

## Chapter 27

# Emma's Struggles as Joseph's First Wife

Like ships in rough seas, Joseph and Emma both held their course through mighty waves of doubts and frustration, of love and faith, even as they ebbed and flowed, intensified by events developing in Nauvoo and with the city's neighbors.

### **A Second Period of Marital Harmony**

In May of 1843, Emma accepted plural marriage and gave her permission for Joseph to marry the Partridge sisters and the Lawrence sisters, being present and participating to show her support. (See Chapter 24.) Her ability to support the reality of what plural marriage meant to her own marriage and her relationship to Joseph eroded rapidly, however, and in August of 1843 (see Chapter 26), Emma steeled herself against polygamy, confronted both Joseph and the plural wives known to her, and launched a campaign to expel the sister-wives from her world. Within weeks, however, her feelings apparently softened. Perhaps feeling remorseful for motivating Flora Ann Woodworth's dramatic marriage to a nonmember or for some other reason, Emma's resistance diminished from September to early November 1843, allowing her and Joseph to live in comparative tranquility. William Clayton remembered in 1874: "During this period [1843] the Prophet Joseph took several other wives. Amongst the number I well remember Eliza Partridge, Emily Partridge, Sarah Ann Whitney, Helen Kimball and Flora Woodworth. These all, he acknowledged to me, were his lawful, wedded wives, according to the celestial order. His wife Emma was cognizant of the fact of some, if not all, of these being his wives, and she generally treated them very kindly."<sup>1</sup>

On October 19, Clayton recorded a significant passage: "He [Joseph Smith] began to tell me that Emma was turned quite friendly and kind." She was even willing to provide counsel for William regarding Margaret, his plural wife, who was pregnant. "He [Joseph] said that it was her [Emma's] advice

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1. William Clayton, Affidavit that begins: "Inasmuch as it may be interesting...", February 16, 1874.

sage would have been bitter in any case, but it has an added tang when one remembers that this revelation from God was transmitted through Emma's husband rather than some less involved person.<sup>79</sup>

Emma needed much faith. Faith to believe polygamy came from God and not from Joseph's fleshly desires. Faith to believe that God had commanded Joseph to marry plural wives without informing her. Faith to accept the written revelation (D&C 132) as divinely inspired, rather than her husband's attempt to manipulate her. Faith to work through the natural reactive emotions of jealousy and suspicion. Together, these trials could have easily precipitated a crisis of faith for her, faith in her husband, faith in her God, or perhaps both. Aroet L. Hale, a teenager in Nauvoo during the 1840s, gave this assessment when he wrote his autobiography forty years later:

I will write a few \words/ about Sister Emma Smith The Wife of the Prophet Joseph. A grate meny of the Saints in theas days think that the Prophet Wife Emmer Hale Smith was a bad woman that she tride to poison the Prophet Their never was a more dutiful woman than Emma Smith was to her Husband till after the Prophet had made publick the revelation on secelestial marriage & begun to take to himselve other wives This proved a grate trial to her. How menny women is their in our day. After 30 or 40 years of teachin that it dose not try to the hartskore [heart's core]

The Prophet Joseph said that she was a good woman & that he would save her if he had to go into the Bowels of Hell to get her. Emma would & did go before Judges Rulers and Govenors to plead for her Husband She would have lade her life down for him I have though[t] cence I became a man that if Emma had, had the right cours taken with her . . . would have been taken with her she would have com to these valleys She pased through grate trials & tribulations loosing her Dear Husband the Prophet and other things was more than she could stand.<sup>80</sup>

Doubtless, Emma Smith's polygamy-related trials were greater than those experienced by any other Church member, female or male. Accordingly, no mortal is positioned to judge her.

### Summary

Emma served as the first Relief Society president and although she voiced her dissatisfaction with polygamy, she continued to administer temple ordinances to women and otherwise support her husband in all other Church responsibilities. It appears that, in the fall of 1843, she experienced a short-lived change of heart regarding plural marriage that, with compromises on

79. Melodie Moench Charles, "Precedents for Mormon Women from Scriptures," 48.

80. Aroet L. Hale, "Reminiscence" (ca. 1882), 30–31.

both sides, evolved into an outwardly stable monogamist lifestyle for the couple in the months after their explosive confrontation on July 13, 1843, over the revelation on celestial marriage.

It appears that Emma's challenges in relation to plural marriage were unique among all of the polygamous wives in Nauvoo. Because the revelation came through her husband, she was distinctively positioned to second-guess some, if not all, of the motives behind it. Accordingly, her proximity to the revelation-giver demanded greater faith than that required of any other wife in a plural marriage. The historical record indicates she continually strove to accept plural marriage, despite her vacillations. Unquestioned is Emma's devotion to Joseph and his return devotion to her, despite the surrounding marital whirlwind to which they were exposed.