

Chapter 16

LDS Leaders Accused Oliver Cowdery of Polygamy

Among the efforts which Brigham Young made to justify polygamy was an allegation that Oliver Cowdery was a polygamist, and that Oliver had written the article entitled “Marriage” and had placed it in the Doctrine and Covenants in order to camouflage his own polygamous practices. After Brigham Young made the charge that Oliver was the first polygamist in the Church, Joseph F. Smith (son of Hyrum Smith), Orson Pratt, and others claimed that Oliver practiced polygamy during 1831–1832 while the Church’s headquarters was at Kirtland, Ohio. Young went so far as to say that Joseph and Oliver were given a revelation on polygamy while they worked at translating the Book of Mormon in 1829.

As previously reported in *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy*, volume 1, the article on “Marriage” was accepted by a special General Assembly at Kirtland and placed in the 1835 Edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. In this way it became the official law of the Church on the subject of marriage. It was placed as Section CI (101) in that edition, but is presently Section 111 in the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants. It was also included in all editions of the LDS Doctrine and Covenants until it was removed in 1876 under President Brigham Young’s administration when he had the section favoring polygamy (LDS DC 132) inserted.

There was a definite reason that the article on “Marriage” was inserted in the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835. As noted in volume one of *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy*, Church missionaries began converting Cochranites in Maine and other eastern states as early as 1832, some of whom gathered to Kirtland

and brought their polygamous concepts with them. Therefore the “Marriage” article was included in the Doctrine and Covenants to make certain that the Church was strictly monogamous.

Oliver was a member of the committee of four chosen to select revelations and articles which became a part of the Doctrine and Covenants. The committee included Oliver, Joseph Smith, Jr., Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams. Even though Oliver may have written or helped write the “Marriage” article, Joseph definitely approved it. In fact, Joseph used it extensively in Nauvoo in 1842 to prove that Dr. John C. Bennett’s polygamous assertions were untrue. Until his death in 1844, Joseph pointed to the “Marriage” article in the Doctrine and Covenants repeatedly as the only law of marriage in the Church.

Brigham Charged Oliver with Authoring and Publishing the Marriage Article against Joseph’s Wishes

The “Marriage” article presented a tremendous problem for Brigham Young, for polygamy could not really be accepted while that article remained in the Scriptures. Brigham was aware that if he were to be successful in making polygamy a doctrine, that he must build a strong case against the “Marriage” article. So he denounced the Church’s marriage law and undermined its validity by charging that Oliver Cowdery (who had died March 3, 1850, and could not defend himself) had been a polygamist.

Brigham made false charges against Oliver Cowdery and the article on “Marriage” when two sons of the Prophet Joseph Smith went to Salt Lake City to preach against polygamy in 1869.

Alexander and David Smith, missionaries for the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, had been assigned to a mission in Utah, Nevada, and California. They arrived at Salt Lake City on July 15, 1869. Their cousin, John Smith, son of their slain Uncle Hyrum, invited them to be guests in his home. Many were happy to learn that Joseph’s sons were in their midst. Alexander wrote his brother, Joseph III, that

“numbers” of people came to visit them, and that they spent the evening with their cousin, Samuel H. Smith. Samuel H. was the son of Samuel, the Prophet’s brother, who died a few weeks after the martyrdom.

The Fox’s Garden Incident

This was Alexander’s second visit to Salt Lake City. He had gone as a missionary in 1866, and while preaching at Fox’s Garden, he had a sharp exchange of views with his cousin, Joseph F. Smith, son of Hyrum Smith.

Elder James W. Gillen, another RLDS missionary, sent a report of the Fox’s Garden incident to President Joseph Smith III, who published Gillen’s account in the RLDS Church’s official paper.

Elder Gillen wrote:

Alexander preached again, by invitation, on Wednesday evening at Fox’s Gardens, which had been previously seated for the display of fire works. There was a good attendance. Your cousin Joseph F. Smith was present, and at the close of the meeting he requested the privilege of speaking, which was granted. He spoke in defence of Polygamy, and also Brigham’s position. He also delivered a prophecy in the name of the Lord, that you and David would come and indorse the proceedings here. He also spoke of the great friendship of the Twelve for your father’s family. After he sat down Bro. Alexander followed him and gave him one of the worst castigations that I ever saw any person receive. (*The True Latter Day Saints’ Herald* 10 [Plano, Illinois, December 15, 1866]: 177)

Alexander Smith’s Account of Brigham’s Accusations against Oliver

When Alexander and David went to Salt Lake City in 1869, Alexander was thirty years of age and David was twenty-four. They used as their base the Inspired Version of the Holy Scriptures, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the *Times and Seasons* as left by their martyred father.

Brigham faced a monumental task now that Alexander and

David had come to preach against polygamy. Alexander wrote of his and David's historic visit with President Young:

On the 17th we called on President Brigham Young, to see if we could get the tabernacle to preach in, and now really begins our experiences in this strange mission.

We went into the *Deseret News* office, and made inquiry if we could see Pres. Brigham Young, as we were instructed that that was the best way to get an audience with him. We were invited to sit down till our request could be taken to him, and get an answer. It seemed to me we were detained here about two hours and a half. . . . Finally I stood . . . and arose to go. . . .

As we rose to take our leave, a messenger came to inform us President Young would see us. Would we walk into his office? We passed through two or three anterooms or connecting rooms between the *Deseret News* Office and President Young's private office, and were ushered into the presence of Brigham Young and about nineteen or twenty others; and the puzzle of our long wait was solved. Messengers had been sent out in the city to call in the principal men of the church to be present at the interview, and it took time to get them all in. There were Pres. Brigham Young, John Taylor, Daniel Wells, George A. Smith, Brigham Young, Jr., George Q. Cannon, J. F. [Joseph Fielding] Smith, John Henry Smith, John Smith, Samuel Smith, Joseph Young, Phineas Young, and a number of others whose names escape my memory now. From the imposing array of names, you can judge the interview was considered by President Young to be an important one. To say I was surprised does not fully express my feeling at this imposing array of the heads of the church there. I had simply called upon Mr. Young to request the use of the tabernacle, not expecting to meet so strong an array of talent.

We were formally introduced to all in the room, and after this ceremony, I simply announced the object of my call, telling President Young I understood that others were granted the use of the tabernacle when not in service by themselves,

and as my brother David and I were there to represent the Reorganized Church we would like to be accorded the privilege to address the people from the pulpit of the tabernacle. Here let me explain a little. Three years before I had spoken in Line and Fox's Garden, a place of public resort in the city, and in my service I was opposed by my cousin, Joseph F. Smith, and in my answer to him I made use of some statements which displeased President Brigham Young; and ere my request [for the use of the tabernacle] was noticed I was called upon by him to take back or retract my statements. I told him I could not do so because they were strictly true, and I stood ready to prove them. He asked me where I got my information, and I remarked I had lived through the experiences of many of the events referred to, and did not need to have anyone inform me. He then asked me if my mother did not give me information. By this time so much had been said we were both getting warm and earnest in our converse. I answered, Yes sir, and I had more confidence in her statement than I did in his. This made him quite angry, and he began to abuse my mother, calling her "the damnedest liar that ever lived;" accused her of trying to poison my father twice, and also accused her of stealing my father's and Uncle Hyrum's picture, and his family ring, and withholding them from the church and the family, and other things of like nature.

I finally told him to stop; that what he had said was false and he knew it to be false. Of course this angered him still more.

Some one said, "We love you boys for your father's sake." I said that made no impression upon me, I expected to live long enough to make for myself a name, and have the people of God love me for my own sake.

At this President Young arose to his feet, clenched his fists, and shook them down by his side, raised upon his toes and came down on his heels repeatedly as he said, "A *name*, a *name*, a *name*. You have not got God enough about you to make a name. You are nothing at all like your father. He was open and frank and outspoken, but you; there is some-

thing covered up, something hidden, calculated to deceive.”

I told him time would tell.

He then told me that article on marriage in the Book of Covenants had been written by Oliver Cowdery and published in the book directly in opposition to father's wishes. [italics added]

I remarked, “President Young, unfortunately for your statement, that article with every other one in the book, used by the church previous to father’s death, was laid before a general assembly of the church in solemn assembly, and endorsed by the whole church.” I then challenged him or any other authorized representative of the church there in Utah to meet us in discussion of the differences in faith and organization existing between us. I told him, “You say you have the truth, and that we are in error. If you have the truth, what need you fear? You are men in full vigor of mind and reason, we are but boys. If it is as you say you can easily overcome us, if we are in the wrong; but if it proves that we are right the sooner you get right the better. Unfortunately for us, a Mormon legislature has made laws prohibiting preaching upon the streets of the cities in Utah, so we are denied the means used by your missionaries in Europe to convert thousands; but you have not made it a misdemeanor to preach upon the mountain side, and we propose to get the ears of this people, if we must needs preach on the mountain side.”

President Young would no longer talk to me; so I said, “Come, David, let us go; it is useless to prolong this controversy.” We arose to our feet, and David said, “Mr. Young, are we to understand that we are denied the use of the tabernacle?["”]

President Young then turned to his brethren, and said, “What do you say, brethren?” Several of them expressed themselves disapproving the letting us have it. The exact words of none come to me except those of George Q. Cannon. He arose and said, “So far as I am concerned, I can soon express myself. After we whose hairs have grown gray in the service of God and after we have borne the heat and

burden of the day in persecution and suffering, on land and sea, and have labored long and hard in heat and cold to build up the work and name for their father; for these boys to come now and ask us for the use of our houses to tear down what we have been so many years in building up, to me it is the height of impudence, and I will not give my consent to it.” He was very much in earnest, his face was as white as death.

David then quietly arose to his full height and his face was also white but his words were calm, but oh, so full of sarcasm: “We will not deny that you have traveled far, suffered much, and labored hard to build up a name for our father, but what sort of a name is it? A name that we his sons are ashamed to meet in good society, and it shall be our life’s work to remove from our father’s name the stain you have heaped upon it.”

None were so severe as George Q. Cannon. After an expression had been called for and given, President Young then turned to David and said, “No, David, we do not think it wise to let you have the tabernacle.” As we arose and turned to go out, Mr. Young said, “Boys, don’t let this be your last visit; come again. I would gladly take you to my bosom if I did not think I would be taking a viper to my bosom that would sting me to death.”

I told him he need not be alarmed, it was not likely after the reception we had just passed through, that we would visit either at his home or office. We went out, and the fight was on. (*Autumn Leaves* 14 [Lamoni, Iowa, August 1901]: 349–351)

Brigham Was First to Accuse Oliver of Polygamy

Brigham declared that a “revelation” favoring polygamy was given to Joseph and Oliver while the Book of Mormon was being translated in 1829. Brigham’s statement is quoted in several books. He is reported to have said in a sermon in 1872 that during the time that Joseph was translating the plates for the Book of Mormon and Oliver was acting as his scribe, “. . . they had a revelation that the order of Patriarchal Marriage and the Sealing was right.”

Brigham alleged that Oliver then asked, “. . . why don’t we go into the Order of polygamy. . . . We know it is true—then why delay?” Joseph allegedly replied that “the time has not yet come.”

Oliver, according to Brigham, disregarded Joseph’s warning, and “. . . took to wife Miss Annie Lyman, cousin to [Apostle] Geo. A. Smith. . . . he went into darkness and lost the spirit” (Gems, *The Most Holy Principle* 1:1–2, and *ibid.*, 3:2. See also Richard S. Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, *A Book of Mormons*, 75; and Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History*, 13).

It is a fact that Brigham Young was not a credible witness on this subject, since he was not acquainted with Joseph nor Oliver in 1829 when Joseph was translating the Nephite record and Oliver was acting as his scribe. Brigham did not join the Church until April 1832 (see Richard F. Palmer and Karl D. Butler, *Brigham Young: The New York Years*, 67).

Joseph F. Smith Repeated the Claim that Oliver Was a Polygamist

President Joseph F. Smith, who was present at the meeting with President Young (and who later became president of the LDS Church), also accused Oliver Cowdery of having been a polygamist at Kirtland and having caused the article on “Marriage” to be inserted in the Doctrine and Covenants in order to camouflage his own polygamy. Since Joseph F. was born in 1838, and the “Marriage” article was first printed in 1835, his testimony was only hearsay. He testified that Orson Pratt said that Lyman E. Johnson had told Orson that Oliver was a polygamist at Kirtland. By this time Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were both dead and could not defend themselves. Lyman Johnson was not a credible witness either, since he apostatized in 1839. However, by this time he had also died.

Joseph F. Smith also declared in a sermon in Salt Lake City, July 7, 1878:

To put this matter more correctly before you, I here declare that the principle of plural marriage was not first re-

vealed on the 12th day of July, 1843. It was written for the first time on that date, but it had been revealed to the Prophet many years before that, perhaps as early as 1832. About this time, or subsequently, Joseph, the Prophet, intrusted this fact to Oliver Cowdery; he abused the confidence imposed in him, and brought reproach upon himself, and thereby upon the church by “running before he was sent,” and “taking liberties without license,” so to speak, hence the publication, by O. Cowdery, about this time, of an article on marriage, which was carefully worded, and afterwards found its way into the Doctrine and Covenants without authority. This article explains itself to those who understand the facts, and is an indisputable evidence of the early existence of the knowledge of the principle of patriarchal marriage by the Prophet Joseph, and also by Oliver Cowdery. (*Journal of Discourses* 20 [Liverpool, 1880]: 29)

Still later, LDS Church Historian Andrew Jenson published the following statement which had been written by President Joseph 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. (See Orson Pratt’s testimony.)” (Andrew Jenson, *The Historical Record* 6 [Salt Lake City, Utah, May 1887]: 219)

Orson Pratt Accused Oliver before an RLDS Congregation

In 1878 Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith passed through Plano, Illinois, and were invited to speak to the RLDS Plano Congregation. While speaking, Orson repeated his claim that Oliver practiced polygamy as early as 1831. Later the LDS Historian published the following:

Orson Pratt's 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 [LDS DC 132]. He refuted the statement and belief of those present that Brigham Young was the author of that revelation; 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, and who was also very intimate with me, 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, from those disaffected, but as soon as he learned the truth he was satisfied.” (*The Historical Record* 6 [May 1887]: 230)

The LDS Church has put much credence in this statement by Pratt, but it should be noted that Orson Pratt was speaking from hearsay when he said Oliver took a plural wife at Kirtland. Orson’s sources for his allegations against Joseph came from Lyman Johnson, Orson’s wife, Sarah, and from Dr. John C. Bennett and “his clique” (as Joseph referred to them).

For a full disclosure of this falsehood, and those who fabricated it to persecute the Prophet and lay their own polygamous foundations, see chapter 3, pages 41–55; chapter 4, pages 57–

69; and chapter 5, pages 71–86 of this book.

**Oliver Cowdery Was Surprised
in 1846 When He
Learned of Polygamy**

In July 1846 Oliver was informed that polygamy was being practiced and sanctioned by Church leaders. He contacted two of his sisters to learn the truth. They were Lucy, the wife of Brigham’s brother, Phineas Young; and Phoebe, who was married to Daniel Jackson. Phoebe answered Oliver’s letter and informed him that polygamy was being practiced with the approval of Brigham and others of the Twelve. Phoebe wrote Oliver from Montrose, Iowa, on July 2, 1846—a few months after the main body of Saints had left Nauvoo. Oliver’s letter of reply to Phoebe shows that he was both astonished and surprised by the news.

President W. W. Blair, who was editor of *The Saint’s Advocate*, an RLDS paper, published Oliver’s reply to Phoebe with this preface:

It appears that Oliver had heard that polygamy was secretly taught and practiced at Nauvoo, and he wrote his sister Lucy inquiring as to the truth of the reports. [Phineas] Young would not allow his wife [Lucy] to answer him, but Mrs. [Phoebe] Jackson wrote him giving a full report of the strange and vile system, and the following letter [by Oliver] 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. Oliver’s testimony is better than Brigham’s, surely:

[Oliver’s Letter]

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

“*Brother Daniel and Sister Pheobe [sic]:*

Pheobe’s [sic] letter mailed at Montrose on the 2d of this month was received in due time, and would have been replied

to immediately, but it came in the midst of toil and the business of court, which has just closed, and I take the earliest moment to answer. It is needless to say that we had long looked for and long expected a letter from you or Sister Lucy.

“Now, brother Daniel and sister Pheobe [*sic*], what will you do? Has sister Pheobe [*sic*] written us the truth? and if so, will you venture with your little ones into the toils and fatigues of a long journey 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, 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 been 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, [*sic*] wrong, such abomination. It will blast, like a milldew, their fairest prospects, and lay the ax at the root of their future happiness. . . .”

Here follows a page or more concerning family matters, and then the signature of Oliver Cowdery. (*The Saints' Advocate* 1 [Plano, Illinois, May 1879]: 112–113)

Although Phineas Young would not let Lucy write her brother, Oliver, at that time, Phineas could not convince Lucy that polygamy was a divine doctrine. Elder Charles Derry, missionary to Utah, wrote in his autobiography,

Brethren [W. W.] Blair, [Joseph] Luff, and myself visited the first and lawful wife of Phineas Young, a brother of Brigham. This lady is the sister of Oliver Cowdery, and would not submit to polygamy, hence did not live with her husband, but was living with her daughter, Mrs. Williams. (*Journal of History* 7 [July 1914]: 341; Charles Derry, *Autobiography of Elder Charles Derry*, 397–398)

Oliver Had Only One Wife

On December 18, 1832, Oliver married beautiful seventeen-year-old Elizabeth Ann Whitmer in Jackson County, Missouri. Elizabeth had great faith in the Restored Gospel, for she had witnessed many miracles. Her father, Peter Whitmer, Sr., opened the Whitmer home to Joseph and Emma and Oliver as a place to live while Joseph was translating the Book of Mormon plates. Elizabeth heard her mother, Mary, testify that she had been visited by an angel who showed her the plates; her brother, David, was one of the three Book of Mormon witnesses; and four other brothers, Christian, Jacob, Peter, Jr., and John, were numbered among the eight witnesses who saw the plates. Elizabeth's brother-in-law, Hiram Page (her older sister Catherine's husband), was also one of the eight witnesses.

Not one of Elizabeth's five brothers accepted the doctrine of polygamy. And not one of them ever accused Oliver of plural marriage, which they would have done if he had taken a plural wife while he was married to their Elizabeth. They loved her dearly and were always close to her. They would have protested and condemned Oliver if he had been a polygamist. But they loved and respected Oliver, who died at David Whitmer's home. Both David and John Whitmer were with Oliver when he died, as well as Oliver's sister, Lucy, and her husband, Phineas Young.

Oliver and Elizabeth had a happy marriage and six children were born to them. Oliver had no children by a plural wife. He was the victim of cruel conspirators, who needed an excuse for removing the article on "Marriage," so they wove their web of deceit around the one who had been closer to Joseph in the early days of the Church than any other.

Modern Authors and Historians

Indicate that Oliver Was Innocent of Polygamy

Some present-day authors agree that Brigham Young charged Oliver Cowdery with taking a plural wife, but indicate that Oliver had only one wife. For instance, authors Richard S. Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, in *A Book of Mormons*, quote Brigham's polygamous charge against Oliver, and then

declare, “This statement by President Young seems to have been either to discredit Oliver Cowdery or to enhance polygamy. No charges of sexual misconduct were made against Cowdery during his 1838 excommunication trial” (page 75).

Conclusion

Brigham Young, Orson Pratt, and Joseph F. Smith did all in their power to enhance the practice of polygamy. However, they were not primary witnesses in regard to a supposed polygamy revelation being received in the 1829–1832 period, or while the Book of Mormon was being translated. They knowingly told a falsehood when they said Oliver was a polygamist. Oliver Cowdery was single during 1829–1832—the years the conspirators claim that he took a plural wife. His only marriage was to Elizabeth Ann Whitmer whom he married December 18, 1832, in Jackson County, Missouri, where they resided. The conspirators knew that Elizabeth Ann Whitmer had been his only wife.

The discrediting of Oliver was a convenient way to justify the discarding of the article on “Marriage,” which had to be removed from their Doctrine and Covenants before their followers would fully accept polygamy. So they lied about Joseph having a polygamous revelation in the 1829–1832 period, and about Oliver having married a plural wife, in order to strengthen their own polygamous position.