



1815–1846

THE  
STANDARD  
OF TRUTH

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with donated money in their own names and sold it for personal profit.

Although both men had admitted their error, Joseph and other church leaders suspected that they were still being dishonest in their management of land in Missouri.<sup>7</sup>

Joseph also worried about the influence of members of his own First Presidency who were preparing to move to Far West. Frederick Williams had clashed with him over the management of the Kirtland Safety Society, and it had hurt their friendship.<sup>8</sup> Oliver, meanwhile, had become uncomfortable with Joseph taking a more active role in local economics and politics. Both he and David Whitmer, the president of the church in Missouri, felt that Joseph was exerting too much influence over temporal matters in his role as prophet.<sup>9</sup>

While these men were not in league with Warren Parrish or the other dissenters, their loyalty to Joseph had waned over the last eight months, and he worried about them causing problems in Zion.

Before leaving Kirtland, Joseph asked his brother Hyrum and Thomas Marsh to go to Far West ahead of him to warn the faithful Saints about the growing rift between him and these men.<sup>10</sup> Hyrum accepted the mission, though it meant leaving his wife, Jerusha, when she was just weeks away from delivering their sixth child.<sup>11</sup>

OLIVER'S FALLING OUT WITH the prophet went beyond disagreements over how to lead the church. Since

learning about plural marriage during his inspired translation of the Bible, Joseph had known that God sometimes commanded His people to practice the principle. Joseph had not acted on this knowledge immediately, but a few years later an angel of the Lord had commanded him to marry an additional wife.<sup>12</sup>

After receiving the commandment, Joseph struggled to overcome his natural aversion to the idea. He could foresee trials coming from plural marriage, and he wanted to turn from it. But the angel urged him to proceed, instructing him to share the revelation only with people whose integrity was unwavering. The angel also charged Joseph to keep it private until the Lord saw fit to make the practice public through His chosen servants.<sup>13</sup>

During the years Joseph lived in Kirtland, a young woman named Fanny Alger worked in the Smith home. Joseph knew her family well and trusted them. Her parents were faithful Saints who had joined the church in its first year. Her uncle, Levi Hancock, had marched in the Camp of Israel.<sup>14</sup>

Following the Lord's command, Joseph proposed marriage to Fanny with the help of Levi and the approval of her parents.<sup>15</sup> Fanny accepted Joseph's teachings and his proposal, and her uncle performed the ceremony.<sup>16</sup>

Since the time had not come to teach plural marriage in the church, Joseph and Fanny kept their marriage private, as the angel had instructed.<sup>17</sup> But rumors spread among some people in Kirtland.<sup>18</sup> By the fall of 1836, Fanny had moved away.<sup>19</sup>

Oliver was deeply critical of Joseph's relationship with Fanny, although how much he knew about it is unclear.<sup>20</sup> What Emma knew about the marriage is also uncertain. In time, Fanny married another man and lived apart from the main body of the Saints. Later in life, she received a letter from her brother asking about her plural marriage to Joseph.

"That is all a matter of our own," Fanny wrote back, "and I have nothing to communicate."<sup>21</sup>

IN THE FALL OF 1837, as Joseph and Sidney left for Far West, Wilford Woodruff was living as a missionary among fishermen and whalers on the Fox Islands in the northern Atlantic Ocean.<sup>22</sup> He and his companion, Jonathan Hale, had arrived on one of the weather-beaten islands in the final weeks of August. Neither of them knew much about the place, which was covered in shaggy evergreen trees, but they wanted to help fulfill Isaiah's prophecy that the Lord's people would gather from the islands of the sea.<sup>23</sup>

Before the two men left Kirtland, some of the dissenters had tried to discourage Jonathan from going to the Fox Islands, predicting that he would not baptize anyone there. He did not want to prove them right.<sup>24</sup>

Wilford and Jonathan had already been working together for several months. After leaving Kirtland, they had tried to share the gospel with Wilford's family in the state of Connecticut, but only his uncle, aunt, and

growth. He and Sidney could see that the area had room for the Saints to gather and grow without crowding neighbors and risking more violence. At the conference, Joseph announced their plans for expansion and postponed further work on the new temple until the Lord revealed His will concerning the building.

The prophet also called for a vote of the Saints in Far West to sustain church leaders. This time, Frederick Williams was removed from his office in the First Presidency, and Sidney Rigdon nominated Hyrum to fill the vacancy. The Saints approved the nomination.<sup>34</sup>

A few days later, Hyrum received the long-awaited news in a letter from Kirtland. But it was written by his brother Samuel, not Jerusha. “Dear Brother Hyrum,” it began, “this evening I sit down to write to you to perform a duty, knowing that every reasonable man wants to know exactly the state of his family.”

Hyrum’s eyes moved back and forth across the page. Jerusha had delivered a healthy baby girl, but the labor had left her weak. The Smith family tried to nurse her back to health, but she had passed away after a few days.<sup>35</sup>

HYRUM AND JOSEPH IMMEDIATELY began preparing to return to Kirtland. Before departing, Joseph met privately with Thomas and Oliver.<sup>36</sup> They talked about Oliver’s objections to Joseph’s marriage to Fanny Alger, but their differences remained unresolved.<sup>37</sup> Finally, Joseph

extended his hand to Oliver and said he wanted to drop any disagreement that had come between them. Oliver shook his hand, and they parted ways.<sup>38</sup>

Joseph, Sidney, and Hyrum arrived back in Kirtland a few weeks later. In the homes of relatives, Hyrum found his five children still mourning the sudden loss of their mother, who lay buried in a cemetery beside the temple. With his new responsibilities in the First Presidency, Hyrum had no idea how he would care for them on his own.<sup>39</sup>

Joseph encouraged his brother to marry again and recommended Mary Fielding.<sup>40</sup> She was kind, well educated, and committed to the church. She would be an excellent companion for Hyrum and a caring mother for his children.

Hyrum proposed to Mary a short time later. At thirty-six, she had received more than one marriage proposal in her life, but she had always declined them. Once, her mother had warned her never to marry a widower with children. If she agreed to marry Hyrum, she would instantly become a mother of six.

Mary considered the proposal and accepted. She already admired the Smith family, thought of Joseph as a brother, and respected Hyrum for his humility.<sup>41</sup> They were married the day before Christmas.<sup>42</sup>

MANY SAINTS WERE RELIEVED to have Joseph back in Kirtland, but any hope that he could restore harmony

followed Islam, the ordinance even specifically protected Muslims, who sometimes practiced polygamy.<sup>19</sup> Although politicians had disappointed him in the nation's capital, Joseph believed in and trusted the founding principles of the American republic to protect his right to live according to God's will.<sup>20</sup>

Still, he knew the practice of plural marriage would shock people, and he remained reluctant to teach it openly. While other religious and utopian communities often embraced different forms of marriage, the Saints had always preached monogamy. Most Saints—like most Americans—associated polygamy with societies they considered less civilized than their own.

Joseph himself left no record of his own views on plural marriage or his struggle to obey the commandment. Emma too disclosed nothing about how early she learned of the practice or what impact it had on her marriage. The writings of others close to them, however, make clear that it was a source of anguish for both of them.

Yet Joseph felt an urgency to teach it to the Saints, despite the risks and his own reservations. If he introduced the principle privately to faithful men and women, he could build strong support for it, preparing for the time when it could be taught openly. To accept plural marriage, people would have to overcome their prejudices, reconsider social customs, and exercise great faith to obey God when He commanded something so foreign to their traditions.<sup>21</sup>

Around the fall of 1840, Joseph had begun speaking with twenty-five-year-old Louisa Beaman about the practice. Louisa's family had been among the first to believe in the Book of Mormon and embrace the restored gospel. After her parents died, she had moved in with her older sister Mary and her sister's husband, Bates Noble, a veteran of the Camp of Israel.<sup>22</sup>

Bates was present during Joseph's discussions with Louisa about plural marriage.<sup>23</sup> "In revealing this to you, I have placed my life in your hands," Joseph told him. "Do not in an evil hour betray me to my enemies."<sup>24</sup>

Sometime later, Joseph proposed marriage to Louisa. She left no record of how she reacted to the offer, or when or why she accepted it. But on the evening of April 5, 1841, the day before general conference, Joseph met Louisa and Bates for the ceremony. Authorized by Joseph, Bates sealed the two together, repeating back the words of the ordinance as Joseph spoke them to him.<sup>25</sup>

THAT SUMMER, THE SAINTS rejoiced when John Bennett was appointed to an important position in the county court system. But others in the county were outraged, fearful of the Saints' growing political power. They saw John's appointment as an attempt by rival politicians to win the Saints' votes.<sup>26</sup>

Thomas Sharp, who was a member of the rival party, openly questioned John's qualifications for the position, his reputation, and the sincerity of his recent

Following the Lord's command, Joseph had also been sealed to other women since his marriage to Louisa Beaman. When teaching a woman about plural marriage, he would instruct her to seek her own spiritual confirmation that being sealed to him was right. Not every woman accepted his invitation, but several did.<sup>8</sup>

In Nauvoo, some Saints entered plural marriages for time and eternity, which meant their sealing would last through this life and the next. Like monogamous marriages, these marriages could involve sexual relations and having children. Other plural marriages were for eternity only, and the participants understood that their sealing would take effect in the next life.<sup>9</sup>

In some cases, a woman who was married for time to a disaffected Saint, or to a man who was not a member of the church, or even to a church member in good standing, could be sealed for eternity to another man. After the sealing ceremony, the woman continued to live with her current husband while anticipating the blessings of an eternal marriage and exaltation in the life to come.<sup>10</sup>

Early in 1842, Joseph proposed such a sealing to Mary Lightner, whose husband, Adam, was not a member of the church. During their discussion, Joseph told Mary that the Lord had commanded them to be sealed together for the next life.<sup>11</sup>

"If God told you that," Mary asked, "why does He not tell me?"

“Pray earnestly,” Joseph replied, “for the angel said to me you should have a witness.”<sup>12</sup>

JOSEPH’S INVITATION UNSETTLED MARY. In teaching her about plural marriage, Joseph had described the everlasting blessings of the eternal marriage covenant.<sup>13</sup> When Mary had married Adam, they had made promises to each other for this life only. Now she understood that she could not make eternal covenants with him unless he first agreed to be baptized by proper authority.<sup>14</sup>

Mary spoke to Adam about baptism, pleading with him to join the church. Adam told her that he respected Joseph but he did not believe in the restored gospel and would not be baptized.<sup>15</sup>

Longing for the blessings of eternal marriage, yet knowing she could not receive them with Adam, Mary wondered what to do. Doubts flooded her mind. Finally, she prayed that the Lord would send an angel to confirm to her that Joseph’s invitation was right.<sup>16</sup>

One night, while she was staying with her aunt, Mary saw a light appear in her room. Sitting up in bed, she was startled to see an angel, dressed in white, standing beside her. The angel’s face was bright and beautiful, with eyes that pierced her like lightning.

Frightened, Mary threw the covers over her head, and the angel departed.

The following Sunday, Joseph asked Mary if she had received an answer.

“I have not had a witness, but I have seen something I have never seen before,” Mary admitted. “I saw an angel and I was almost frightened to death. I did not speak.”

“That was an angel of the living God,” Joseph said. “If you are faithful you shall see greater things than that.”<sup>17</sup>

Mary continued to pray. She had seen an angel, which strengthened her faith in Joseph’s words. And she received other spiritual witnesses over the coming days that she could not deny or ignore. Adam would still be her husband in this life, but she wanted to ensure that she received all the blessings available to her in the life to come.<sup>18</sup>

She soon accepted Joseph’s invitation, and Brigham Young sealed them together for the next life.<sup>19</sup>

UNDER JOSEPH’S DIRECTION, JOHN Taylor and Wilford Woodruff began publishing the prophet’s translation of the book of Abraham in the March 1842 issues of the *Times and Seasons*. As the Saints read the record, they were thrilled to discover new truths about the creation of the world, the purpose of life, and the eternal destiny of God’s children. They learned that Abraham had possessed a Urim and Thummim and had spoken with the Lord face-to-face. They read that the earth and everything in it had been organized from existing materials to bring about the exaltation of the Father’s spirit children.<sup>20</sup>

together and ensured that their relationships continued beyond the grave.

Yet up to now no women and only a handful of men had received the endowment, and many Saints were still unaware of the eternal marriage covenant. Joseph clung to the promise that he would live to finish his mission, and he yearned for the temple to be completed so he could introduce the Saints to these ordinances. He continued to feel like time was running out.

Still he sprinted forward, urging the Saints to keep pace. He believed extraordinary blessings were available to those who received sacred ordinances and obeyed God's laws. Now, more than ever, his goal was to extend the divine knowledge he had received to a greater number of Saints, to help them make and keep covenants that would uplift and exalt them.<sup>3</sup>

THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER FROZE solid that winter, blocking the usual traffic of rafts and riverboats up and down the water. Snow fell often, and icy winds cut across the flatlands and over the bluff. Few Saints stayed outside long since many of them had only low shoes, thin jackets, and threadbare shawls to protect them from the cold and slush.<sup>4</sup>

As the end of winter approached, a bitter chill still hung in the air while Emily Partridge washed clothes and tended children at the Smith home. For more than two years, she and her older sister Eliza had been living

and working with the Smiths, not far from where their mother lived with her new husband.<sup>5</sup>

Emily belonged to the Relief Society and talked often with the women around her. Occasionally she would hear whispers about plural marriage. More than thirty Saints had quietly embraced the practice, including two of her stepsisters and one of her stepbrothers. Emily herself knew nothing about it firsthand.<sup>6</sup>

A year earlier, however, Joseph had mentioned that he had something to tell her. He had offered to write it in a letter, but she asked him not to do so, worried that it might say something about plural marriage. Afterward, she had regretted her decision and told her sister about the conversation, sharing what little she knew about the practice. Eliza appeared upset, so Emily said nothing more.<sup>7</sup>

With no one to confide in, Emily felt like she was struggling alone in deep water. She turned to the Lord and prayed to know what to do, and after some months, she received divine confirmation that she should listen to what Joseph had to say to her—even if it had to do with plural marriage.<sup>8</sup>

On March 4, a few days after her nineteenth birthday, Joseph asked to speak with Emily at the home of Heber Kimball. She set out as soon as she finished work, her mind ready to receive the principle of plural marriage. As expected, Joseph taught it to her and asked if she would be sealed to him. She agreed, and Heber performed the ordinance.<sup>9</sup>

Four days later, her sister Eliza was sealed to Joseph too. The sisters could now talk to each other and share what they understood and felt about the covenants they made.<sup>10</sup>

THE SAINTS CONTINUED TO defend Joseph against the accusations in John Bennett's exposé. Much of what John had written was embellished or flatly untrue, but his claim that Joseph had married multiple women was correct. Unaware of this fact, Hyrum Smith and William Law fiercely denied all of John's statements and unwittingly condemned the actions of Saints who obediently practiced plural marriage.<sup>11</sup>

This made Brigham Young uneasy. As long as members of the First Presidency remained unaware of the practice, he believed, their condemnation of polygamy could prevent Joseph and others from fulfilling the commandment of the Lord.

Joseph had already tried without success to teach his brother and William about plural marriage. Once, during a council meeting, he had barely broached the issue when William interrupted. "If an angel from heaven was to reveal to me that a man should have more than one wife," he said, "I would kill him!"

Brigham could see that Hyrum's and William's actions exhausted Joseph. One Sunday, as Brigham finished his evening chores, Joseph arrived unexpectedly at his door. "I want you to go to my house and preach," Joseph said.

him exact instructions on how to obey His word. As with other commandments and revelations, Joseph had to move forward according to his best judgment. Only many years later did Emily and others write recollections of Joseph's obedience to the principle and their own experiences with plural marriage in Nauvoo. Their accounts were often brief and fragmented.<sup>32</sup>

Because neither Joseph nor Emma wrote down how they felt about plural marriage, many questions are left unanswered. In her writings, Emily recorded some of their struggles with the practice. At times Emma rejected it completely while at other times reluctantly accepting it as a commandment. Torn between the Lord's mandate to practice plural marriage and Emma's opposition, Joseph sometimes chose to marry women without Emma's knowledge, creating distressing situations for everyone involved.<sup>33</sup>

In early May, Emma took Emily and Eliza aside and explained the principle of plural marriage to them.<sup>34</sup> She had told Joseph that she would consent to him being sealed to two additional wives as long as she could choose them, and she had chosen Emily and Eliza, apparently unaware that Joseph had already been sealed to them.<sup>35</sup>

Rather than mention her former sealing, Emily believed that keeping silent on the matter was the best thing for her to do.<sup>36</sup> A few days later, she and Eliza were again sealed to Joseph, this time with Emma as a witness.<sup>37</sup>