

## Chapter 4

### Orson Pratt and the 1831 Revelation Rumor

The study of the case of Sarah Pratt brings into focus the polygamous beliefs of her husband, Apostle Orson Pratt, who became the LDS Church's leading theologian on the subject of the plural marriage doctrine. Research reveals that Orson believed as early as 1832 that Joseph Smith had received a revelation in 1831 on the principle of plural marriage, and from that time Orson expected it to become a doctrine of the Church. His belief made it easier for him to accept the false testimonies of his wife, Sarah, and Dr. John C. Bennett about Joseph trying to seduce her, and to reject Joseph's declarations that he was innocent. Orson's trouble at Nauvoo, then, did not arise from his having an aversion to the doctrine of polygamy, but from Bennett's story that Joseph tried to seduce his wife.

A knowledge of how Orson came to believe in the supposed 1831 revelation is necessary for an understanding of why he opposed Joseph in 1842 when the Sarah Pratt case became public knowledge, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

#### **The LDS Church's Third Most-Important Polygamy Source**

In order to understand Orson Pratt's acceptance of polygamy, it is necessary to know of his connection with Lyman E. Johnson, whose assertions Orson believed rather than the Prophet's testimony. Orson declared that Lyman had confided to him, that Joseph had told him, that he had received a polygamous revelation in 1831. This alleged revelation was never made public and is based primarily on Orson's account. Orson made his announcement of it before an RLDS congregation in Plano, Illinois, in 1878, forty-seven years after the 1831 revelation

was supposedly received.

In spite of having an ambiguous origin, this rumored revelation has been so widely referred to in LDS plural marriage publications that it has become the third most-important item supporting the polygamy dogma, ranking only after Section 132 of their Doctrine and Covenants and the “Essay on Happiness.” Mormon authorities have made innumerable references to Orson’s assertion that Joseph had received a revelation upon this principle as early as 1831. Yet all their claims have no foundation, for everything the Prophet published on that subject strongly opposed polygamy in all forms.

As an example of the LDS leaders’ use of this unfounded rumor, Historian Andrew Jenson published:

By way of introducing the subject [of plural marriage] we quote the following from a communication written by Pres. Jos. F. Smith and published in the *Deseret News* of May 20, 1886:

“The great and glorious principle of plural marriage was first revealed to Joseph Smith in 1831, but being forbidden to make it public, or to teach it as a doctrine of the Gospel, at that time, he confided the facts to only a very few of his intimate associates. Among them were Oliver Cowdery and Lyman E. Johnson, the latter confiding the fact to his traveling companion, Elder Orson Pratt, in the year 1832. . . . [I]t remained an ‘unwritten law’ . . . until the 12th day of July, 1843 . . .” (Andrew Jenson, *The Historical Record* 6 [Salt Lake City, Utah, May 1887]: 219)

President Joseph F. Smith was not a primary witness on the subject because he was not born until November 13, 1838, seven years after the alleged 1831 revelation. In contrast, Oliver Cowdery was a primary witness, even though he died March 31, 1850, twenty-eight years before Orson made his announcement at Plano in 1878. Oliver witnessed against polygamy by writing a letter to one of his sisters, which shows that he knew nothing of the supposed 1831 revelation.

In 1846 Oliver, who was living in Ohio, heard that polygamy was being practiced in the Church. He wanted to know if it were

true or false and wrote to his sister, Lucy, who was married to Brigham Young's brother, Phineas Young. Another sister, Phoebe Jackson, answered his letter and confirmed that polygamy was being practiced by the leaders. Oliver replied, and Phoebe kept his letter. A copy of it was given to Editor W. W. Blair of the Reorganized Church, who published a portion of it with this explanation:

His [Oliver's] two sisters, Lucy and Phebe, the wives of Phineas H., (brother to Brigham Young) and Daniel Jackson, remained for a season with the Utah Mormons. It appears that Oliver had heard that polygamy was secretly taught and practiced at Nauvoo, and he wrote his sister Lucy [Young] inquiring as to the truth of the reports. [Phineas] Young would not allow his wife to answer him [Oliver], but Mrs. Jackson wrote him giving a full report of the strange and vile system, and the following letter is in answer to hers.

Brigham Young is said to have stated that Oliver was the first to practice polygamy in the Church. This letter informs us as to what Oliver, speaking for himself, thought of it, as late as 1846. (*The Saints' Advocate* 1 [May 1879]: 112)

### **Oliver Cowdery's Letter against Polygamy**

Oliver Cowdery's answer to his sister demonstrates his opposition to polygamy. It also indicates that he knew nothing of the supposed 1831 revelation, nor any polygamy officially in the Church prior to 1846. He wrote:

TIFFIN, Seneca County, Ohio,  
July 24, 1846.

*Brother Daniel and Sister Phoebe:* Phoebe's letter mailed at Montrose [Iowa] on the 2nd of this month was received

. . . .

Now, Brother Daniel and Sister Phoebe, what will you do? Has Sister Phoebe written us the truth? and if so, will you venture with your little ones, into the toil and fatigue of a long journey [to the West], and that for the sake of finding a resting place when you know of miseries of such magnitude

as have, as will, and as must rend asunder the tenderest and holiest ties of domestic life? I can hardly think it possible, that you have written us the truth [about polygamy], that though there may be individuals who are guilty of the iniquities spoken of,—yet no such practice can be preached or adhered to, as a public doctrine. Such *may* do for the followers of Mahomet; it may have done some thousands of years ago; but no people, professing to be governed by the pure and holy principles of the Lord Jesus, can hold up their heads before the world at this distance of time, and be guilty of such folly—such wrong—such abomination. It will blast, like a mildew, their fairest prospects, and lay the axe at the root of the tree of their future happiness.

You would like to know whether we are calculating to come on and emigrate to California. On this subject everything depends upon circumstances. . . . We do not feel to say or do anything to discourage you from going, if you think it best to do so. We know, in part, how you are situated. Out of the church, you have few, or no friends, and very little, or no society—in it you have both. . . . [T]hough the journey is frequently attended with toil, yet a bright future has been seen in the distance, if right counsels were given, and a departure in no way from the original faith, in no instance, countenanced. *Of what that doctrine and faith is, and was, I ought to know,* and further it does not become me now to speak. . . . May the Lord have mercy on you, and protect and spare you.

Truly your brother and friend,

Oliver Cowdery. (*The Saints'*

*Herald* 55 [January 15, 1908]: 56–57)

Oliver wanted his sisters and their husbands to be aware that he knew what the original doctrine and faith of the Church was—and that it did not include polygamy.

### **More History of Oliver's Important Letter**

Phoebe kept Oliver's letter and years later showed it to RLDS elder, Richard Ferris. Time passed and her daughter,

Mrs. Quigley, allowed Ferris to have photographic blueprint copies of it. Elder Ferris then gave photos of the letter to Elder Elbert A. Smith of the RLDS Church. The following information accompanied the printing of Oliver's letter in the *Herald*:

[Editor's Note.—Herewith appears a letter from Elder Richard Ferris, followed by a verified copy of the Cowdery letter, which he referred to, taken from the photos which he forwarded to us. We have delayed the publication of this letter, hoping to reproduce the photos in question, but have found it impossible (owing to their size, and the fact that they are blue prints) to secure a legible reproduction. However, the photos are on file with the Editors, and may be seen by those who choose.—ASSOCIATE EDITOR.] (ibid., 56)

Elder Ferris's letter which accompanied the photos stated:

OAKLAND, California, August 5, 1904.

Bro. Elbert Smith;

*Dear Sir:* I forward you photos of the Cowdery letter, which you will find on analysis to totally refute the story of the Brighamites that polygamy was a part of the doctrines of the church during the Martyr's time. You see that Daniel and Phoebe Jackson, and Phineas [and Lucy] Young lived in Montrose, Iowa, in 1846. They were sisters of Cowdery (that is Phoebe Jackson and Phineas Young's wife). Phineas Young's wife got a letter from Cowdery asking if it was true that some were practicing polygamy in Nauvoo. She would not answer, but turned the letter over to her sister, who did answer it. The photos are of the reply from Cowdery. I knew Phoebe Jackson in Sacramento, when I lived there, twenty-five years ago [1879]. On visiting there, Mrs. Quigley, her daughter, loaned me the letter. Bro. Kelly [of the RLDS Church] has it now. Mrs. Jackson showed me the letter when she was living and told me its history as I gave it to you. I did not know its value then, as I had but lately come into the church, and she told me it had been published.

Your brother in the gospel,

RICHARD FERRIS.

630 Chestnut Street. (ibid., 56)

Oliver's letter is a testimony against polygamy. It demonstrates that the charge made by Joseph F. Smith, that Oliver knew of a polygamy revelation in 1831, is without foundation.

### **Apostle Pratt's Connection with Lyman Johnson**

Lyman Johnson was baptized in February 1831. He was the first apostle chosen when the Quorum of Twelve was established in 1835. Lyman and Orson Pratt traveled together as missionary companions for several years during the 1830s and baptized many individuals into the Church. It was during this period, in 1832, that Lyman supposedly told Orson that Joseph had told him that he had received the polygamous revelation.

Lyman and Orson partook of the spirit of apostasy so prevalent at Kirtland during the 1837 crisis, and the two brought criminal charges against Joseph the Prophet on May 29, 1837. Their charges were in the form of an affidavit before Bishop Newel K. Whitney's court. They charged Joseph with "lying and misrepresentation—also for extortion—and for speaking disrespectfully, against his brethren behind their backs" (Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt*, 50–51; J. Christopher Conkling, *A Joseph Smith Chronology*, 98).

Their antagonism against Joseph continued. However, Orson managed to avoid being disfellowshipped, but at a conference held at Kirtland, September 3, 1837, Lyman was rejected as an apostle and suspended from fellowship. A week later, on September 10, 1837, he was restored to fellowship and to his office as an apostle. Seven months later, on April 13, 1838, Lyman was expelled from the Church at Far West, Missouri (see RLDS *History of the Church* 1:643). He never again joined the Church!

### **Lyman Continued to Associate with the Saints**

After the Saints were driven from Missouri, they gathered to Nauvoo, Illinois. Lyman settled first in Davenport, Iowa, and then moved to Keokuk, Iowa, which was across the Mississippi River and a few miles southwest of Nauvoo. He visited Nauvoo often and mingled with his former fellow apostles and

others, including his sister, Marinda Nancy, and her husband, Apostle Orson Hyde. (It should be remembered that Orson Hyde was very familiar with polygamy, for he and Samuel Smith were the first missionaries to visit and convert the polygamous Cochranites, and urge them to gather to Church headquarters at Kirtland.)

### **Lyman Met with the Council of Twelve at Nauvoo**

As incredible as it seems, Lyman—who was no longer an apostle nor a member of the Church—met with members of the Quorum of Twelve while they were in session in July 1841, a few days after some of them had served as judges in the elders' court which had tried Dr. Bennett and some of his clique, and investigated the case of Sarah Pratt.

Mormon Church history refers to Lyman Johnson's meeting with the Twelve:

Monday, 19 [July 19, 1841].—Council of the Twelve, viz.—Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, John Taylor, Orson Pratt, and George A. Smith met at Elder Young's house, conversing with Lyman E. Johnson, who formerly belonged to the quorum. President Rigdon and myself [Joseph] were with them part of the time. (*LDS History of the Church* 4:389)

According to the above report, Joseph and Sidney were present at the quorum meeting only "part of the time," which gave the apostles ample opportunity to converse freely with Lyman. Possibly Lyman discussed the 1831 rumor with them on that occasion. All of the apostles who were at that meeting later became polygamists.

Why was Lyman allowed to attend a meeting at a time when the most pressing problem which the apostles were facing had to do with polygamy in the Church?

### **Orson and Joseph F. Smith Visited Plano**

In 1878 Apostle Orson Pratt and President Joseph F. Smith of the Mormon Church visited Plano, Illinois, headquarters of the Reorganized Church, in hopes of interviewing President

Joseph Smith III and viewing the manuscript of the “New Translation of the Bible” (the Inspired Version). They did not get to see Joseph III or view the manuscript, but Orson did speak before the RLDS congregation. Joseph Smith III referred to Orson’s visit with these words:

Orson Pratt once passed through Plano while I was living there, and was requested by the brother in charge during my temporary absence from home, to occupy our pulpit. I believe he did attend a prayer service and spoke briefly to the Saints assembled there. However, not being home at the time of his visit I did not get to see him. (Mary Audentia Smith Anderson, *The Memoirs of President Joseph Smith III (1832–1914)*, 32)

The Mormons published the following account of Orson’s address:

### **Orson Pratt’s 1878 Testimony**

“At a meeting held in Plano, Illinois, Sept. 12, 1878, Apostle Orson Pratt explained the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the revelation on plural marriage. He refuted the statement and belief of those present that Brigham Young was the author of that revelation [Section 132 in the Utah Doctrine and Covenants]; showed that Joseph Smith, the Prophet, had not only commenced the practice of that principle himself, and further taught it to others, before President Young and the Twelve had returned from their missions in Europe, in 1841, but that Joseph actually received revelation upon that principle as early as 1831. He said, ‘Lyman Johnson, who was very familiar with Joseph at this early date, Joseph living at his father’s house [near Hiram, Ohio, beginning in September 1831], and [Lyman] who was also very intimate with me [Orson], we having traveled on several missions together, told me himself that Joseph had made known to him as early as 1831, that plural marriage was a correct principle. Joseph declared to Lyman that God had revealed it to him, but that the time had not come to teach or practice it in the Church, but that the time would come.’ To



this statement Elder Pratt bore his testimony. He cited several instances of Joseph having had wives sealed to him, one at least as early as April 5, 1841, which was some time prior to the return of the Twelve from England. Referred to his own trial in regard to this matter in Nauvoo, and said it was because he got his information from a wicked source [Sarah and Dr. Bennett], from those disaffected, but as soon as he learned the truth, he was satisfied.” (*The Historical Record* 6:230)

### **A Polygamous Revelation Would Have Been Contrary to Early Revelations**

Lyman’s claim that Joseph received a plural marriage revelation in 1831 is in direct conflict with the revelations which Joseph gave to the Church during this same period. Joseph had brought forth the Book of Mormon in March 1830, which strongly condemned polygamy. Also, Joseph received three monogamous revelations within a few months of the time when Orson said, that Lyman said, that the polygamous 1831 revelation was given. They were:

*The Revelation of March 1830:*

And again, I command thee that thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife. (LDS DC 19:25; RLDS DC 18:3a)

Mormon theologians uphold Dr. Bennett’s assertion that Joseph married several women who were already married to other men—which would mean that he coveted his neighbors’ wives, which would have made him a sinner in the eyes of God.

*The Revelation of February 1831:*

Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and none else. And he that looketh upon a [another] woman to lust after her shall deny the faith, and shall not have the Spirit; and if he repents not he shall be cast out. (LDS DC 42:22–23; RLDS DC 42:7d)

If Joseph did take plural wives, he violated this commandment and thereby no longer had the Holy Spirit and should have been cast out.

*The Revelation of March 1831:*

... marriage is ordained of God unto man. Wherefore, it is lawful that he should have one wife, and they twain shall be one flesh. (LDS DC 49:15–16; RLDS DC 49:3a–b)

These revelations stand as Joseph’s testimony of God’s law and his own beliefs on the law of marriage for the Saints in 1831.

**Orson Proclaimed April 5, 1841,  
as Joseph’s Wedding Date**

When Orson Pratt spoke to the Saints at Plano, he asserted that Joseph married a plural wife on April 5, 1841. That alleged wife would have been Louisa Beaman (also spelled Beeman and Beman), for that is the date Dr. Bennett and LDS leaders gave for Joseph’s first plural marriage. In Bennett’s allegation that Joseph attempted to seduce Sarah, the doctor said, “He [Joseph] then went off to see Miss Louisa Beeman, at the house of Mrs. Sherman, and remained with her about two hours” (John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints; or, An Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*, 229). Dr. Bennett also published, “In concluding this subject [of Joseph and his alleged wives], however, I will semi-state two or more cases, among the vast number, where Joe Smith was privately married to his spiritual wives . . . that of Miss L\*\*\*\*\* B\*\*\*\*\* [Louisa Beaman], by Elder Joseph Bates Noble” (ibid., 256).

**LDS Affidavits Support  
Bennett’s Claim**

When President Joseph F. Smith of the Mormon Church needed to publish the names of Joseph’s alleged wives in order to defend LDS polygamy, he drew on John Bennett’s statement about Louisa. He listed the first plural wife as “Louisa Beman, married to the Prophet April 5, 1841, Joseph B. Noble officiating” (*The Historical Record* 6:233). This was in agreement with Bennett’s statement on page 256 in his book.

In desperate need of defending their position, the leaders of the Mormon Church obtained affidavits from a number of individuals, including Joseph Noble. The LDS record states:

## AFFIDAVIT OF JOSEPH BATES NOBLE

Territory of Utah }  
 County of Salt Lake. } ss.

Be it remembered that on the 26th day of June, A.D. 1869, personally appeared before me, James Jack, a notary public in and for said county, Joseph Bates Noble, who was by me sworn in due form of law, and upon his oath saith, that on the fifth day of April, A.D. 1841, at the city of Nauvoo, County of Hancock, State of Illinois, he married or sealed Louisa Beaman to Joseph Smith, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, according to the order of celestial marriage revealed to the said Joseph Smith.

Joseph B. Noble.

Subscribed and sworn to by the said Joseph Bates Noble, the day and year first above written.

[Seal]

James Jack, Notary Public.

(Joseph F. Smith, Jr., *Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage*, 75)

### **Evidence that Joseph Did Not Marry Louisa Beaman**

According to Orson Pratt, one of the main purposes for polygamy was for a man to father as many children as possible, in order that those children would become his subjects in eternity. Orson wrote, "The inhabitants of each world are required to reverence, adore, and worship their own personal father who dwells in the Heaven which they formerly inhabited" (Orson Pratt, Editor, *The Seer* 1:37). Orson also proclaimed that in eternity a man with only one wife could populate one world in "one hundred thousand million of years," but if he had a hundred wives he would "multiply worlds on worlds" (*ibid.*, 39).

So according to Orson, Joseph married Louisa Beaman for the purpose of fathering many children. Mormon Church leaders have published that Joseph and Louisa lived as husband and wife from April 5, 1841, until Joseph's death, June 27, 1844, which was a period of three years and two months. Yet Louisa

bore no child during that period. If, as the Mormons claim, Joseph married Louisa for the purpose of fathering children by her, how many did she bear? There were none!

Now consider the great contrast between the number of children born to Louisa when she was married to Brigham Young. Louisa became Brigham's plural wife on January 14, 1846, and they lived as husband and wife until Louisa died May 15, 1850—a period of four years and four months (see John J. Stewart, *Brigham Young and His Wives: And The True Story of Plural Marriage*, 87). During those four years, Louisa bore Brigham five sons! They were: (1) Moroni, born January 8, 1847; (2 and 3) twin sons, Joseph and Hyrum, born 1848; and (4 and 5) twin sons, Alva and Alma, born 1850 (see Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow*, 151, 284; and Kate B. Carter, *Brigham Young-His Wives and Family*, 425).

Joseph was certainly capable of fathering children. By April 1841 he had fathered seven children by Emma. Between April 1841 and June 1844 Emma conceived at least two more times. She gave birth to an eighth child, a stillborn son, in 1842. Then in the spring of 1844 she conceived a ninth child, a son, who was born after Joseph's death (see Scot Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor, *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, 475).

This is evidence that Joseph was not a polygamist. It is yet another example of polygamous leaders falsely declaring that one of their plural wives (in this case a dead one who could not disagree) had been Joseph's plural wife, in order to preserve and continue the Utah leaders' polygamous conspiracy.

### **Louisa Was Not Baptized until After the Purported Marriage**

Mormon Church leaders state Louisa Beaman was married to Joseph on April 4, 1841, even though she was not baptized until two years later—on May 11, 1843 (see *Millennial Star* 21: 75). This marriage would have been impossible in view of the Mormon claim that the plural marriage doctrine was so secret that even the apostles were not told of it until the summer of

1841. Is it not ridiculous to charge that Joseph started the polygamy system with a woman who was so far from the Kingdom that it took two years to get her baptized?

Some might theorize that her May 11, 1843, baptism was a rebaptism. If so, what evil had she done?

### **Conclusion**

The Prophet strongly denied having had a revelation on polygamy, and the Mormon Church's claim that he received such a revelation in 1831 is only a rumor—and its source is that Orson *said* that Lyman *said* that Joseph *said*—a third-handed hearsay! One wonders how such an immensely important life-controlling theology as the LDS Church's polygamy system could exist while having such a rumor as one of its foundation stones.

Orson and his fellow polygamists fabricated their entire theology of plural marriage, basing it on the Cochran-Bennett pattern, and have thereby done a great injustice to the cause of the great Latter Day Work, and to the Saints who have suffered from the scourge of polygamy from that day to this. Mormon Church leaders have kept repeating and republishing Orson's 1831 rumor until the unsuspecting members of their church and the general public have come to falsely believe that Joseph did receive such a manifestation that year. By adding the doctrine of plural marriage to their church's theology, they have fulfilled that part of the angel Moroni's prophecy which states that Joseph's name would be known for good and *evil*.

The above information provides a background as to why Orson opposed Joseph in Nauvoo in 1842 when Bennett's story about Joseph and Sarah Pratt appeared in the *Sangamo Journal*.

