

Whiffing on Wifery: The Redefinition of ”Spiritual Wives”

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As the dust from the battles and exodus from Missouri seemed ready to settle on Latter-day Saint history, and the swampy lands of Commerce, Illinois, had been transformed into the more hospitable Nauvoo, a new haze of dirt and mud took to the air. In the summer of 1842 John Cook Bennett would undertake the task of bringing turmoil and ruin upon the city he had helped to build. He launched a barrage of accusations against Joseph Smith and the Church, charges that served to inflame Mormons, Masons and Missourians alike, and attached polygamy to Joseph and the Church in the minds of the public indefinitely. Bennett had been removed from the Church and had resigned as Mayor of Nauvoo. The predominant institutional explanation for his removal and the surrounding events has been as follows: John Bennett was seducing women using a system of promiscuous sex, which was called “spiritual wifery.” Bennett’s actions relied heavily on telling women that Joseph permitted the intercourse. Joseph Smith strongly denied spiritual wifery, the narrative goes, and he was not lying in his denials because he never did the things that Bennett had been doing. Instead, Joseph was teaching and practicing “celestial plural marriage” which was completely unrelated to Bennett’s spiritual wife system.¹

The error in this explanation is that it lacks historical support for the definition of “spiritual wifery” used within it. It is accepted

*Links in this paper are live at journalofmormonpolygamy.org.

¹Brian Hales, “Denying the Undeniable,” *Journal of Mormon History* 44, no. 3 (2018): 31, [LINK](#).

that Bennett was guilty of illicit intercourse with women in Nauvoo, and of using Joseph Smith's name to assist in his activities; but using the term "spiritual wifery" to describe these activities appears to be a more modern and undocumented assertion. The historical record directly contradicts the basis for assigning the term "spiritual wifery" to Bennett's behavior and excluding it from Joseph Smith's. The target of this paper is the investigation of what the idiom referenced when used in the early days of Mormon polygamy. The accuracy or sincerity of the historical actors is not the focus of this inquiry. The aim is narrower and more precise: to determine how the term "spiritual wife doctrine" was defined and used in 1840s Nauvoo. The details that challenge modern usage of the term necessitate contemplation on the rationale and etymological evolution behind such a definition.

In his paper "Denying the Undeniable," Brian Hales defines spiritual wifery as declaring that "a couple could experience sexual relations so long as they were kept completely secret. No ceremony was required and no obligations existed after the encounter."² Hales contends that Bennett introduced "spiritual wifery" and that it was a completely different system from Joseph Smith's "celestial plural marriage." Hales says that "it is easy to understand how early researchers might have concluded that Bennett was Joseph's confidant and that spiritual wifery was simply another name for Joseph's secret plural marriage teachings."³ Hales explains that people who conflate Bennett's practice and Joseph's plural marriage as both being "spiritual wifery" thus take Joseph's denials of spiritual wifery to be hypocritical and dishonest. By creating space between Joseph and the spiritual wife system, as Hales has done, Joseph becomes technically honest in his protests against the spiritual wife system. From the description given, not only is the spiritual wife system simple with very few pieces, but the explanation for Joseph appears to be simple as well.

²Hales, "Denying the Undeniable," 31.

³Hales, "Denying the Undeniable," 31. Gary Bergera has a similar view; he writes that Bennett was practicing a "competing version of Smith's plural marriage doctrine," but also that Bennett "assumed he was merely advocating the same celestial teaching he believed Smith was practicing." Gary James Bergera, "John C. Bennett, Joseph Smith, and the Beginnings of Mormon Plural Marriage in Nauvoo," *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 25 (2005): 73, [LINK](#).

This definition for “spiritual wifery” has become the modern default meaning for the term, understood as such among a wide variety of people. It is used in faithful sources, such as in the Church history book *Saints*,⁴ by LDS influencers,⁵ and in the Church’s own Gospel Topics Essays.⁶ Those who are antagonistic to the Church run unquestioningly with the same definition. One example of this comes from Mike at the LDS Discussions website, who takes issue with separating Smith’s “plural marriage” from Bennett’s “spiritual wifery”—Mike claims Bennett and his crew were engaging in “spiritual wifery” with Joseph’s permission and doing the same thing as Joseph, seducing women into illicit sexual relations.⁷ Dan Vogel follows suit when debunking the claims of those denying that Joseph Smith practiced polygamy.⁸ The phrase is used to describe Bennett’s activities even by those in other branches of the Restoration, such as Richard and Pamela Price, who were associated with the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, in their work, *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy* in a section entitled “Bennett Began His Spiritual Wifery Soon after Arriving in Nauvoo.”⁹ Even neutral, informational sources use this definition of the term. When accessing a catalog of images and transcripts of the testimonies of women, against Bennett and others, entitled “Testimonies in Nauvoo High Council cases 1842 May Regarding ‘Spiritual Wifery,’”¹⁰ one will find that the title is inaccurate and the phrase “spiritual wifery” does not appear in any of the actual contents.

⁴*Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days, Volume 1: The Standard of Truth 1815–1846* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 458, [LINK](#).

⁵Jacob Hansen, “Full Debate: Did Joseph Smith Practice Polygamy,” Thoughtful Faith Podcast, 42:58, [LINK](#), and 1:21:33, [LINK](#).

⁶“Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo,” Gospel Topics Essays, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [LINK](#).

⁷Mike, “Polygamy Overview, Part 3: Apologetics and Conclusion,” LDS Discussions, [LINK](#).

⁸Dan Vogel, “Gwendolyn Wyne on Nancy Rigdon—Response by Dan Vogel,” Dan Vogel YouTube channel, 35:37, July 5, 2025, 2:53, [LINK](#). “To be sure, Bennett was a scoundrel, for reasons beyond his attempt to practice what was called ‘spiritual wifery.’ However, in the opinion of many at his time, Joseph was not far behind him. Bennett was essentially cut off from the Church for engaging in the same behavior [secret sexual relations] as Joseph Smith.”

⁹Richard and Pamela Price, *Joseph Smith Fought Polygamy, Vol. 1* (Price Publishing Co., 2014), 72, [LINK](#).

¹⁰Testimonies in Nauvoo High Council Cases 1842 May Regarding “Spiritual Wifery,” MS 24557, Internet Archive, [LINK](#).

This interpretation of the phrase is so prevalent that many people using modern materials to research the polygamy situation in Nauvoo will hear the words “spiritual wives” and think of Bennett’s seduction scheme. This view of the term in question warps the discussion when referencing statements of figures from the past.

To examine this pervasive definition of “spiritual wives,” this study will begin at the Joseph Smith’s Polygamy website maintained by Brian Hales, in an article entitled “John C. Bennett’s Spiritual Wifery.”¹¹ Half of the six references to “spiritual wifery” on the page are in the navigation and title of the page. Two of these usages appear in the introductory heading for the page. The first one of those asserts that John Bennett had “been accused of practicing ‘spiritual wifery,’ which had nothing to do with Joseph Smith’s private teachings of celestial plural marriage.”¹² The second gives a clear definition to use in this investigation. It says, “Spiritual wifery was little more than illicit sexual relations kept secret.”¹³ The definition is expanded upon by the only occurrence of the phrase which is to be found in the main body of the article. It says, “In clandestine circles, [Bennett] whispered teachings of ‘spiritual wifery,’ which allowed any man and woman to experience sexual relations without a marriage ceremony, so long as they kept it secret.”¹⁴ The assertions given in this website float with no supporting references therein. These claims and the lack of sourcing lead to two important questions. First, was Bennett accused of “spiritual wifery” and what sources support the existence of the accusation? Second, what sources define the spiritual wife system and is this simple characterization of the system correct? It is well accepted that Bennett and several of his male friends in Nauvoo were accused of being engaged in illicit intercourse and that their methods required no marriage ceremony. Was the specific term “spiritual wifery” used contemporaneously to describe their behavior?

¹¹Brian Hales, “John C. Bennett’s Spiritual Wifery,” Joseph Smith’s Polygamy website, *LINK*.

¹²Hales, “John C. Bennett’s Spiritual Wifery.”

¹³Hales, “John C. Bennett’s Spiritual Wifery.”

¹⁴Hales, “John C. Bennett’s Spiritual Wifery.”

Hyrum Smith gave a summary of the Bennett situation in the August 1, 1842 issue of the *Times and Seasons*.¹⁵ Hyrum emphasized Bennett's call for secrecy and the assurance given to the women that any sin in the matter would be on Bennett's own head. That issue of the *Times and Seasons* was largely focused on the crimes of John Bennett and nothing resembling the term "spiritual wives" appears in its pages. Bennett's scheme, so far, is a definition without a popular term. Modern observers apply "spiritual wifery," but Hyrum, when describing Bennett's activities does not use this phrase.

There are several other sources from Nauvoo that detail Bennett's activities and offer rebuttals to his claims. If he was accused of spiritual wifery, these would be the most likely sources to find this accusation, and to find a definition for the expression. Bennett was disfellowshipped, on paper, on May 11, 1842, for adultery, after his promiscuous activities were discovered.¹⁶ Formal Church documentation of claims against Bennett begins with the Testimonies in Nauvoo High Council Cases gathered from May 21, through May 28, 1842.¹⁷ Again, contrary to the modern labeling and naming of the information, none of the testimonies against Bennett and his crew describe those actions as "spiritual wifery." Margaret and Matilda Nyman simply describe what Chauncey Higbee, who was among Bennett's co-conspirators, sought as "sexual intercourse."¹⁸ "Illicit intercourse" is a very common descriptor used throughout. Joseph Smith reported that Bennett wanted to remain in Nauvoo and hoped to rejoin the Church when he could, but when it became apparent that he did not have the confidence of the people any more he decided to leave town and speak against the Church. The *Nauvoo Wasp*, which was edited by Joseph's brother William Smith, printed Joseph's report with many details and affidavits

¹⁵Hyrum Smith, "Affidavit," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 19 (Aug. 1, 1842): 870-872, [LINK](#).

¹⁶Notice, 11 May 1842, 1, The Joseph Smith Papers (hereafter JSP), [LINK](#). On May 11, a statement was signed to disfellowship Bennett; on May 17 Bennett resigned as Mayor and voluntarily left the Church. Starting May 20, the Nauvoo High Council began investigating Chancy Hibgee, and much of the testimony also implicated Bennett. Bennett received the May 11 disfellowship notice on May 25. After a series of events, Bennett was excommunicated on June 18. See Andrew F. Smith, *The Sainly Scoundrel* (University of Illinois Press, 1997), 86-91.

¹⁷Testimonies in Nauvoo High Council Cases.

¹⁸Testimonies in Nauvoo High Council Cases, 1-6.

regarding the situation with Bennett on June 23, 1842.¹⁹ On August 8, the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge enumerated charges against Bennett, including the terms “seduction” and “illicit intercourse,” calling him “one of the most base and infamous adulterers, liars, and a general plunderer of female chastity.”²⁰ If, as the Joseph Smith’s Polygamy website claims, Bennett had “been accused of practicing ‘spiritual wifery,’” one might expect these documents to contain the phrase; they do not. Instead, the term is used by Bennett in his accusations against Joseph Smith and other Church leaders.

After the *Sangamo Journal* published many of Bennett’s accusatory letters, the *Times and Seasons* published the sprawling August 1, 1842, rebuttal dedicated to the topic.²¹ As already noted, the term is also not to be found anywhere within it. On October 1, 1842, the *Times and Seasons* printed something, using a term similar to “spiritual wife system” when they published signed statements from leading men in the church and from the leadership of the Relief Society. These statements declared that “J. C. Bennett’s ‘secret wife system’ is a disclosure of his own make,” and that they knew of “no other system of marriage in the Church” besides section 101 of the Doctrine and Covenants.²² This D&C section was printed in this issue immediately before these statements to show that “all marriages in this church of Christ of Latter Day Saints, should be solemnized in a public meeting” and that “one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband.”²³ These official doctrines of the Church directly opposed what Bennett had accused Church leaders of, under the name of the “spiritual wife doctrine.”²⁴ Bennett had been giving lectures on the secret wife system at Nauvoo²⁵ and this is most likely why the leading men in the Church and the leaders of the Relief Society used that term to defend themselves in response to Bennett in the *Times and Seasons* of October 1, 1842. Modern historians have taken this source out of context, as though Joseph and others

¹⁹ Joseph Smith, Letter to the Church and Others, June 23, 1842, JSP, [LINK](#).

²⁰ Nauvoo Masonic Lodge Minutebook, Aug. 8, 1842, MS 3436, CHL, [LINK](#).

²¹ *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 19 (Aug. 1, 1842), [LINK](#).

²² “On Marriage,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 23 (Oct. 1, 1842): 940, [LINK](#).

²³ “On Marriage,” 940.

²⁴ A similar shorter excerpt of the same section was released in the September 1, 1842 *Times and Seasons*, but without the full text of the section or the signed declarations. *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 21, (Sep. 1, 1842): 909, [LINK](#).

²⁵ *New York Daily Herald* 8, no. 240 (Aug. 31, 1842): 2, [LINK](#).

were using the term “secret wife system” to describe Bennett’s activities rather than using it as a direct response to Bennett’s accusations against them. Since the above-named sources would be the most probable places to find accusations of “spiritual wifery” aimed at Bennett, and since such accusations are not present, the first important question is unsatisfied. Bennett was not accused of “spiritual wifery.”

Joseph and Hyrum Smith spoke out strongly against the spiritual wife system. On October 15, 1843, in a Sunday sermon, Joseph declared being in favor of hard work and virtue and told the people to “stop th[e]ir spinni[n]g street yarn and talking about spiritual wives . . . I proclaim in the name of the Lord god. that I will have nothing but virtue & integrity (sic) and uprightness.”²⁶ On May 26, 1844, after William Law left Nauvoo and spoke out against Joseph, Joseph spoke against “spiritual wifeism” in a public speech, stating that he had been accused [by Law] of “spiritual wifeism,” saying that his accusers were upset that he “would not countenance such wickedness,” and declaring, “What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery; and having seven wives, when I can only find one.”²⁷

Hyrum spoke in an April 8, 1844, general conference against “spiritual wifery.” After hearing many reports and fielding questions from people who were curious about a new spiritual wife doctrine, he said:

almost every foolish man runs to [me], to enquire if [such] things are true, how many sp[iritual] wives a man may have. I know nothing ab[ou]t it; what he mi[gh]t call sp[iritual] wife, I should not know anything about it. . . . I am auth[orize]d to tell you from henceforth that any man who comes in & tells any such d[am]n fool doctrine, to come in to take away his license.²⁸

Hyrum further attributed “such stuff” to fools and said that “every Elder who teaches such stuff ought to have his nose wrung.”

²⁶Joseph Smith, Discourse, 15 October 1843, as Reported by Willard Richards, 5, JSP, *LINK*.

²⁷History, 1838–1856, volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844], 60, JSP, *LINK*.

²⁸Hyrum Smith, sermon delivered April 8, 1844, Nauvoo, IL, in Historian’s office General Church Minutes, 1839–1877, CR 100 318, LDS Church History Library (hereafter CHL), *LINK*.

He said they were “as empty as an open sepulchre” and that he “wo[ul]d call the D[evil] my Bro[ther] before such a man.” He emphatically stated, “it is lawful for a man to marry a wife, but it is unlawful to have more, & God has not com[manded] any one to have more.” He closed by declaring, “[n]o Sp[iritual] Wife [doctrine] ever originated with me . . . [g]et the Wife that God & your Country let you have.”²⁹

When hearing these denials of spiritual wifery, it will serve one well to question what exactly was being referenced. The second important question regarding defining the “spiritual wife system” comes to the forefront. What were they condemning so frequently and furiously? What went through the minds of their contemporary listeners when the designation “spiritual wives” was bandied about? From the denials, in print and in speech, it becomes apparent that this terminology originally applied to accusations against the Church and its leaders. The question of exactly when the definition of the term “spiritual wifery” changed, and began to be used to describe Bennett’s activities, invites further study but falls outside the scope of the present analysis since this analysis is focused on the original meaning of the term in Nauvoo. With the dearth of usage of the nomenclature in question in contemporary Church sources against Bennett, the evidentiary base must shift to the oppositional literature Bennett produced for a definition. Bennett is the principal source for uncovering the original meaning of the term. Although Bennett’s reliability as a witness has been widely questioned, that issue is not relevant for present purposes. What matters here is the terminology and conceptual framework he employed in his accusations.

Bennett launched his salvo of letters at Joseph and the Church beginning with his June 27, 1842, letter published in the July 8, 1842, issue of the *Sangamo Journal*.³⁰ From this first letter mention is made of “wives” being taken by Smith in secret. He claimed that Joseph had “attempted to seduce Miss Nancy Rigdon, the eldest single daughter of Sidney Rigdon, to submit to his hellish purposes, and become one of his clandestine wives under the new

²⁹Hyrum Smith, sermon delivered April 8, 1844.

³⁰John C. Bennett, “To the Editor of the Journal,” *Sangamo Journal* 10, no. 46 (Jul. 8, 1842): 2, col. 4, bottom, *LINK*.

dispensation.”³¹ Bennett also called upon a Miss Mitchell (possibly Pamela Michael) to tell what she knew of “the PROPHET’S SECRET WIVES.”³² He also claimed that “hundreds of cases can be instanced” around these secret wives, and he claimed that he had the evidence of Joe’s licentiousness. Bennett also asserted that Smith and others had broken customary Masonic procedures and that Smith had instituted a lodge of his own called “ORDER.” Part of this lodge was to take an oath and obligation by saying, “*I furthermore promise and swear that I will never touch a daughter of Adam UNLESS SHE IS GIVEN ME OF THE LORD.*”³³

Bennett’s second letter of July 2, 1842, was published in the July 15, 1842, edition of the *Sangamo Journal*.³⁴ It contains Bennett’s account of Joseph locking him in a room at the lodge and holding him at gunpoint. Bennett claimed that Joseph said that the peace of Joseph’s family required that Bennett sign an affidavit and make a statement “exonerating [Joseph] from all participation whatever, either directly or indirectly, in word or deed, in the *spiritual wife* doctrine, or private intercourse with females in general.”³⁵ Here in this letter is the first appearance of the phrase in question. In his quote of Joseph, Bennett makes a distinction between general private intercourse and the spiritual wife doctrine. This letter explains that Sarah Pratt was to be one of Joseph’s spiritual wives, “for the Lord had given her to him.” Joseph is quoted by Bennett as saying directly to Sarah, “Sister Pratt, the Lord has given you to me as one of my spiritual wives.”³⁶ Bennett then stated that Joseph said he had also been given Nancy Rigdon to wife by the Lord. Joseph’s reported words to Bennett were: “If you will assist me in procuring Nancy as one of my spiritual wives, I will give you five hundred dollars, or the best lot on Main Street.”³⁷ Bennett claimed that Joseph said that if the Lord permitted it,

³¹Bennett, “To the Editor,” 2, col. 5, bottom, emphasis in original.

³²Bennett, “To the Editor,” 2, col. 5, bottom, emphasis in original.

³³Bennett, “To the Editor,” col. 6, top, emphasis in original.

³⁴John C. Bennett, “Further Mormon Developments!! 2d Letter from Gen. Bennett,” *Sangamo Journal* 10, no. 47 (Jul. 15, 1842): 2, cols. 3–6, *LINK*.

³⁵Bennett, “Further Mormon Developments”, col. 3, middle, emphasis in original. Bennett had already produced a May 17, 1842, affidavit exonerating Joseph of the earlier accusations he had made, and this letter was now claiming it had been done under duress. See Joseph Smith, “Letter to the Church and Others,” June 23, 1842.

³⁶Bennett, “Further Mormon Developments”, col. 4, middle.

³⁷Bennett, “Further Mormon Developments”, col. 5, top.

then, morally, it was as correct as having a legal wife to make Nancy a spiritual wife.

As the virtuous hero of his story, Bennett declined the previously mentioned offer of money and property. This letter calls on Martha Brotherton to tell of how she was locked up in a room and proposed to. Bennett also told of Joseph asking Melissa Schindle to engage in “illicit intercourse” with him, but he was rejected and slept with widow Fuller instead.³⁸ In this section of the letter there is no mention of becoming a “spiritual wife,” but instead Bennett claimed that Joseph was using seductive methods like those Bennett had used on women in Nauvoo.

Bennett’s third letter, written on July 4, 1842, was printed in the same issue of the *Sangamo Journal* as his second letter. He writes about a lodge that Joseph had created and named “ORDER.” The initiates to this lodge were brought in naked to prove that their genitals were intact and not too mutilated as required in Deuteronomy 23:1. They were then clothed and had ointment poured over them. They then took an oath, which Bennett supplied part of in his first letter. Bennett said that the oath was given “in order to prepare them for the SPIRITUAL WIFE operations, and save Joe from public disgrace and infamy.”³⁹ Also in this letter Bennett promised to release a book entitled *The History of the Saints*.

The fourth letter of the series from July 15, 1842, makes no mention of spiritual wives and contains no new related accusations.⁴⁰ That letter was followed in the same newspaper issue by Bennett’s accusations that Joseph had told Porter Rockwell to kill Governor Boggs of Missouri. Immediately after that in the same paper is found the writing of Martha Brotherton. Her story contains no mentions of “spiritual wifery,” but she includes what may be relevant details to the system. Brotherton claimed that about three weeks after her arrival in Nauvoo, Brigham Young and Heber Kimball brought her to Joseph’s store and offices. She said

³⁸Bennett, “Further Mormon Developments,” col. 5, bottom.

³⁹John C. Bennett, “Gen. Bennett’s third Letter,” *Sangamo Journal* 10, no. 47 (Jul. 15, 1842): 2, col. 6, bottom. *LINK*, emphasis in original.

⁴⁰John C. Bennett, “Gen. Bennett’s 4th Letter,” *Sangamo Journal* 10, no. 48 (Jul. 22, 1842): 2, cols. 4–5, *LINK*.

she was asked by Kimball if she was “ready to take counsel,”⁴¹ and she said Brigham Young asked what she would say to him being her husband, and that Joseph had “a revelation from God that it was lawful and right for a man to have two wives.”⁴² If she accepted Brigham then she would gain entry to the celestial kingdom, and Joseph would perform the ceremony that very same day.

The fifth letter from Bennett, dated July 23, 1842, contains nothing of interest to this topic. It was printed in the same issue of the *Sangamo Journal* from August 19, 1842, which contains the August 3, 1842, sixth letter from Bennett.⁴³ This sixth letter contains what has been termed the “Happiness Letter.” This letter, which Bennett claimed was written to Nancy Rigdon by Joseph Smith dictating to a scribe, sets forth the idea that something which is “wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another.” It speaks of Solomon gaining every desire of his heart, even that which those who do not understand the order of heaven would consider abominable. After the “Happiness Letter” concludes in this newspaper, Bennett said that to understand the letter “I refer you to the spiritual wife doctrine heretofore alluded to, and to Miss Brotherton’s letter.—You will see that ALL things that God gives and sanctions by special revelation through the Holy Joe, is LAWFUL and RIGHT.”⁴⁴ Bennett asked the readers to read the letter carefully and all its “allusions, and compare it with the former disclosures, and you will see that it is pregnant with the ‘spiritual doctrine’ taught by Joe to his cloistered, chambered, and cyprian maids and madams in his female LODGE or Mormon Inquisition.”⁴⁵ Bennett’s letter ends by pointing out that he will explain that last part, in full, in his upcoming book, *The History of the Saints*.

The spiritual wife doctrine laid out by Bennett against Joseph has already been shown to be drastically different than what was previously described by Hales with the summation, “Spiritual wifery was little more than illicit sexual relations kept secret.”⁴⁶ This

⁴¹John C. Bennett, “Miss Brotherton’s Statement,” *Sangamo Journal* 10, no. 48 (Jul. 22, 1842): 2, col. 6, *LINK*.

⁴²Bennett, “Miss Brotherton’s Statement, 2, col. 6, bottom.

⁴³John C. Bennett, “6th Letter From Gen. Bennett. Jos Smith’s Letter to Miss Rigdon,” *Sangamo Journal* 10, no. 52 (Aug. 19, 1842): 2, col. 7, *LINK*.

⁴⁴Bennett, “6th Letter,” 2, col. 7, bottom, emphasis in original.

⁴⁵Bennett, “6th Letter,” 2, col. 7, bottom, emphasis in original.

⁴⁶Hales, “John C. Bennett’s Spiritual Wifery.”

has been shown by reviewing the six letters that Bennett wrote from June 27, 1842, through August 3, 1842. An examination of Bennett's full and expanded exposé in *History of the Saints; or, an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* will give an even deeper understanding of what Joseph and Hyrum were publicly combatting.

In *History of the Saints*, Bennett accuses Joseph of taking inspiration from the East in creating a system of polygamy and concubinage.⁴⁷ Bennett gives many examples of the polygamists of yesteryear and then describes Joseph Smith's methods of organizing his women and those of others in the Church. He describes the Mormon seraglio as a grand lodge, like the Freemasons, having "three distinct orders, or degrees."⁴⁸

The first and lowest degree was named by Bennett as "The Cyprian Saints." It was comprised of those of the Mormon females who had strayed from virtue without permission from the holy prophet. An errant woman would be brought before the members of the Female Relief Society, who were assigned to watch for such women, and she would be put under an inquisition, being questioned and threatened until she confessed. She was then pronounced as a "Cyprian," a term associated with prostitution, and banished from the Relief Society. She was given the White Veil and word was spread amongst those within the inner circle of church members. She was then required to spend her days gratifying the vilest appetites of priests and elders of the Church.⁴⁹

The middle level of this lodge was called "The Chambered Sisters of Charity." These were the women who "indulge their sensual propensities, without restraint, whether married or single, by the express permission of the Prophet."⁵⁰ Bennett described that whenever a man and woman, of any marital status, "become enamored" with one another, the "loving brother goes to Holy Joe, and states the case." According to Bennett, the prophet would then check his "peep-stone" to see what the Lord wanted. Bennett noted that if Joseph wanted the lady for himself then the Lord would decline the request. Bennett claimed that if the Lord was

⁴⁷John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints; or, An Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), 218, *LINK*.

⁴⁸Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 220.

⁴⁹Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 220-21.

⁵⁰Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 221.

feeling generous, “the reply permits the parties to follow the bent of their inclinations, which they do without further ceremony, though with a strict observance of secrecy.” Bennett elaborated that these Chambered Sisters of Charity were much more numerous than the Cyprians, and far more respected. Bennett called them “Saints of the Green Veil.”⁵¹

The third and highest order of this organization was titled by Bennett “The Consecratees of the Cloister, or Cloistered Saints.”⁵² Up until now from these writings, in this lodge laid out by Bennett, no mention has been made of “spiritual wives.” Nothing in these degrees has yet been called by anything resembling the term in question. To this point in his text, the lower degrees still seem to be part of the whole “spiritual doctrine” mentioned by Bennett previously, but in explaining this highest degree of the Harem, Bennett revealed the true definition of spiritual wife:

This degree is composed of females, whether married or unmarried, who, by an express grant and gift of God, through his Prophet the Holy Joe, are set apart and consecrated to the use and benefit of particular individuals, as *secret, spiritual wives*. They are the *Saints of the Black Veil*, and are accounted the special favorites of Heaven, and the most honorable among the daughters of Jacob. Their spiritual husbands are altogether from the most eminent members of the Mormon Church, and participate in the holiness of their consecrated wives.⁵³

Under the rules of this degree, and like the Green Veil, when a man with enough priesthood experiences a mutual flame with a woman, he would ask the prophet if “it would be right and proper for him to take unto himself the said woman for his spiritual wife. It is no obstacle whatever to this spiritual marriage if one or both of the parties should happen to have a husband or wife.”⁵⁴ Here in the highest level of the lodge is finally found the “spiritual wife” along with the “spiritual husband” in a “spiritual marriage.” It

⁵¹Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 222.

⁵²Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 223.

⁵³Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 223, emphasis in original.

⁵⁴Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 223.

is important to point out that both men and women could have multiple spouses as Bennett placed both polygyny and polyandry into this marital framework. This spiritual marriage also requires a special marriage ceremony, performed in the lodge room with each spiritual fiancé kneeling at an altar. The man and woman were then put under secrecy about the ceremony and agreed to forfeit their lives if they disclosed anything. When each had agreed, they were then consecrated as husband and wife according to the laws of Zion.⁵⁵ When they agreed again, they were then anointed with oil and given blessings, including having the peace of heaven in time and in eternity. They then arose and a robe was wrapped on them. They were pronounced one flesh and “consider[ed] themselves as united in spiritual marriage.”⁵⁶

To emphasize further, Bennett’s book then lists several examples of spiritual wives using their initials:

In concluding this subject, however, I will semi-state two or more cases, among the vast number, where Joe Smith was privately married to his spiritual wives—in the case of Mrs: A**** S****, by Apostle Brigham Young; and in that of Miss L***** B*****, by Elder Joseph Bates Noble. Then there are the cases of Mrs. B****, Mrs. D****, Mrs. S*****, Mrs. G****, Miss B****, etc. etc.⁵⁷

This statement is often used as evidence that Joseph married Agnes Smith, Louisa Beaman, Presendia Buell, Elizabeth Durfee, and Patty Sessions. Various other names have been slipped into place here as well, such as Jane Gully, Mary Bosley, and Sarah Bapson. A search for this Bennett reference on Brian Hales’ Joseph Smith’s Polygamy website will yield several results in which this example of “spiritual wives” is used as supporting evidence.⁵⁸ One would not expect these to be used as evidence for marriage or sealing since they are listed as “spiritual wives,” as that is what people now say Bennett was doing; and Joseph denied having any involvement in spiritual wifery. If spiritual wifery has no ceremony and is

⁵⁵Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 224.

⁵⁶Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 224.

⁵⁷Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 256.

⁵⁸Brian C. Hales, Joseph Smith’s Polygamy, search results for “Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 256,” [LINK](#).

little more than illicit intercourse kept secret, then these women, as spiritual wives, should not be in the list of Joseph Smith's wives. Thus, a large part of the distortion caused by the errant definition of "spiritual wives" should now be apparent.

With mention of sealing it is important to note that eternal marriage, as a doctrine reported by Bennett, post-dates Bennett's time in Nauvoo. On October 8, 1843, Bennett wrote to James Edwards about a new doctrine of "marrying for eternity."⁵⁹ He says that "this '*marrying for eternity*' is not the '*Spiritual Wife doctrine*' noticed in my Exposé, but is an entirely new doctrine established by special revelation. The '*SPIRITUAL WIVES, for time!* and the '*CELESTIAL WIVES for eternity!*'"⁶⁰ The separation between the two teachings could be important when addressing Joseph Smith's later denials. When Brian Hales states that Smith never denied "celestial plural marriage," his claim is accurate in a limited sense. The phrase itself belongs to later theological vocabulary and cannot be documented in Joseph's Nauvoo-era statements. Secondly, in a conceptual manner, Joseph never denied Bennett's accusation of "celestial wives" published in the *Hawk Eye* on December 7, 1843, but in the *Hawk Eye*, though Bennett did use the plural, "celestial wives," he did not try to specifically name extra wives Joseph may have married this way; he claimed that Joseph had "lately been married to his present wife Emma, *for eternity as well as for time.*"⁶¹ And Joseph admitted to teaching about marrying "in view of Eternity (sic)."⁶²

After reviewing what Bennett unmistakably laid out as the "spiritual wife doctrine," a gathering of the pieces of what Bennett articulated as part of this system is called for. Each of the following is a key component to the spiritual wife doctrine which is described in Bennett's exposés:

1. Differentiation is made between intercourse in general and being a spiritual wife.⁶³

⁵⁹John C. Bennett, "Letter from Gen. Bennett" to James G. Edwards," *Hawk Eye* (Burlington, IA) 5, no. 18 (Dec. 7, 1843): 1, col. 5, *LINK*.

⁶⁰Bennett, "Letter" to James Edwards, 1, col. 5, emphasis in original.

⁶¹Bennett, "Letter" to James Edwards, 1, col. 5, emphasis in original.

⁶²Minutes, 10 June 1844, 25, JSP, *LINK*.

⁶³Bennett, "Further Mormon Developments," 2.

2. God's permission makes it right.⁶⁴
3. God's permission is made known by taking counsel from a leader.⁶⁵
4. The "Happiness Letter" "is pregnant with the 'spiritual [wife] doctrine.'"⁶⁶
5. Ceremony with nudity and anointing prepares members for spiritual wife operations.⁶⁷
 - (a) Men covenant to only touch daughters of Adam given them by the Lord.⁶⁸
6. Females are also part of a structure copying the Masonic lodges.⁶⁹
 - (a) There are three progressing degrees in the system.
 - (b) Level one is for those guilty of unauthorized intercourse. It involves priests and elders freely using the women for gratification.⁷⁰
 - (c) Level two is for mutual, consensual, and authorized intercourse. It involves apostles, high priests, and elders.⁷¹
 - (d) Level three is spiritual wives and spiritual husbands in spiritual marriage. It involves apostles, high priests, elders, and scribes.⁷²
 - (e) Secret ceremonies are only for the highest in the church.⁷³
7. The spiritual wife doctrine allows both polygyny and polyandry.
8. The blessings of Jacob are given.

⁶⁴Bennett, "6th Letter," 2, col. 7.

⁶⁵Bennett, "Miss Brotherton's Statement, 2, col. 6.

⁶⁶Bennett, "6th Letter," 2, col. 7.

⁶⁷Bennett, "To the Editor of the Journal," 2, col. 6.

⁶⁸Bennett, "To the Editor of the Journal," 2, col. 6.

⁶⁹Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 220.

⁷⁰Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 221.

⁷¹Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 221-222.

⁷²Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 223-224.

⁷³Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 223-224.

9. A marriage ceremony is involved.⁷⁴
 - (a) It is performed in the lodge.
 - (b) The women have veils.
 - (c) It is done with the couple kneeling at an altar.
 - (d) They covenant secrecy.
 - (e) They agree to the penalty of forfeiting their lives.
 - (f) They must bow and agree before each next phase of the ceremony.
 - (g) They are anointed.
 - (h) They are consecrated.
 - (i) A robe is placed on them.
 - (j) They are given blessings in time and eternity.
10. Duties and privileges are the same as in any other marriage.⁷⁵
11. Examples of spiritual wives are (presumably) Agnes Smith, Louisa Beaman, etc.⁷⁶
12. Those who accept and live the doctrine receive passage to the celestial kingdom.⁷⁷
13. Eternal marriage is not the same as the spiritual wife doctrine.⁷⁸

These are the components of the structure and system which Joseph, Hyrum, and other early Church leaders spoke against and denounced as foolish and evil. Considering the above list, it does seem apparent that John Cook Bennett may have been the first to openly write details of the early iterations of Latter-day Saint temple rituals; from the initiatory to the endowment to the marriage, pieces of each are demonstrated in his accounts. With a more correct understanding of the “spiritual wife doctrine” laid out, a modern Latter-day Saint may be uneasy with historical denials of

⁷⁴Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 223.

⁷⁵Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 224.

⁷⁶Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 256.

⁷⁷Bennett, “Miss Brotherton’s Statement,” 2, col. 6.

⁷⁸Bennett, “Letter” to James Edwards, 1, col. 5.

a system that shares similarities with current rites.⁷⁹ Explanations for denials are highly speculative and not undertaken here. There are major discrepancies between the two; however, the overlaps between the system Bennett presented, and accusations made about early Utah LDS practices are difficult to ignore.⁸⁰ This is just one example of an aspect of Church history which could be explored further, keeping the contemporary Nauvoo definition in mind.

Reviewing mentions of the spiritual wife doctrine from Nauvoo is clarifying once the term is placed in its original setting. When it is recognized that the label was directed at Joseph Smith and the Church, rather than describing a private scheme devised by John Bennett for sexual license, the sources read differently. In Bennett's published accusations, "spiritual wifery" functioned as a sweeping charge. It gathered secret marriage, prophetic authority, and sexual immorality into a single inflammatory phrase meant to attack the Church in the most damaging way possible.

What Bennett was himself doing with women in Nauvoo could conceivably resemble the Cyprian or Chambered Sisters of Charity levels of this "spiritual wife doctrine." Yet key elements he attributed to the Church's practice are absent in the evidence surrounding his activities. There is no indication that the women involved with Bennett underwent any formal inquiry, nor that Smith had used revelatory means to designate them as divinely appointed partners. Without those elements, it becomes difficult to fit Bennett neatly into the very system he claimed to expose.

Attempts to distance Joseph Smith from the label "spiritual wifery" by redefining the term create further problems. Doing so shifts the historical meaning of the phrase. In the 1840s the term was used publicly as a charge against Smith himself. To redefine it in order to exclude him is to distort lines of inquiry about how the term was heard and understood in Nauvoo.

Plural marriage participants who had lived in Nauvoo did not uniformly reject the terminology when it was applied to their own practice. Emily D. Partridge Young said that in Nauvoo "the holy order of celestial marriage was in its infancy; it was not taught

⁷⁹Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 154, *LINK*.

⁸⁰J. H. Beadle, *Life in Utah; or, The Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1870), 494, *LINK*; Jonathan Stapley, *Holiness to the Lord: Latter-day Saint Temple Worship* (Oxford University Press: 2025).

publicly, consequently the people generally did not know of it. . . . Spiritual wives, as we were then termed, were not very numerous in those days, and a spiritual baby was a rarity indeed.”⁸¹ Likewise, Heber Kimball in an 1855 general conference address said, “If you oppose what is called the ‘spiritual wife doctrine,’ the Patriarchal Order, which is of God, that course will corrode you with a spirit of apostacy, and you will go overboard.”⁸²

Nearly thirty years after Kimball’s statement, his daughter Helen Mar Whitney reflected on the Nauvoo period, noting that “at that time spiritual wife was the title by which every woman who entered into this order was called, for it was taught and practiced as a spiritual order and not a temporal one, though it was always spoken of sneeringly by those who did not believe in it.”⁸³ President John Taylor, in an 1854 account of the death of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, likewise recalled “a time that was particularly trying to the people—new doctrine of ~~what is called~~ (sic) what used to be called then ‘spiritual wifery’ (and the doctrine was first introduced of men having more wives than one).”⁸⁴ In addition to affirming that plural marriage was referred to as “spiritual wifery,” Taylor suggested that John Bennett had drawn upon elements of Joseph’s teachings to corrupt and destroy both himself and others. Taylor’s remarks are precise: while he acknowledged that Bennett was influenced by the doctrine, he did not equate Bennett’s illicit system with “spiritual wifery.” Rather, he applied the term to the Saints’ own marital practices. Such usage demonstrates that contemporaries of Joseph Smith did not hesitate to associate the phrase “spiritual wifery” with Church teachings.⁸⁵

⁸¹Emily D. Partridge Young, “Pioneer Day,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12, no. 5 (Aug. 1, 1883): 37, [LINK](#).

⁸²Heber C. Kimball, “Iniquity, Etc.,” *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 3 (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1856), 125, [LINK](#).

⁸³Helen Mar Whitney, *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), 16, [LINK](#).

⁸⁴LaJean P. Carruth and Mark L. Staker, “John Taylor’s June 27, 1854, Account of the Martyrdom,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, Iss. 3, Article 3, 43, [LINK](#).

⁸⁵Richard Van Wagoner agrees that “[t]hough “spiritual wifery” in Mormon usage much later came to be equated with promiscuous intercourse or “free love,” this was evidently not the contemporary Nauvoo meaning. “Polygamy,” “spiritual wifery,” “spiritual marriage,” and “plural marriage” were all apparently interchangeable in Mormon and non-Mormon contexts during the early 1840s.” Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 39-40, fn 5, [LINK](#).

The initial question, whether contemporaries accused John C. Bennett of "spiritual wifery," cannot be sustained on the basis of the available sources. No contemporary documentation has been identified that clearly applies that label to Bennett himself. This absence does not demonstrate that he escaped criticism for sexual misconduct. It does, however, weaken the claim that he was publicly charged with "spiritual wifery" in the same sense that it was directed against the Church. More broadly, the phrase "spiritual wifery" has often been misapplied in later retellings, resulting in confusion about its historical meaning. A careful reading of Bennett's own writings, which serve as the principal source for the terminology, shows that the system he described included graded levels culminating in what he portrayed as a higher, "cloistered" order. When these descriptions are compared with the later articulation of celestial plural marriage in nineteenth-century Utah, notable structural similarities appear. This comparison does not collapse the two systems into one, but it does call into question sharp distinctions that are sometimes drawn between Bennett's accusations and the form of plural marriage later taught in the Utah church.

Modern usage has frequently separated "spiritual wife doctrine" from teachings attributed to Joseph Smith, treating the former as more relevant to Bennett's practices, and as mere slander when applied to Joseph Smith, and the latter, Joseph Smith's teachings, as a distinct theological development. Such a separation risks imposing later categories onto earlier controversies. If in the 1840s the term was publicly directed at Smith's system, then redefining it to exclude him reshapes the historical record. Recovering the contemporary meaning of "spiritual wifery" is therefore necessary for a clearer understanding of early Latter-day Saint polygamy and the language through which it was debated and defended.

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