

# Joseph Smith and His Concubines

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During the last several decades much has been published about Joseph Smith's doctrine and practice of polygamy and polyandry. Little however, has been written on Smith's belief and practice of concubinage. Smith taught that "Abraham received concubines, and they bore him children; and it was accounted unto him for righteousness, because they were given unto him" (Doctrine and Covenants 132:37). Smith said he received "an appointment" from God to "restore all things" (v.40), which included the practice of having "many wives and concubines" (vv.1-3). In the Bible and the Book of Mormon, however, there is zero evidence that God ever *commanded* any prophet to practice polygamy, polyandry or concubinage.

Smith's idea and practice of concubinage is different than found in the Old Testament. His practice is similar to his contemporary John Humphrey Noyes's "free love" philosophy. Noyes's Oneida community in New York taught that sex between consenting adults was not a sin, even among married people.<sup>1</sup> The phrase "spiritual wife" was used in different ways during Joseph Smith's era. I believe Smith used the term as having a relationship with a woman somewhat like a concubine, or a wife for the night. A woman became Smith's sexual concubine when she gave her consent; whereas, a plural marriage included an authorized officiator, a witness and a marriage/sealing ceremony.

Here are four examples in chronological order of Smith's doctrine and practice of concubinage. Notice that Smith evokes the idea to these women that he has the "blessings of Jacob." Recall that Jacob of old possessed both plural wives and concubines.

## Lucinda Harris

Lucinda and her husband George W. Harris moved to Far West, Missouri in about 1837. In March 1838, Joseph and Emma moved in with the Harris's and stayed with them until May. Sarah Pratt, wife of Apostle Orson Pratt at the time, later said of her friend Lucinda:

"Mrs. Harris was a married lady, a very good friend of mine. When Joseph had made his dastardly attempt on me, I went to Mrs. Harris to unbosom my grief to her. To my utter astonishment she said, laughing heartily: 'How foolish you are! I don't see anything so horrible in it. Why I am his mistress since four years!'"<sup>2</sup>

### Sarah Pratt

Sometime in late 1840 or early 1841, Sarah Pratt said that Joseph Smith propositioned her twice, but unlike Lucinda Harris, she turned him down. Sarah reported Smith as saying:

“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.”<sup>3</sup>

This is not a marriage offer. Years later Sarah Pratt described Smith’s modus operandi that he used on her and a number of other women:

“Joseph did not think of a marriage or sealing ceremony for many years. He used to state to his intended victims, as he did to me: ‘God does not care if we have a good time, if only other people do not know it.’ He only introduced a marriage ceremony when he had found out that he could not get certain women without it. I think Louisa Beeman was the first case of this kind [This first plural marriage to Smith occurred on April 5, 1841].”<sup>4</sup>

### Melissa Schindle

Melissa Schindle, wife of Colonel George Schindle, made an affidavit on July 2, 1842 that was published in the *Sangamo Journal* on July 15, 1842. Mrs. Schindle said Joseph Smith asked “in the fall of 1841 ... if he could have the privilege of sleeping with her ... [that] it was the will of the Lord that he should have illicit intercourse with her, and that he never proceeded to do anything of that kind with any woman without first having the will of the Lord on the subject.” After Melissa rejected his offer, Smith reportedly said, “that she must never tell of his propositions to her, for he had all influence in that place [Nauvoo], and if she told he would ruin her character, and she would be under the necessity of leaving.”<sup>5</sup>

### Catherine Fuller Warren

The same “fall of 1841” evening that Melissa Schindle was propositioned by Smith, she was staying the night with recently married Catherine Fuller Warren. Schindle said that after she turned Smith down, “He then went to an adjoining bed where [Catherine] ... was sleeping [,] got into bed with her and laid there until about 1 o’clock, then he got up” and left.<sup>6</sup> John C. Bennett in his own affidavit also affirmed that, “He has seen Joseph Smith in bed with Mrs. Fuller” [Catherine Fuller Warren].<sup>7</sup> In a more complete statement of this same affidavit, Bennett said Smith seduced women like Mrs. Fuller Warren, “by telling them that the Lord had granted the blessing of Jacob, and that there was no sin

in it—that he [Smith] told him that ... he had free access to Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, and various others.”<sup>8</sup>

On November 7, 1841, Smith taught the saints at Nauvoo the importance of secrecy, saying:

“If you do not accuse each other, God will not accuse you. If you have no accuser you will enter heaven, and if you follow the revelations and instructions which God gives you through me, I will take you into heaven on my back load. If you will not accuse me, I will not accuse you. If you will throw a cloak of charity over my sins, I will over yours—for charity covereth a multitude of sins. What many people call sin is not sin; I do many things to break down superstition, and I will break it down.”<sup>9</sup>

This philosophy was already being practiced by Joseph Smith as seen in the four chronological examples above, and others soon followed, such as John C. Bennett of the First Presidency of the Church, Joseph’s brother and Apostle William Smith, Chauncey L. Higbee, Lyman O. Littlefield, Joel S. Miles, Darwin Chase and others. By May 1842, a number of cases of alleged sexual misconduct against both men and women were brought before the Nauvoo Stake High Council, including those named above but not William or Joseph Smith. The pattern of the female witnesses testifying before the Council was that these men taught: (1) “That any respectable female might indulge in sexual intercourse, and there was no sin in it, (2) providing the person so indulging, keep [kept] the same to herself; (3) for there could be no sin where there was *no accuser*,” and (4) “using the name of Joseph Smith” they affirmed “that such intercourse was tolerated by the heads of the Church.”<sup>10</sup>

The problem was that these men in their eagerness were not careful, were exposed, and now had “accusers.” Most of them were disciplined or withdrew from the church in 1842.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to note that of the thirty-three women listed by Todd Compton as being plural wives of Joseph Smith, twelve do not have an officiator, ceremony or witness to their marriage/sealing. Fanny Alger and Mrs. Lucinda Harris, fall into this category in the 1830s; Mrs. Sylvia Sessions, Mrs. Elizabeth Durfee, Mrs. Sarah Cleveland, and widow Delcena Johnson, in 1842; and single women, Flora Ann Woodworth, Sarah and Maria Lawrence, Hannah Ells, Olive Frost and Nancy Winchester, in 1843.<sup>12</sup> Is inadequate record keeping the only problem here, or are some of these women—especially the married ones—sexual consent relationships?

Joseph Smith believed in the doctrine of concubinage. He said it was practiced in “righteousness” by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and “many others of my servants, from the beginning of creation,” so he reinstated the practice (D&C 132:37-38). But as we have shown, Smith’s idea of concubinage was more like having a mistress.

#### Endnotes

1. John Humphrey Noyes 1811-1886 – Wikipedia; accessed May 2016.
2. Wilhelm Wyl, *Mormon Portraits, or the Truth About the Mormon Leaders, 1830-1886* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing Co., 1886), 60, emphasis deleted.
3. Richard S. Van Wagoner, “Sarah Pratt: The Shaping of an Apostate” *Dialogue* 19 (Summer 1986): 71-72; John C. Bennett, “Bennett’s Second and Third Letters,” *Sangamo Journal* (Springfield, Illinois) July 15, 1842, emphasis in original.
4. Wilhelm Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 62, emphasis deleted, my brackets.
5. John C. Bennett, “Bennett’s Second and Third Letters,” *Sangamo Journal* July 15, 1842, emphasis deleted.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. John C. Bennett, Affidavit, *Pittsburg Morning Chronicle*, June 29, 1842.
9. Joseph Smith’s November 7, 1841 discourse in, Joseph Smith et al, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co. 1978 printing), 4:445.
10. Qtd. in Gary James Bergera, “Illicit intercourse,’ Plural Marriage and the Nauvoo Stake High Council, 1840-44,” *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 23 (2003), 68-69, my emphasis.
11. *Ibid.*, 59-90.
12. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 4-6.