

Chapter 3

The Sarah Pratt Case

The summer of 1842 was filled with tribulation for Joseph the Prophet because of the many accusations which Dr. John Bennett made against him. In addition to claiming that Joseph had sent Porter Rockwell to assassinate Lilburn Boggs, ex-governor of Missouri, and the Martha Brotherton and Nancy Rigdon cases, Bennett accused Joseph of trying to seduce Apostle Orson Pratt's wife, Sarah Marinda.

When Bennett and Francis M. Higbee had been brought into Church court in July 1841, it was discovered that Bennett had been promiscuous with Sarah over an extended period while Orson was in the British Isles on a mission. But because both Bennett and Francis had shown such sincere repentance, they were forgiven, as mentioned in volume one of *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy*, and the findings of the court were not made public. However, when Bennett and Chauncey L. Higbee were found in the summer of 1842 to still be practicing spiritual wifery, they were expelled from the Church. Thereupon Bennett retaliated by publishing his infamous six letters in the *Sangamo Journal*, beginning July 7. To make Joseph appear to be a villain, Dr. Bennett claimed in his letters, among other charges, that Joseph had tried to take Sarah as a plural wife, but that she had refused him.

After the *Sangamo Journal* published Bennett's accusations, they were republished in newspapers nationwide, and Joseph was obligated to answer those charges. His welfare, and that of his family and the Church, was dependent upon his response. Therefore, the Prophet proclaimed his innocence in sermons, in public meetings called for that purpose, and by publishing what

had hitherto been confidential information known only to Church officials—information concerning John Bennett’s affair with Sarah Pratt.

Church authorities discovered in 1841 that Bennett had seduced women by teaching them the falsehood that Joseph had received a polygamous revelation and was practicing polygamy (known also as spiritual wifery). By teaching this untruth, Bennett was able to lead young men and women into practicing that doctrine. When confronted with his sins, Bennett admitted his guilt, declared that he had lied about Joseph, wept much, and attempted suicide by taking poison. He was given an antidote and survived. He then called upon God and the angels to witness his repentance, begged for mercy and forgiveness, and pleaded that his sins not be made public. Dr. Bennett was forgiven—and it was hoped that he and his clique would repent, and the Saints could be spared the trial of the public learning of polygamy in the Church.

Testimonies that Doctor Bennett and Sarah Pratt Were Promiscuous

A number of affidavits were made which gave evidence that Dr. Bennett and Sarah Pratt had an affair. In October 1840, only two months after Bennett arrived in Nauvoo, the wayward doctor began seeing Sarah regularly. Some of the information which reveals the nature of this case includes the following testimonies:

The Testimony of Ebenezer Robinson

Ebenezer Robinson, a justice of the peace during the investigations and expulsion of Dr. Bennett, recalled:

In the spring of 1841 Dr. Bennett had a small neat house built for Elder Orson Pratt’s family [Sarah and her small son] and commenced boarding with them. Elder Pratt was absent on a mission to England. (Ebenezer Robinson, *The Return 2* [St. Louis, Missouri, 1891]: 363)

The Testimony of John D. Lee

John D. Lee, who was a policeman at Nauvoo, asserted that

he was present at the May 19, 1842, meeting of the Nauvoo City Council, when charges were brought against Mayor Bennett. Lee reported:

John C. Bennett became suspected, and . . . He was accused of selling offices in the military organization [the Nauvoo Legion], to certain men who would help him win the good graces of some of the young sisters, and that he became intimate with Orson Pratt's wife, while Pratt was on a mission. That he built her a fine frame house, and lodged with her, and used her as his wife. . . . He said that the Prophet gave him permission to do as he had done with Mrs. Pratt. (John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled: or The Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop, John D. Lee*, 147–148)

Affidavit of J. B. Backenstos

Jacob Backenstos made the following affidavit concerning Bennett and Sarah's conduct:

Affidavit of J. B. Backenstos.
 State of Illinois ss.
 Hancock County

Personally appeared before me Ebenezer Robinson acting Justice of the Peace, in and for said county, J. B. Backenstos, who being duly sworn according to law, deposeth and saith, that some time during last winter, he accused Doctor John C. Bennett, with having an illicit intercourse with Mrs. Orson Pratt, and some others, when said Bennett replied that she made a first rate go, and from personal observations I should have taken said Doctor Bennett and Mrs. Pratt as man and wife, had I not known to the contrary, and further this deponent saith not.

J. B. Backenstos

Sworn to, and subscribed, before me the 28th day of July, 1842.

E. Robinson, J. P.

(Affidavits and Certificates Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett's Letters, August 31, 1842)

Sarah Was Named in Foster's Letter

Dr. Robert D. Foster, an elder at Nauvoo, wrote a letter in which he named some of the women with whom Bennett had been intimate, including Sarah Pratt. Although Foster's statement appeared in volume one of *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy*, it bears reprinting. Foster wrote:

Alas, none but the seduced join the seducer [Dr. Bennett]; those only who have been arraigned before a just tribunal for the same unhallowed conduct can be found to give countenance to any of his black hearted lies, and they, too, detest him for his seduction, these are the ladies to whom he refers his hearers to substantiate his assertions. Mrs. White, Mrs. [Orson] Pratt, Niemans, Miller, Brotherton, and others. (*Wasp* 1 [October 15, 1842]: 2)

Apostle Pratt Arrived Home during the Investigation

Apostle Orson Pratt arrived home from his foreign mission the second week of July 1841 (see Elden J. Watson, *The Orson Pratt Journals*, 142). He found the Church leaders deeply involved in an investigation of the promiscuity of Dr. Bennett and others, including Orson's wife, Sarah. Orson also found "that Church leaders had withdrawn his wife's food allotment and were accusing her of adultery with John C. Bennett" (Richard S. Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, *A Book of Mormons*, 211).

Sarah and Dr. Bennett told Orson their version of what had transpired. They portrayed Joseph as a seducer and liar, and themselves as innocent victims. Their testimonies were in direct conflict with the Prophet's testimony that he was innocent of all charges of polygamy and spiritual wifery.

It will be shown in later chapters that Orson was favorable to polygamy as a doctrine in the Church. His problem at Nauvoo sprang from his belief that Joseph was lying, and that Bennett and Sarah were truthful. Confident that Joseph was not telling the truth, Orson spurned the Prophet's declarations of innocence, and opened his heart and his home to Dr. Bennett. He became the wicked doctor's loyal friend and supporter, and their friendship continued until Bennett left Nauvoo. Orson believed Ben-

nett's allegations that Joseph had received a polygamous revelation, and was practicing polygamy in secret.

An example of Bennett's closeness to the Pratts is found in the wedding announcement of Sarah's sister in January 1842. It states:

Married . . . In this city, on the 9th inst., by Mayor Bennett, Mr. Wm. Allred, to Miss Orissa Bates, all of this city. (*Times and Seasons* 3 [January 15, 1842]: 669)

Dr. Bennett continued to function as mayor of Nauvoo, and in a variety of other offices. He gave the outward appearance of leading a saintly life, while privately continuing his wicked practices.

Bennett Charged Joseph with Attempting to Seduce Sarah Pratt

After Bennett was expelled from the Church in May 1842, he published his infamous six letters in order to obtain revenge against Joseph Smith. In one of them he wrote the following concerning Joseph and Sarah, which was published in the *Sangamo Journal*, the *Wasp*, and in his book. The doctor declared:

Joe Smith told me, *confidentially*, during the absence of her husband, that he intended to make Mrs. Pratt one of his *spiritual wives*, one of the *Cloistered Saints*, for the Lord had given her to him as a special favor for his faithfulness and zeal; and, as I had influence with her, he desired me to assist him in the consummation of his hellish purposes; but I refused compliance, and told him that she had been much neglected and abused by the Church, in order to *cloister* her, so far without success, and that, if the Lord had given her to him, he must attend to it himself, for I should never offer her an indignity.

"Well," said he, "I shall approach her, for there is no harm in it if she submits to be cloistered, and if her husband should never find it out; and if she should expose me, as she did Bishop Knight, *I will blast her character*; so there is no material risk for so desirable a person."

I then called upon Mrs. Pratt, and apprized her of Joe's contemplated attack on her virtue, *in the name of the Lord*, and that she must prepare to repulse him, in so infamous an assault, *by opposing revelation to revelation* [Bennett taught his followers that Joseph claimed to have received a polygamous revelation]. She replied, "Joseph cannot be such a man; I cannot believe it until I know it for myself, or have it from his own lips; he cannot be so corrupt." I told her that she would see, unless he changed his mind, for he was an unprincipled libertine, unequalled in the history of civilized man.

Accordingly, in a few days, Joe proposed to me a visit to Ramus, which I accepted, and we started from his house, in an open carriage, about 4 o'clock, P. M., rode into the prairie a few miles, and returned to the house of Captain John T. Barnett, in Nauvoo, about dusk, where we put up the horse, with Barnett's permission. Joe pretended we were looking for thieves. After perambulating for an hour or two, we proceeded to the residence of Mrs. Pratt, and found her at home, and alone, with the exception of her little boy, who was then asleep in bed. We were hospitably received, and our situation rendered as comfortable and agreeable as the tenement would admit of. After considerable desultory conversation, Joe asked her if she would keep a secret for him; to which she assented. "Do you pledge me your honor," said he, "that you will never tell without my permission?" She replied in the affirmative.

He then continued, "Sister Pratt, the Lord has given you to me as one of my *spiritual wives*. I have the blessings of Jacob granted me, as God granted holy men of old; and as I have long looked upon you with favor, and an earnest desire of connubial bliss, I hope you will not repulse or deny me." She replied, "And is that the great secret that I am not to utter? Am I called upon to break the marriage covenant, and prove recreant to my lawful husband? *I never will*. My sex shall not be disgraced, nor my honor sullied. I care not for the blessings of Jacob, and I believe in no such revelations, neither will I consent, under any circumstances whatever. I

have one good husband, and that is enough for me.” He then went off to see Miss Louisa Beeman. . . .

Next day, we returned to Nauvoo. I then called upon Mrs. Pratt, and asked her if her opinion of Joseph, the Prophet, was the same as heretofore. She replied, “No; he is a bad man, beyond a doubt—‘wicked, sensual, devilish;’ but it will not do for me to express myself openly, or my life might atone for it. . . . I had a better opinion of human nature; but, alas! I was deceived. The scales, however, have fallen from my eyes, and ‘*whereas I was once blind, NOW I SEE.*’

“I am in great trouble on another account. My husband is a good and pious man, and a *true believer in Mormonism*, DEVOTEDLY attached to *Joseph* as the spiritual leader of the Church. He believes him to be a pure man, and a Prophet of the Lord. Now, if I should tell him the true story of my sufferings, privations, and insults, and Joseph should circumvent or meet it with his *infallible rebuff* of a ‘VERILY, THUS SAITH THE LORD,’ I fear that Orson would believe him in preference to me, *unless his faith can be shaken*. How shall I extricate myself from this fearful dilemma? As a confidential friend, I look to you [Bennett] for advice and protection, until the return of Mr. Pratt.”

“Be quiet,” said I, “Sarah, under these circumstances”

Joe afterwards tried to convince Mrs. Pratt of the propriety of his spiritual wife doctrine, and she at last told him peremptorily, “Joseph, if you ever attempt any thing of the kind with me again, I will make a full disclosure to Mr. Pratt on his return home. . . .” Joe replied, “Sister Pratt, I hope you will not expose me, for if I suffer, all must suffer; so do not expose me. Will you promise me that you will not do it?”

“If,” said she, “you will never insult me again, I will not expose you, unless strong circumstances should require it.”

“If you should tell,” said he, “I will ruin your reputation; *remember that*; and as you have repulsed me, it becomes sin, unless *sacrifice* is offered.”

He then desired that a lamb should be procured and slain, and the doorposts and the gate sprinkled with its blood, and

the kidneys and entrails taken and offered upon an altar of twelve stones that had not been touched with a hammer, as a burnt sin-offering, for the purpose of saving him and his priesthood. His desire was complied with, and the lamb procured from Captain Barnett, and slain by Lieutenant Stephen H. Goddard; and the kidneys and entrails were offered in sacrifice, as Joe desired; and he observed, "All is now safe; the Destroying Angel will pass over without harming any of us." (John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 228–231)

In Bennett's original letter to the *Sangamo Journal* he was careful to state that *he* had procured the alleged lamb and *he* had offered it on the altar. He wrote:

"Well, sister Pratt,' says Joe, 'as you have refused me, it becomes sin, unless *sacrifice* is offered:' and turning to me he said, 'General, if you are my friend I wish you to procure a lamb, and have it slain, and sprinkle the door posts and the gate with its blood, and take the kidneys and the entrails and offer them upon an alter of twelve stones that have not been touched with a hammer, as a burnt offering, and it will save me and my priesthood. Will you do it? 'I will, I replied. *So I procured the lamb from Capt. John T. Barnett, and it was slain by Lieut. Stephen H. Goddard, and I [Bennett] offered kidneys and entrails in sacrifice for Joe as desired*" (italics added). (*Wasp Extra* [July 27, 1842]; *Sangamo Journal* [July 15, 1842])

Many who have used Bennett's writings to support their position that Joseph was a polygamist, have ignored the lamb story which makes all of Bennett's claims ridiculous.

The Goddards Answered Bennett's Charges against Joseph

Stephen and Zeruiah Goddard gave notarized testimonies in which they charged Dr. Bennett and Mrs. Pratt with an adulterous relationship. Stephen's was in the form of a letter to Apostle Pratt. He stated:

July 23, 1842.

Mr. Orson Pratt, Sir:—Considering a duty upon me I now communicate to you some things relative to Dr. Bennett and your wife, that came under the observation of myself and wife, which I think would be satisfactory to the mind of a man could he but realize the conduct [of] those two individuals while under my [] ce]. I would have been glad to have [] forever in silence if it could have been so and been just.

I took your wife into my house because she was destitute of a house, Oct. 6, 1840, and from the first night, until the last, with the exception of one night, it being nearly a month, the Dr. was there as sure as the night came, and generally two or three times a day—on the first three nights he left about 9 o'clock—after that he remained later, sometimes till after midnight; what their conversation was I could not tell, as they sat close together, he leaning on her . . . whispering continually or talking very low—we generally went to bed and had one or two naps before he left.

After being at my house nearly a month she was furnished with a house by Dr. Foster, which she lived in until sometime about the first of June, when she was turned out of the house and came to my house again, and the Dr. came as before.

One night they took their chairs out of doors and remained there as we supposed until 12 o'clock or after; at another time they went over to the house where you now live and come back after dark, or about that time. We went over several times late in the evening while she lived in the house of Dr. Foster, and were most sure to find Dr. Bennett and your wife together, as it were, man and wife. Two or three times we found little Orson lying on the floor and the bed apparently reserved for the Dr. and herself—she observing that since a certain [] he had rather sleep on the floor than with her.

I am surprised to hear of her crying because Bro. Joseph attempted to kiss her as she stated, even if he did do it; for she would let a certain man smack upon her mouth and face half a dozen times or more in my house without making up the first wry face. I will not mention his name at present.

There are many more things which she has stated herself

to my wife, which could go to show more strongly the feelings, connexion, and the conduct of the two individuals. As to the lamb which Dr. Bennett speaks of, I killed it, and kept a hind quarter of it for my own use, and saw the Dr. and Mrs. Pratt eat of the balance; The (Dr.) told me he would like to have me save enough blood to make a French pudding, which I believe Mrs. Pratt spoke of afterwards and said it looked so that she could not eat it. I had not instructions to save the entrails [to be sacrificed], and the Dr. was not present to [sacrifice] them himself, consequently his statements that he burned them on twelve stones is a falsehood, for the hogs eat them.

Your friend
Stephen H. Goddard

I certify that the above statement of my husband is true according to the best of my knowledge.

Zeruiah N. Goddard. Sworn to before me July 23d 1842.

Geo. W. Harris, Alderman of the City of Nauvoo. (*Affidavits and Certificates*, August 31, 1842)

Testimony of Mrs. Goddard

Mrs. Goddard was more explicit in her testimony than her husband in explaining the conduct of Dr. Bennett and Sarah Pratt. She gave the following statement to be published:

Dr. Bennett came to my house one night about 12 o'clock, and sat on or beside the bed where Mrs. Pratt was and cursed and swore very profanely at her; she told me next day that the Dr. was quick tempered and was mad at her, but I have no other reason. I concluded from circumstances that she had promised to meet him somewhere and had disappointed him; on another night I remonstrated with the Dr. and asked him what Orson Pratt would think, if he could know that you were so fond of his wife, and holding her hand so much; the Dr. replied that he could pull the wool over Orson's eyes.

Mrs. Pratt stated to me that Dr. Bennett told her, that he could cause abortion with perfect safety to the mother, at any

stage of pregnancy, and that he had frequently destroyed and removed infants before their time to prevent exposure of the parties, and that he had instruments for that purpose &c.

My husband and I were frequently at Mrs. Pratt's and stayed till after 10 o'clock in the night, and Dr. Bennett still remained there with her and her little child alone at that late hour.

On one occasion I came suddenly into the room where Mrs. Pratt and the Dr. were: she was lying on the bed and the Dr. was taking his hands out of her bosom; he was in the habit of sitting on the bed where Mrs. Pratt was lying and lying down over her.

I would further state that from my own observation, I am satisfied that their conduct was anything but virtuous, and I know Mrs. Pratt is not a woman of truth, and I believe the statements which Dr. Bennett made concerning Joseph Smith are false, and fabricated for the purpose of covering his own iniquities, and enabling him to practice his base designs on the innocent.

Zeruiah N. Goddard (ibid.)

When the above affidavits and Bennett's ridiculous tale of the sacrificed lamb are considered, it becomes apparent that Bennett concocted the entire story of Joseph seeking Sarah for a plural wife, in order to destroy Joseph and to shield himself from public disgrace and Orson Pratt's wrath. Since he had been intimate with Sarah, and since she did not want to risk her marriage by telling Orson the truth, he felt safe in using Sarah's name and declaring falsely that Joseph had made an attempt to seduce her.

Joseph Smith III's Interview with Sarah Pratt

Joseph Smith III, son of the Martyr, interviewed Sarah Pratt on one of his visits to Salt Lake City. That interview was published in two issues of the *Saints' Herald*. Joseph III reported:

I was visiting in the home of a retired physician named Benedict. . . . In conversation with him and his wife, I mentioned Elder Orson Pratt, then deceased, and asked them if they knew the woman who was his wife when he lived in Nauvoo, and whether or not she were still living.

They said, "Why, yes; she lives with some sons of hers only about two blocks from here, and we know her well."

For certain reasons which I believed to be good, I was desirous of having a talk with Mrs. Pratt, whom I had known at Nauvoo. So I asked Doctor Benedict if he would go with me to call upon her. He consented to do so, and after lunch we repaired to the house and I was presented to the lady. . . . The latter part of my conversation with her revolved around the matters I had had particularly in mind when I sought the interview. I asked her, "Sister Pratt, will you allow me to ask you some rather personal and delicate questions?"

"You may ask me any questions proper for a lady to hear and answer," she replied.

I assured her I would use no language a lady should not hear and did not wish to ask any improper question or one she might not answer in the presence of Dr. Benedict who was with me. But I told her I felt there were some which referred to my father and herself which only she could answer. I asked her to consider the circumstances in which I was placed. I was the son of the Prophet; had been baptized by him; was a member, though a young one, at the time of his death, and thought that I had understood, in part at least, the principles the church taught and believed. But following his death certain things were said about him, his teaching and practice, which were at variance with what I had known and believed about him and about the doctrines he presented. Naturally I wanted to know the truth about these matters, for I assured her I would much rather meet here in this life whatever of truth might be revealed about those things, even though it were adverse to what I believed to be his character, than to wait until after I had passed to the other side and there be confronted with it and compelled to alter my position should such revelation prove I had been in error. She told me to proceed and

the following conversation took place.

“Did you know my father in Nauvoo?”

“Yes, I knew him well.”

“Were you acquainted with his general deportment in society, especially towards women?”

“Yes.”

“Did you ever know him to be guilty of any impropriety in speech or conduct towards women in society or elsewhere?”

“No, sir, never. Your father was always a gentleman, and I never heard any language from him or saw any conduct of his that was not proper and respectful.”

“Did he ever visit you or at your house?”

“He did.”

“Did he ever at such times or at any other time or place make improper overtures to you, or proposals of an improper nature—begging your pardon for the apparent indelicacy of this question?”

To this Mrs. Pratt replied, quietly but firmly, “No, Joseph; your father never said an improper word to me in his life. He knew better.”

“Sister Pratt, it has been frequently told that he behaved improperly in your presence, and I have been told that I dare not come to you and ask you about your relations with him, for fear you would tell me things which would be unwelcome to me.”

“You need have no such fear,” she repeated. “Your father was never guilty of an action or proposal of an improper nature in my house, towards me, or in my presence, at any time or place. There is no truth in the reports that have been circulated about him in this regard. He was always the Christian gentleman, and a noble man.”

That I thanked Mrs. Pratt very warmly for her testimony in these matters my readers may be very sure. I had constantly heard it charged that my father had been guilty of improper conduct toward Elder Pratt’s wife, and I had long before made up my mind that if I ever had an opportunity I would find out the truth from her.

The result [of this interview] was very gratifying to me, especially as she had made her short, clear-cut statements freely, just as I have recorded, in the presence of Dr. Benedict.

It may be added that mingled with my pleasure was a degree of astonishment that such stories as had been told about her and her relations with Father should have gotten out and been so widely circulated and yet never met with a public refutation from her. However, I expressed my appreciation of her kind reception and her statements, and at the close of our interview, which lasted about an hour and a half, left her with good wishes.

Doctor Benedict and I passed from her presence into the street in a silence which was not broken until we had gone some distance. Then suddenly he stopped, pulled off his hat, looked all around carefully, and raising his hand emphatically, said:

“My God! What damned liars these people are! Here for years I have been told that your father had Mrs. Pratt for one of his spiritual wives and was guilty of improper relations with her. Now I hear from her own lips, in unmistakable language, that it was not true. What liars! What liars!”

. . . I was glad that before she died I had her testimony, and that it had proved, as had been proved many times before, that such charges made against my father were untrue.

. . . I have conscientiously traced statements made by various individuals inculcating my father in this wrongdoing, and in every instance I have failed to find evidence worthy to be called proof. It strikes me now, as it has for many, many years, that honorable men and women should absolve me from blame for pursuing the course I have taken, in steadfastly refusing to believe, simply because persons entangled in the evil meshes [of polygamy] wished to involve him in their wrongdoing, that my father was a bad man and responsible for doctrines which he himself pronounced to be “false and corrupt.” (*The Saints’ Herald* [January 15, 1935], 80; [January 22, 1935], 109–110)

Conclusion

The case of Sarah Pratt provides one of the missing pieces in the puzzle of how Joseph fought polygamy, but was labeled as its author. Orson was not opposed to polygamy as a doctrine in the Church. His difficulty arose from his belief that Joseph had attempted to seduce Sarah and take her as his plural wife. Joseph denied these charges and Orson believed that Joseph was lying about it. Orson's belief made him a prime candidate for Brigham Young to choose to formally introduce the doctrine of polygamy to the Saints in Utah in 1852. Orson later became the Mormon Church's foremost theologian on polygamy. Without Orson, Brigham would not have been able to make polygamy a doctrine of the Mormon Church.

The next chapter will give further evidence of Joseph's battle against the encroachment of polygamy into the Church, and more details of Orson's involvement with that false doctrine.

