made it so shocking was that in his letter Sheen had implicated Joseph in polygamy. His letter was dated September 20, 1852, and had been published in the *Cincinnati Commercial* and also in the *Saturday Evening Post* for October 9, 1852 (ibid. 1 [January 1860]: 26; *Saint's Herald* 57 [January 26, 1910]: 95).

The quotation from Sheen's letter which LDS missionaries often use when trying to undermine the RLDS position is:

Joseph Smith repented of his connection with this doctrine [polygamy], and said it was of the devil. He caused the revelations* on that subject to be burned, and when he voluntarily came to Nauvoo [returned from Iowa] and resigned himself into the arms of his enemies, he said that he was going to Carthage to die. At that time he also said, that if it had not been for that accursed spiritual wife doctrine, he would not have come to that. (*True Latter Day Saint's Herald* 1 [January 1860]: 27)

The portion of Sheen's statement which the Mormons have stressed so heavily is "Joseph Smith repented of his connection with this doctrine." This statement alone, taken as

* In the January 1860 *Herald*, the typesetter added the letter "s" to the word "revelation" making it plural. Sheen's original letter in the *Saturday Evening Post* said "revelation" (*Saints' Herald* 89 [December 12, 1942]: 5).

fact, would mean that Joseph did teach and practice polygamy. Here they think that they have an authoritative statement right from the RLDS leaders of 1860 that Joseph was a polygamist. But this is untrue—Isaac Sheen was not a primary witness. Furthermore, Edmund Briggs and other leaders at that time did not believe as Sheen did.

If the Mormons are going to accept Sheen's statement as authoritative about Joseph having had a "connection with this," then they must also accept his declaration that Joseph "repented of his connection with this doctrine." In other words, if the Mormons accept Sheen as an absolute authority, then they must agree also that Joseph denounced polygamy and that it is a false doctrine.

There is truth to the final part of Sheen's statement, however, that "if it had not been for that accursed spiritual wife doctrine, he [Joseph] would not have come to that [arrest and martyrdom]." As has been previously shown, Brigham Young and others in high Church offices were secretly practicing "the accursed doctrine" of polygamy before Joseph's death, and were using John C. Bennett's lies that Joseph and "others of the authorities of the church" were practicing it, and "there would be no harm if they should not make it known" (*Times and Seasons* 3 [July 1, 1842]: 840; *RLDS History of the Church* 2:586).

While Joseph was publicly denouncing polygamy, Brigham was secretly living with four wives by 1844: Mary Ann Angell, Lucy Ann Decker Seely, Harriet Elizabeth Cook, and Augusta Adams Cobb (Stewart, *Brigham Young and His Wives*, 84–86).

Joseph rightly called it "a cursed doctrine" (*True Latter Day Saints' Herald* 1 [January 1860]: 26; *RLDS History of the Church* 2:733).

Editor Sheen's Background

Sheen was closely associated with polygamist Almon Babbitt and had some contact with Utah Apostle Orson Pratt. This helps to account for Sheen's belief that Joseph was connected with polygamy.

Isaac Sheen was born December 22, 1810, at Littlethorpe, Leicestershire, England, and emigrated to America in 1830. A devout Christian, who had been reared under the influence of the Baptist Church, he settled in Pennsylvania, living for almost ten years in the vicinity of Philadelphia and Germantown. During this period he was associated mainly with the Quakers, for whom he “formed a strong attachment.” From them he came to have a deep interest in the universal freedom of every individual and to embrace the doctrine that “all men are created free and equal.” This doctrine led him to become an abolitionist who openly opposed slavery and published an antislavery paper (see *True Latter Day Saints’ Herald* 21 [April 15, 1874]: 240; *ibid.* 57 [January 26, 1910]: 95; Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church*, 436).

Although he had received only six months of formal schooling, Sheen became known as an outstanding speller and prolific writer. In Philadelphia he worked as a newspaper carrier—an occupation that gave him the opportunity he craved to become better educated. He was able to observe how articles were written and newspapers produced. His style of penmanship was known to printers as “Scotchface.” His talent for writing was so advanced that he invented a shorthand system and sold it to *Harpers* of New York for one hundred dollars—a large amount for that period. One day in 1840 in the city of Philadelphia, Isaac noticed a crowd of people entering a hallway, and out of curiosity followed them. They were Saints assembling for worship. He stayed and listened and believed. His life was changed forever. In 1840 he was baptized and confirmed (see *Saints’ Herald* 57 [January 26, 1910]: 76, 94–95).

Isaac Sheen Did Not Live near Joseph

In 1841 Sheen traveled with Seventy Almon W. Babbitt to Kirtland, where the congregation of Saints numbered between three and four hundred members. A Church conference convened at Kirtland on May 22, 1841, and Elder Almon Babbitt was elected “president or presiding elder of the stake in Kirtland” (*Times and Seasons* 2 [July 1, 1841]: 458). Sheen was ordained

to the office of elder in 1841, and that same year married Almon's sister, Drusilla Babbitt, with Almon performing the wedding ceremony (see *Saints' Herald* 57 [January 26, 1910]: 95).

Sheen did not know Joseph at Kirtland, for by the time Sheen moved there, Joseph was living in Nauvoo. When Sheen moved to Nauvoo he only stayed there briefly. Joseph Smith III said of him:

In August, 1842, he went to Nauvoo, Illinois, and thence to Macedonia, Hancock County, Illinois, where himself and family remained until January, 1846. (*True Latter Day Saints' Herald* 21 [April 15, 1874]: 240)

Macedonia was also known by two other names: Webster and Ramus. It was a settlement about twenty-five miles east of Nauvoo—nearly a day's journey then. Isaac did not live close enough to Joseph to be intimately acquainted with him, and therefore he was not a primary witness in this case.

Isaac Sheen Separated from Brigham Young

After Joseph's death, Brigham Young emerged as leader and Sheen would neither accept polygamy as a true doctrine nor follow Brigham. In contrast, Babbitt gave his allegiance to Brigham, and although Babbitt had a living wife, he married three plural wives at Nauvoo (see *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint History: Illinois*, 47). In February 1846, Brigham directed the majority of the Saints in an exodus from Nauvoo by crossing the Mississippi River to find a new home in the West. Sheen borrowed a carriage from Babbitt to convey his family across the frozen Mississippi River. Then Sheen separated from the main body.

Years later Isaac's son, John Kirk Sheen, wrote of those days:

[With] Joseph and Hyrum dead and the Twelve Apostles sitting upon the throne, the exodus came and Isaac Sheen said, "Brigham, go thy way and I will go mine." Placing his wife, daughter, and baby boy [John Kirk] in Almon Babbitt's

carriage, in February, 1846, he crossed the frozen Mississippi and headed for Booneville, Missouri. Leaving his family here with relatives he went to Cincinnati, Ohio, and engaged again in newspaper carrying and shortly was enabled to send for his family and located them in Covington, Kentucky, in 1847. (*Saints' Herald* 57 [January 26, 1910]: 95)

Sheen United with William Smith

Sheen went to Ohio and found employment in Cincinnati—but he made his home in Covington, Kentucky, which is located directly across the Ohio River. Sheen still strongly believed in the truthfulness of the Church, but he did not believe that Brigham had the right to lead it. In an attempt to discover whose right it was to be the Martyr's successor, he began a serious study of the law of lineage as found in the Scriptures. This led him to believe that Joseph's only living brother, William Smith, had the right to lead the Church until Joseph III should come of age. John Kirk Sheen stated of his father:

Here he discovered the lineal priesthood doctrine and made a synopsis along that line from the Book of Mormon, and that synopsis is now before me. He wrote William Smith along that line and William and himself got together, first by letter, then personally. Isaac published a small paper for several months while William preached in Lee County, Illinois, and Cincinnati. . . . A conference was held in Covington in June, 1847, and although I was only about four and one half years of age I have distinct memory of the hall and gathering and it was there resolved that it was "young Joseph's right by lineage," etc., and that William should stand in his stead until Joseph should come of age. (ibid.)

William declared himself president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and Isaac became a member of his First Presidency. Proof of this relationship is found in the fact that William and Isaac sent a petition dated December 31, 1849, "To the Honorable Senate of the United States of America in Congress assembled." The document was "against the ad-

mission of the Salt Lake Mormons into the Union as a State.”
The petition was signed by:

William Smith
Isaac Sheen
Presidents of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.
(National Archives, Record Group #46, Petition, p. 4)

Brigham’s Polygamy Document Influenced Sheen

On August 29, 1852, at a special conference in Salt Lake City, a polygamous document was publicly introduced. The document was published in the *Deseret News Extra*, September 14, 1852. (It was later placed in the LDS Doctrine and Covenants as Section 132.) Brigham Young was assisted by Apostle Orson Pratt in forcing that document upon the Saints. Brigham boldly admitted that the document was not the original, but assured the Saints that what they heard read was a *copy* of a revelation given to Joseph Smith before his death. Brigham declared:

The original copy of this revelation was burnt up. . . .
Sister Emma burnt the original. (Supplement to *Millennial Star* 15 [1853]: 31; RLDS *History of the Church* 3:348)

Soon after Brigham and Orson introduced the polygamy document, Isaac Sheen was notified concerning it. On September 20 he wrote his letter condemning polygamy and sent it to the *Cincinnati Commercial* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. He wrote:

They announce that polygamy is a doctrine “sent forth as a Standard of Universal Restoration for the Tribes of Israel, and for all nations”. . . . A specimen of this kind of sophistry is presented by Mr. Pratt in his communication. (*True Latter Day Saints’ Herald* 1 [January 1860]: 26)

Even though Sheen bitterly opposed Pratt’s polygamous teachings, they stayed in contact with one another. Orson’s teachings no doubt influenced Isaac’s belief that Joseph had connections with polygamy, as the following shows:

When, in September, 1852, Apostle Orson Pratt went on a mission to England, he called on Mr. Sheen on his way East. (Editors Scott Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor, *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith By His Mother*, xxiii)

During Orson's visit, Isaac sold him a valuable manuscript—that of Lucy Mack Smith's history of Joseph Smith the Prophet. Sheen had evidently obtained the manuscript from William Smith or Almon Babbitt. Orson took the manuscript to England, where he published it in 1853 under the title of *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (see *ibid.*, xxiii–xxiv; also Jan Shipps, *Mormonism—The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, 99–100).

Sheen and Pratt must have discussed polygamy during Orson's visit. Pratt, the husband of six wives, undoubtedly had a copy of the polygamous document in his possession, and would have shown it to Sheen. Pratt was on his way to Washington, D.C., to publish a paper called *The Seer*. The first issue was published January 1853, with the polygamous document on pages 7 to 11.

Babbitt Continued to Influence Sheen

Isaac's polygamous brother-in-law, Almon Babbitt, moved to Utah, where he became a delegate to Congress and Secretary of the Territory of Utah. He made several trips to Washington, D.C. (see *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia* 1:284). No doubt Almon visited his sister, Drusilla, and Isaac at every opportunity while traveling back and forth. In conversing with Isaac, Babbitt would have justified his own polygamy by assuring Sheen that Joseph had been a polygamist. The seemingly sincere testimonies of men such as Orson Pratt and Almon Babbitt evidently caused Sheen to continue to hold the wrong opinion about Joseph and the false doctrine of polygamy.

Edmund Briggs Speaks out against Sheen's Statements

Many in the Reorganization did not agree with the position Sheen took in the *Herald*. Apostle Edmund Briggs recorded his disappointment in these words:

Gallands Grove, Iowa, January 30, 1860. I arrived at Bro. J. A. McIntosh's after a tedious ride in the cold. Found him in the best of spirits and hope in the reorganization of the church. And to my surprise here is the first number of the TRUE LATTER DAY SAINTS' HERALD. Have read it with much interest, though disappointed and sorry to find the letter of Elder I. Sheen of October 9, 1852, taken from the *Cincinnati Commercial*. He [Sheen] says . . . ["The Salt Lake apostles also excuse themselves by saying that Joseph Smith taught the spiritual wife doctrine [polygamy]. . . . Joseph Smith repented of his connection with this doctrine and said it was of the Devil. He caused the revelation on this subject to be burned."]

Every public utterance and printed statement of Joseph, and Hyrum, his brother, before their cruel martyrdom, attests the fact that they never favored it in the least degree. But Bro. Sheen's letter in this first number of the HERALD will be used by our enemies against the true position of the Reorganization in relation to Joseph being responsible for that accursed doctrine. Bro. Sheen must have given credence to Young's lie, when he said, "Emma burned it." Emma told me she never saw such a revelation until it was published by [Orson] Pratt in the *Seer* [January 1853]. Young says she burned it; and now Elder Sheen says Joseph had it burned. That is a new statement and the first I had heard of it.

I have met thousands of the old members of the church who were well acquainted with Joseph, and yet I never saw a man who heard Joseph teach polygamy; but they said that they had heard him denounce it as a corrupt doctrine.

In the *Times and Seasons* for two years we had been warned against that abomination [polygamy] by Joseph and Hyrum Smith; and they took great pains to denounce it as a corrupt and wicked practice. And it is evident from Elder Marks' letter in this same HERALD that Joseph never had any

affiliation with it; and proposed immediately to make a thorough investigation and find out who were in any way favoring it, and cut them off from the church. Bro. Marks said this to me personally, referring to his talk with President Smith upon this conversation set out in this HERALD. He has not given it in full as he did to me.

I said to him, "Did you, when you had that conversation with Bro. Joseph, think he had been in any way mixed up in polygamy, or had favored it?"

He replied, "No. I had more confidence in him at that time than I ever had in all my life before, and was satisfied that he was pure from that gross crime. I had been troubled over the condition of the church for some time, and been fearful that Joseph did not bring the pressure against some men in the church that he should have done. You see from John C. Bennett's time there had been so many rumors going the rounds, I was fearful that there might be something in the stories afloat that might implicate Joseph. But Joseph was so free and positive in his denunciation of polygamy in every form, that I took courage; and I could see Joseph was in earnest and felt just as I did about it. But before the Sunday following our conversation, Joseph was having his suit [the lawsuit], and he was killed before he had a chance to commence his investigation against those whom he had suspicioned of teaching it privily. But I thought he had been deceived in some of the men and elders of the church, and had too much confidence in some of them. But I guess it was to be so to fulfill the Scriptures in relation to the latter-day apostasy."

I then said, "Bro. Marks, did you ever see the revelation on polygamy before it was published in 1852 [in the *Seer*] by Mr. Pratt?" Marks emphatically replied, "No, never."

"You were president of the stake at Nauvoo, and if Joseph had such a revelation, would you not have been privileged, according to custom, to have seen it, or heard of it?"

He replied, "Yes, without a doubt. There was no such revelation in existence during Joseph's life. Brigham Young and his clique got that up after Joseph's death; for if there had been any such revelation in existence when I lived in Nauvoo, just after Joseph's death, Brigham Young would have showed it to me when I opposed his measures. But he never pre-

tended to any such thing to me, that there was such a revelation on the subject from Joseph". . . .

I am sorry on account of these errors. They are evidently the errors of Bro. Sheen, who has but lately united with the church. But I am really sorry that they are in the first HERALD. Our enemies will take advantage of them to do us an injury, if possible. May God help us is my fervent prayer. For the sake of the lambs of the church, right, only right, is all I want. By the grace of God helping me, for that will I ever contend while God gives me breath, in all these matters that affect our glorious church. Amen. (*Saints' Herald* 50 [April 22, 1903]: 363–364)

Joseph Smith III and Sheen Had Different Views

Isaac Sheen was editor for five years before Joseph III took editorial control of the *Herald*. Joseph had this to say about Sheen's editorial policies:

had I been in control of the HERALD in its incipency, I could not have subscribed to some of the views expressed and maintained in its opening issues. It seemed to me that they were based upon insufficient foundation. They were advanced by men older than myself and were held to tenaciously, and it seemed to them that the stability of the fabric which we were building depended upon these theories, and that a divergence from them would result disastrously. Under these conditions all I could do was to wait, watch, and pray, which I did, until better conditions prevailed. (ibid. 57 [January 26, 1910]: 77)

Conditions are even better today than they were in the days of Joseph III, for many documents which were not obtainable then are now available. These documents are proving, and will continue to reveal, that Joseph the Martyr was innocent of polygamy—and that that evil doctrine was brought into the Church by Brigham Young and his coconspirators.

