

”Unless the Lord Directs Otherwise:” Willard Richards and the Origins of Divine Reversal in Early Mormon Polygamy

Adrian Croft

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In 1891, Missouri Senator George Graham Vest observed, “[H]istory is written by the victors and framed according to the prejudices and bias existing on their side.”¹ In the case of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it was not conquerors but clerks who became the victors—those who wrote the history became its interpreters. It is well known that very few extant historical documents are written in the hand of Joseph Smith Jr., the Church’s founding prophet. Therefore, much of what is known about his life, teachings, and revelations has been mediated through the scribes tasked with recording them.²

Among these scribes, no figure wielded more influence than Willard Richards. As Joseph Smith’s private secretary, recorder, and eventual Church Historian, Richards held an unparalleled position of textual authority. He recorded Smith’s journals, transcribed revelations, drafted letters, and later oversaw the construction of the *Manuscript History of the Church*.³ But Richards was not merely a passive transcriber. His editorial fingerprints, visible in insertions, exceptions, and retrospective harmonizations, suggest that he had a profound impact on an evolving narrative shaped not only by memory but by institutional priorities and personal theology. This

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

¹“Vest on Secession,” *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Reflector*, Aug. 27, 1891, 1, [LINK](#).

²Ronald O. Barney, *Joseph Smith: History, Methods, and Memory* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 52.

³Barney, *Joseph Smith*, 76.

study examines how doctrinal development, whether intentional or unconscious, passed through clerical mediation during periods when the historical record was being stabilized.

This paper investigates Willard Richards's role in shaping early Latter-day Saint doctrine and collective memory through scribal mediation. It focuses on the emergence of what may be termed the "divine reversal" framework, a theological logic introducing conditions under which otherwise prohibited actions could become divinely sanctioned. In essence, the doctrine asserts that a specific, present revelation from God permits deviation or exception from standing moral law, transforming what would otherwise constitute a sin, such as adultery, into something lawful and righteous.

This discussion centers on the radical claim that what is ordinarily defined as "wrong" or "bad" can become "right" or "good," or that a standing "Thou shalt not" can be converted into a binding "Thou shalt." While instances in which scriptural texts are employed to justify or tolerate otherwise questionable actions are acknowledged, the focus is on an evolving doctrine in which absolute moral prohibitions are explicitly reversed, elevated, and sanctified by appeal to divine command. The "divine reversal" framework thus transforms moral law from having an absolute boundary into being radically conditional, rendering righteousness contingent upon prophetic authorization or immediate revelation rather than upon uncompromising divine commandments grounded in universal morality.

This study recognizes that Joseph Smith's teachings included cases in which a later revelation set aside a prior command in certain limited situations, such as Nephi's slaying of Laban, Abraham's deception for survival, and the justifications for righteous warfare recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 98. However, each of these examples presupposes the continued validity of moral law while allowing for constrained exceptions. What is absent from Joseph Smith's verified sermons and public revelations is a doctrine in which moral prohibitions are positively reversed into Godly principles. The above examples do not transform wickedness into righteousness, or specific exemptions into institutionalized practices. This distinction between limited justification and divine reversal—defined here as the sanctification of moral prohibitions—is central to this study. While Joseph Smith's teachings, at

times, provided specific accommodations within moral law, the far more radical claim that moral law itself can be inverted by divine command is conspicuously absent from Joseph Smith's public teachings, which consistently maintain moral absolutes even while allowing for limited exceptions.

Yet this reversal-based logic does appear repeatedly in documents penned or edited by Willard Richards and attributed to Joseph Smith, suggesting that its public articulation or systematization could have originated within Richards's immediate clerical circle instead of directly under the direction of Smith. Although the logic of divine reversal later extended beyond plural marriage (and those effects will be touched on briefly in this paper) the focus of this study remains the emergence and normalization of polygamy as the first sustained application of moral reversal theology. By treating polygamy as a revealing case study in editorial influence, this paper explores how scribal authority functioned as a theological force in the construction of early Mormon doctrine and institutional identity.

This study does not attempt to resolve the longstanding debate over Joseph Smith's private teachings or practices regarding plural marriage, nor does it seek to disprove Smith's involvement in plural marriage altogether. Rather, the focus of this paper is historiographical and textual: it examines how the idea of divine reversal entered the written record and how its appearance is connected to identifiable scribes who recorded or edited these texts. Whether Smith privately taught plural marriage or not, the surviving documents show that its reversal-based justification appears most clearly in texts preserved, expanded, or systematized by Willard Richards. The question addressed here is therefore not whether plural marriage existed in Nauvoo, but how the doctrinal rationale used to justify it became embedded within the historical record.

Willard Richards

Willard Richards was born on June 24, 1804, in Hopkinton, Massachusetts. A trained Thomsonian physician, he first learned of Mormonism in 1835 and by late 1836 had come to Kirtland, Ohio, to investigate the Church. On December 31, 1836 he was baptized

into the Church of the Latter Day Saints by his own cousin, Apostle Brigham Young. (Richards later recalled reading Parley Pratt's *Voice of Warning* and corresponding with Brigham Young before his baptism.) An eager convert, he was ordained an elder in early 1837 and quickly sent on missions.⁴

After a brief mission to the Eastern United States, Richards served four years (1837–1841) in the British Mission, where he worked alongside Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young. In England he helped edit the periodical *Millennial Star*, gaining experience in publishing and record-keeping. Richards was ordained an apostle by Brigham Young on April 14, 1840, in Preston, England. He returned to the U.S. in 1841 and, according to Richards, Smith soon praised him as “a man after [my] own heart” whom he could trust with all church business.⁵

Relationship with Brigham Young

Willard Richards and Brigham Young were not only first cousins but also close collaborators throughout their lives. Young played a pivotal role in Richards's conversion to the Church, introducing him to the Book of Mormon and to the Saints in Kirtland.⁶ Their bond deepened during their shared mission in England, where they worked closely in advancing Church efforts abroad. Upon Richards's return to Nauvoo in 1841, he initially lived with Brigham Young and later with Joseph Smith—an arrangement that further solidified his place within the Church's inner leadership circle.⁷ Throughout the 1840s, Richards remained one of Young's most trusted allies. He supported the Quorum of the Twelve's

⁴Willard Richards, “Willard Richards—Biography,” Joseph Smith Papers, hereafter JSP, *LINK*.

⁵Jennetta Richards, Jennetta Richards collection, [7], MS 23042, LDS Church History Library, hereafter CHL, *LINK*.

⁶Claire Noall, *Intimate Disciple: A Portrait of Willard Richards, Apostle to Joseph Smith—Cousin of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1957), 104, 111–14, *LINK*; Lawrence R. Flake, “Willard Richards,” in *Prophets and Apostles of the Last Dispensation* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 247–49, *LINK*; Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball: An Apostle, the Father and Founder of the British Mission* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 143–44, *LINK*.

⁷Richards lived with Brigham Young from August 1841 to January 12, 1842 after which he moved in with Joseph Smith until he left in late June 1842 to collect his family from the east; “Willard Richards as Historian,” *BYU Studies* 19, no. 3 (1979): 283–84, *LINK*.



Willard Richards, from Daguerreotype collection, circa 1850s-1860s, PH 100, LDS Church History Library. Digital historical photo reconstruction by Jonathan Streeter.

succession claims following Smith's death, and in 1847, Brigham Young appointed Richards as his Second Counselor in the First Presidency, a formal recognition of their enduring personal and, as will be shown, ideological, alliance.⁸

Church Historian and Secretary

In December 1841, Richards became Joseph Smith's private secretary and the recorder for the Nauvoo Temple, likely due to

⁸"Succession of Church Leadership," Church History Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints website, [LINK](#).

his education and administrative skill. On December 21, 1842, Joseph Smith formally appointed Richards as Church Historian and Recorder. In these capacities, Richards kept Smith's daily journal, drafted official letters, recorded Church councils, and edited meeting minutes. He maintained Joseph Smith's daily schedule and recorded most of his activities, producing an unusually extensive documentary record, and drafting a substantial portion of the Nauvoo-era manuscript history, amounting in total to roughly two thousand manuscript pages. These journals and notes were later incorporated into the official *History of the Church*. In short, nearly all extant documents preserving Joseph Smith's Nauvoo-era teachings passed through Willard Richards's hands as scribe, compiler, and later, after Smith's death, as editor.⁹

Joseph Smith emphasized the importance of this clerical system to preserve his teachings. In a discourse delivered on May 26, 1844, he explained that he had kept "several good, faithful, and efficient clerks in constant employ" who had written down "what I have done, where I have been and what I have said," so that his enemies could not accuse him without written evidence.¹⁰ This reliance on clerical documentation meant that the preservation of Smith's teachings depended heavily on the scribes responsible for recording and later compiling the Nauvoo record.

Plural Marriage (1838-1844)

While polygamy in Nauvoo was secret and limited, Richards was among the early practitioners. He married his first wife, Jennetta Richards, in England on September 24, 1838, and by 1843 they had two surviving children. However, by the early 1840s Richards privately began taking additional wives. Between December 1841 and February 1842, he allegedly began living with

⁹Willard Richards served as Joseph Smith's principal scribe, compiler, and editor during the Nauvoo period, and nearly all surviving records of Smith's teachings from this era derive from Richards's contemporaneous recording or later editorial work. See Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841-April 1843* in *The Joseph Smith Papers*, general editors Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011); Dean C. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith, Volume 2: Journal, 1832-1842* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), xxv-xxvi; Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 417-419.

¹⁰Discourse, 26 May 1844, p. 2, JSP, *LINK*.

Nancy Marinda Johnson, the 26-year-old wife of Apostle Orson Hyde, during Orson's absence on his mission.¹¹ Though never publicly recorded as a sealing, this cohabitation could have been one of the first plural arrangements among Church leaders. In January 1843 Willard Richards is alleged to have been secretly sealed to two teenage sisters, Nanny and Sarah Longstroth, ages 16 and 14.¹² A few months later, on June 18, 1843, he was sealed to Susanna Lee Liptrot. By Joseph Smith's death in June 1844, Richards had entered into several plural unions and by the time of his own death in 1854 he had ten plural wives besides Jennetta, who died in 1845.¹³

Richards's administrative authority, his close alliance with Brigham Young, and his private participation in plural marriage are foundational to understanding his scribal influence. By 1842, Richards occupied a position that gave him access to Joseph Smith's daily dictation as well as editorial control over the Church's documentary memory. This central position, combined with his personal investment in emerging doctrines, would later enable his unique textual influence over practices that, at that stage, lacked clear public exposure.

The following section turns to Richards's private correspondence with his wife Jennetta, where the doctrinal seeds of divine reversal first appeared. These intimate letters reveal a theological inclination toward conditional moral reasoning, foreshadowing the divine reversal that he would later employ in shaping the official record.

Letters to Jennetta: Private Instruction and Doctrinal Experimentation

In a personal letter to his wife Jennetta, Richards offers critical insight into his emerging theology, demonstrating his internalization

¹¹Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 238, [LINK](#).

¹²Joseph Grant Stevenson, ed., *Richards Family History*, 5 vols. (Provo, UT: Stevenson Genealogy, 1991),3:279.

¹³George M. McCune, *Personalities in the Doctrine and Covenants and Joseph Smith–History* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Hawkes Publishing, 1991), 97–98; Devery S. Anderson, "Willard Richards's Nauvoo Plural Marriages: Polygamy Most Peculiar," in *Secret Covenants: New Insights on Early Mormon Polygamy*, ed. Cheryl L. Bruno (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2024), 360-62.

of the reversal principle. In a pivotal February 1842 letter, written just a few months before John C. Bennett was excommunicated for “spiritual wifery,” Richards uses language that frames divine command as superseding the generally accepted moral rules of Christianity. He first opens the door to the idea that moral boundaries might be flexible, rather than absolute:

There are many things recorded of the old patriarchs and prophets which have *seemed bad* to us. which if we knew the reasons thereof and the order of God[,] would *appear right*.¹⁴

This is the earliest surviving indication in Richards’s own hand that shows he held a personal belief in a theological justification for divine reversal: acts that appear “bad” can be “right” if they are in “the order of God.”¹⁵ His mention here of “the old patriarchs” could be a reference to the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob who practiced polygamy—an action that would have “seemed bad” to his wife and the people of his day. While this form of apologetic reasoning about the Old Testament patriarchs was not unique to Richards and appears frequently in nineteenth-century Protestant discussions of biblical morality, its appearance here is noteworthy because it is paired with the following emphasis on present revelation and varying commandments that could circumvent established law:

The grand secret of the Gospel is this, for us to live by every word of the lord. To live by revelation, present Revelation, do what God requires of us, & not what he required of somebody else.¹⁶

This is the precise logical foundation for the “unless the Lord directs otherwise” clause. It posits that current revelation creates an exception to standing laws, a concept that becomes the central pillar of post-1844 polygamous theology. While it is true that Joseph Smith had, on occasion, taught that continuing revelation

¹⁴Jennetta Richards, Jennetta Richards collection 1817-1845, [7], emphasis added.

¹⁵There are some notes from Richards regarding a Nov. 7, 1841 sermon by Joseph Smith that may indicate that these topics were being discussed earlier than this Feb. 1842 letter. This sermon will be covered in a later section of this paper.

¹⁶Jennetta Richards, Jennetta Richards collection, [8].

My Dearest Jennetta I know it pleases you to see a little scrap. & I long to please you and it would rejoice my soul to see you, & converse with you and I have no doubt it awaits yours also. In this privilege we shall yet enjoy & we are bound that all things have been well, and next before God we are separated. Let us be patient and wait on the Lord - Jennetta your faith has sometimes been weak as you have said, but I can truly say that, a child of God, there is no mistake, acknowledge the hand of God in all things. & you shall see the salvation of God & long for his promise. There is more written in the print too than even the saints are aware of. It is the power of God on earth, as we see as God loves of you will cling to me, and wish my happiness to the end. I will bring you into the Kingdom & your friends & mine, and what will you not be willing to suffer to accomplish this, all idols are nothing. There are many things recorded of the old patriarchs and prophets which have seemed hard to us, which if we heard the reasons thereof, and the order of God would appear right. Hagar's boy did some wrong things, no doubt, God has said of Joseph to do a certain work, not so participating to make him a perfect example, but do a certain work, & he never pretends to be a perfect man, but tells every body he is imperfect & they need not copy after him, & yet I never saw his equal, to do every thing right without pretensions. Joseph says he has been searching all his life time to find a man after his own pattern in all things, that he could trust with his business, he has found none, so do you think it is? For Richards, will not this compensate for the loss of his country a little while he lasts?

Willard Richards, letter to Jennetta, Feb. 1842, Jennetta Richards collection, MS 23042, LDS Church History Library.

governed the organization of the Church,¹⁷ Richards's innovation lay in combining that principle with, and extending it to, the reversal of standing moral prohibitions.

Richards then concludes the passage with a remark about his affection for "sisters," explaining that his heart is "expansive as Eternity." Language of expansive or universal love was common in nineteenth-century discourse and does not necessarily imply marital or sexual relationships. At the same time, the phrasing is noteworthy. Rather than referring to "brothers and sisters," the more typical expression of Christian fellowship, Richards speaks specifically of loving many "sisters." Where Richards has just suggested that actions which appear wrong may in fact be justified within "the order of God," the remark could be read as an attempt to frame certain expressions of affection as morally legitimate. While the passage does not explicitly reference plural marriage or other unconventional relationships, it illustrates how the theological framework he had just outlined could support an expanded understanding of acceptable social and emotional bonds:

¹⁷See Minutes and Discourse, 21 April 1834, 43, JSP, [LINK](#); "The Elders in the Land of Zion to the Church of Christ Scattered Abroad," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 2 (July 1832): [5], [LINK](#) "The Old and New Revelations," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 4 (Sept. 1832): [5], [LINK](#).

I love my sisters as well as ever & my Jennetta better too, and if I had a thousand such dear friends I could love them all. Why[?] because my heart is true, expansive as Eternity¹⁸

This example suggests that Richards may have been internalizing the divine reversal model as early as February, 1842, well before it was publicly stated.

Another notable feature of this correspondence is the way Richards puts this theological reasoning in his own voice. Although the concept of divine reversal is often associated by historians with Joseph Smith, Richards does not present the idea in this letter as a direct quotation or instruction from the Prophet. Instead, he explains the principle to Jennetta as part of his own reasoning about how God's commands operate, suggesting that he has already absorbed the idea and is now applying it.

Richards's articulation of the beginnings of reversal-based moral reasoning in his private letter to Jennetta in February 1842 is vital because it establishes that he internalized and personally articulated this theological framework prior to or contemporaneously with any surviving record attributed to Joseph Smith.¹⁹ This complicates the view of Richards as a neutral recipient of dictation; instead, it suggests he possessed the insight necessary to recognize, frame and possibly form the logic of divine reversal.

The “Happiness Letter” and Doctrinal Flexibility

The “Happiness Letter” was published by John C. Bennett in 1842 with the claim that it had been dictated by Joseph

¹⁸Jennetta Richards, Jennetta Richards collection, [8]

¹⁹Scholars have long noted that Willard Richards left no diary entry, letter, affidavit, or reminiscence explaining when Joseph Smith first introduced him to the principle of plural marriage. See Gary James Bergera, “Identifying the Earliest Mormon Polygamists, 1841–44,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 41–42, *LINK*; Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy, Vol. 1: History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 215–17; Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 11–12. Because no firsthand statement survives, historians date Richards's instruction to late 1841 or early 1842 based on circumstantial evidence, including his documented participation in the Whitney family sealings and his increasing involvement in the administration of secret Nauvoo plural marriages.

Smith to Willard Richards and addressed to Sidney Rigdon's daughter, Nancy. It contains one of the most striking formulations of situational ethics in early Mormon writing, offering an early articulation of a "divine reversal:"

That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another. . . Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire.²⁰

This passage outlines a theology of divine reversal similar to later plural marriage rationales, and resembles the logic expressed in Richards's private letter to Jennetta earlier that year.

Although John C. Bennett claimed that the original letter was in the handwriting of Willard Richards, the letter's connection to Joseph Smith is considerably more tenuous. Bennett claimed that Joseph Smith dictated the letter to Willard Richards, who wrote it and acted on Smith's behalf in its transmission to Nancy Rigdon.²¹ However, the Nauvoo newspaper, *The Wasp*, printed a statement above Sidney Rigdon's signature claiming that "Mr. Smith denied to me the authorship of that letter." Rigdon also reported that his daughter, Nancy, declared that "she never said to Gen. Bennett or any other person, that said letter was written by said Mr. Smith, nor in his hand writing, but by another person, and in another person's hand writing."²² Gerrit Dirkmaat has noted that the diction departs from Smith's known style and may represent a paraphrase or fabrication.²³ As no original document survives, the letter's authorship remains contested.

The provenance of the letter is further complicated by later manuscript evidence. Devery S. Anderson has noted that a copy of the text appears in Joseph Smith's letterbook under the heading "Joseph Smith's letter to Nancy Rigdon," with an assigned date of

²⁰John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints; or, an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842), 243–45, *LINK*.

²¹Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 245.

²²Sidney Rigdon, 27 Aug. 1842, Letter to the Editor, *The Wasp* 1, no. 20 (Sep. 3, 1842): [3], *LINK*.

²³Gerrit Dirkmaat, "Searching for 'Happiness': Joseph Smith's Alleged Authorship of the 1842 Letter to Nancy Rigdon," *Journal of Mormon History* 42, no. 3 (July 2016): 96–98, *LINK*.

January 1842, raising the possibility that Richards took dictation *before* writing to Jennetta in February.²⁴ This inference, however, rests on the assumption that the letterbook copy represents a contemporaneous record of composition. Dirkmaat has demonstrated that this assumption is unwarranted. He argues that the letterbook version of the text, purported to be in the handwriting of John Henry Smith, likely reflects late-1860s Historian's Office activity, a period when clerks were actively assembling documentation to substantiate Joseph Smith's involvement in plural marriage. On handwriting and contextual grounds, Dirkmaat cautions that this letterbook copy and assigned date cannot be treated as reliable evidence for the letter's original composition or dictation.²⁵

Consistent with this assessment, the Joseph Smith Papers editors do not assign the letter a January 1842 date, but instead present it as "circa mid-April 1842," while explicitly noting that Joseph Smith's authorship is uncertain and that no autograph manuscript survives.²⁶ Because the dating and authorship are uncertain, the letterbook copy cannot establish that Richards took dictation prior to his February 1842 correspondence with Jennetta, nor does it demonstrate that one text depends on the other.

Although Joseph Smith publicly denied authorship, the letter was preserved and later became part of the documentary corpus used to reconstruct Nauvoo theology. Regardless of ultimate authorship, the letter entered circulation through Richards's hand and under his administrative control. The critical issue, therefore, is not who first conceived the language, but how reversal-based reasoning entered and remained within the theological corpus despite Smith's public disavowal.

The timing of the letter is also noteworthy. It appeared during a growing public controversy over "spiritual wifery," when Joseph Smith and the Nauvoo Relief Society were publicly condemning adultery and clandestine sexual relationships.²⁷ The circulation of

²⁴Devery S. Anderson, "I Could Love Them All: Nauvoo Polygamy in the Marriage of Willard and Jennetta Richards," *Sunstone Magazine*, issue 171 (June 2013), [textitLINK](#).

²⁵Dirkmaat, "Searching for 'Happiness,'" 114.

²⁶See Source Note and Historical Introduction to Appendix: Letter to Nancy Rigdon, circa Mid-April 1842, 2, JSP, [LINK](#).

²⁷Jill Mulvay Derr et al., *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 20–23.

a document advancing a form of divine reversal at the same time that Church leaders were issuing explicit public denunciations—such as the Letter to the Relief Society discussed in the following section—raises important questions about its origin. One possibility is that Joseph Smith dictated the letter, but intended for it to remain private, as allowing it to circulate would pose a risk that it could be attributed to him. Alternatively, the letter may have originated with someone other than Joseph Smith. The claim that the document was written in Willard Richards’s hand further complicates the question of authorship and raises the possibility of Richards’s involvement in its composition and transmission without Smith’s authorization.

Unfortunately, no surviving statement from Richards clarifies the matter. Moreover, although Richards was generally a consistent journal keeper, the surviving record contains no entries from January 23, 1842 to July 1842,²⁸ leaving no commentary from him during the months surrounding the composition of the letter.

It is important to note that the content of the “Happiness Letter” itself makes no reference to plural marriage, nor does it propose marriage to Nancy Rigdon.²⁹ It is only within the context of Bennett’s other accusations that this letter becomes connected to discussions of polygamy. The letter’s focus is on the general concept of divine reversal, with no explicit connection to chastity or fidelity. Joseph Smith’s public sermons from 1842 and beyond make no direct reference to divine reversal. Instead, they emphasize purity, monogamy and unchanging commandments. The theological structure of the “Happiness Letter” closely parallels the conditional reasoning articulated in Richards’s February 1842 correspondence. The similarity between the two texts is conceptual and meaningful, not incidental: both judge moral behavior based on God’s command at the moment, rather than on fixed moral prohibitions.

It is also significant that after Smith’s death, the text of the letter was incorporated into the Nauvoo-era *Manuscript History* under the supervision of Willard Richards in his capacity as Church Historian. The Joseph Smith Papers editors note that the letter appears in this compiled history, despite Smith publicly

²⁸Willard Richards journals and papers, 1821-1854; Journals; CHL, MS 1490 *LINK*.

²⁹Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 243-245.

denying writing it.³⁰ This complicates the assertion that Richards functioned merely as a passive transcriber incapable of preserving material that diverged from Smith's stated positions. Whatever one concludes regarding the letter's original authorship, its retention within the official historical record demonstrates that Richards exercised discretion over which texts would shape the Church's theological memory. The inclusion of a document Smith publicly denied suggests that the historical archive did not always simply preserve Smith's public declarations, but could also reflect the judgments of those who controlled its transmission.

The Letter to the Relief Society, March 31, 1842

The *Relief Society Minute Book* records a letter dictated by Joseph Smith to the women's organization in late March 1842, warning against "iniquitous characters" and reaffirming strict chastity.³¹ There are two extant versions of this letter: the one recorded in the Minute Book and a draft version in Willard Richards's handwriting.³² Comparison of the two versions reveals a telling difference. In the draft, Richards inserted a conditional clause, "unless it be by message del[iv]ered to you by our own mouth, by actual revelation & commandment," appearing directly after Smith's categorical condemnation of illicit relationships. Notably the version recorded in the Minute Book includes no such exception or ambiguity.

The Minute Book version reads as follows:

we do not want any one to believe any thing as coming from us, contrary to the old established morals & virtues & scriptural laws, regulating the habits, customs & conduct of society; and all persons pretending to be authoriz'd by us, or having any permit, or sanction from us, are & will be liars & base impostors, & you are authoriz'd on the very first intimation of the kind, to denounce them as such, & shun them as

³⁰History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843] [addenda], p. 3 [addenda], JSP, *LINK*. (See Historical Introduction for dating.)

³¹Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, 86, JSP, *LINK*.

³²Letter to Emma Smith and the Relief Society, 31 March 1842, 1, JSP, *LINK*.

the flying fiery serpent, whether they are prophets, Seers, or revelators; Patriarchs, twelve Apostles, Elders, Priests, Mayers, Generals, City Councillors, Aldermen, Marshalls, Police, Lord Mayors or the Devil, are alike culpable & shall be damned for such evil practices; and if you yourselves adhere to anything of the kind, you also shall be damned.³³

Willard Richards's draft reads almost exactly the same except for one very important difference:

we don't want any body to believe any thing as coming from us contrary to the old established morals & virtues & scriptural laws regulating the habits customs & conduct of Society unless it be by message del[iv]ered to you by our own mouth, by actual revelation & commandment. and all persons pretending to be authorized by us or having any permit or sanction from us are & will be liars & base imposters & you are authorized on the very first intimation of the kind to denounce them as such.³⁴

Scholars such as Jill Mulvay Derr and the editors of *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society* have identified the draft as a Richards copy, likely written from dictation.³⁵ Yet its lone "divine reversal" clause again mirrors the logic of the "Happiness Letter:" moral rules can be overruled by revelation. Whether this phrasing originated in Smith's dictation or in Richards's pen cannot be proven, but again the pattern appears in documents under Richards's control. Notwithstanding the authorship, the essential observation is that the version over which Smith had final control did not contain the reversal clause.

The most up-to-date commentary on this letter can be found in a non-peer-reviewed, online video essay where historian Dan Vogel has proposed two possible explanations for the absence of the clause in the final version of the document. First, he suggests that the phrase "was likely removed because it was too revealing and

³³Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, 86.

³⁴Letter to Emma Smith and the Relief Society, 31 March 1842, emphasis added.

³⁵Derr et al., *First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 23.

incriminating.” He later offers an alternative explanation, proposing that “the exception clause was no doubt removed before Hyrum Smith, who was zealous in opposition to polygamy and would not accept it for another year, signed it.”³⁶

Vogel, however, does not provide any documentary evidence supporting either interpretation. While both explanations are possible, other plausible scenarios should also be considered. For example, it could be that the clause appeared in the version received by the Relief Society but was omitted by the later transcriber by mistake or for reasons that cannot now be recovered. It is also conceivable that Richards may have drafted the initial version of the letter based on an outline or general instructions from Smith without his direct dictation, and Smith may have rejected the clause upon review.³⁷ Another possibility is that Richards, who controlled both the draft and the fair copy, could have created two versions for differing purposes—an internal document that accommodated divine reversal, and the publicly circulated version that remained consistent with Joseph Smith’s explicit teachings. Although there is no definitive evidence for which possibility is accurate, it does not seem logically consistent for a document stating, “no such authority ever has, ever can, or ever will be given to any man,”³⁸ to privately include a comprehensive divine exception that was missing from the Relief Society’s record of the document.

The October 5, 1843 Journal Entry

On October 5, 1843, Richards recorded an entry in Joseph Smith’s journal concerning the “law of the priesthood”. The original version reads:

eve at home walked up and down st. with scribe.—
and gave inst[r]uction to try those who were preaching
teaching or the doctrin[e] of plurality of wives. on this

³⁶Dan Vogel, “Joseph Smith’s Letter to the Nauvoo Relief Society (March 1842)—by Dan Vogel,” posted May 28, 2025, YouTube, 11:53, *LINK*.

³⁷This method, having a clerk or scribe draft the language of an entire letter, seems to have been used on “The voice of innocence from Nauvoo” written by W. W. Phelps and later amended by Emma Smith. The voice of innocence from Nauvoo, MS 15540, CHL, *LINK*.

³⁸Letter to Emma Smith and the Relief Society, 31 March 1842.

Law. *Joseph forbids it.* and the practice ther[e]of—*No man shall have but one wife*³⁹

A later, edited version reads as follows:

Evening, at home, and walked up and down the streets with my scribe. Gave instructions to try those persons who were preaching, teaching, or practicing the doctrine of plurality of wives: for, according to the law, I hold the keys of this power in the last days; for there is never but one on earth at a time on whom the power and its keys are conferred; and I have constantly said no man shall have but one wife at a time *unless the Lord directs otherwise*.⁴⁰

That final phrase, “unless the Lord directs otherwise,” and the references to only one person holding the keys do not appear in the original notes, suggesting it was added when either Richards, or someone under his direction, copied the journal into the fair manuscript history.⁴¹ The addition transforms Smith’s order from a clear prohibition into a divine reversal that authorizes plural marriage by revelation.

The original Oct. 5, 1843, journal entry records only, “No man shall have but one wife.” Editors of the Joseph Smith Papers identify the handwriting of the later insertions, such as “at a time” and “unless the Lord directs otherwise,” to be that of Thomas Bullock.⁴² As Richards was the scribe of the original entry and because Bullock worked directly under his supervision in the Historian’s Office during the compilation of the *Manuscript History of the Church*, the change was likely made under Richards’s direction and with his approval. This alteration aligns with the pattern of divine reversal in which prohibitions were allowed under divine direction.

Another indication that this insertion may not originate with Joseph Smith is its retrospective claim that he had “constantly said no man shall have but one wife at a time unless the Lord

³⁹ Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 3, 15 July 1843–29 February 1844, 117, JSP, *LINK*, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ History Draft [1 March–31 December 1843], 72, JSP, *LINK*.

⁴¹ Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:294–96.

⁴² History Draft, JSP. See Source Note, Document Information, and inline scribal notes for attribution to Bullock

directs otherwise.”⁴³ Although some readers may interpret the statement as two separate ideas—that Smith “constantly said no man shall have but one wife,” followed by an independent qualification; grammatically, the phrasing does not support this reading. The inclusion of the phrase “at a time,” and the lack of additional punctuation, links the prohibition to the reversal clause that follows, suggesting the sentence was intended to be read as a single statement rather than two separate assertions.

As demonstrated throughout this paper, only two other surviving instances attributed to Smith employ similar reversal language, both mediated through Richards. There is no record of Smith stating publicly that a man could have more than one wife at a time if the Lord directed, making it unlikely that he made this claim in this instance, let alone “constantly.” The misaligned language again suggests the possibility that the insertion may reflect Richards’s theological adjustment rather than Smith’s consistent teaching.

Another key factor in determining the authorship of this phrase is the timing of when it was inserted into the record. These editorial changes to the October 5 entry were made several years after Smith gave these instructions.⁴⁴ The late date of these additions suggests that they were not part of the original teaching, nor a simple scribal clarification of a quickly scribbled note. Instead, it appears to reflect a later editorial effort to revise earlier records in ways that aligned with developing theological priorities.

This pattern of textual adjustments does not necessarily imply a covert agenda on Richards’s part. His interventions may instead reflect a sincere theological impulse to reconcile emerging doctrinal ideas with Smith’s teachings. In this sense, rather than an attempt to alter Joseph Smith’s words, Richards’s edits might reflect an effort to systematize doctrines within an evolving faith.

⁴³History Draft, JSP.

⁴⁴Journal, [December 1842–June 1844], JSP; History Draft [1 March–31 December 1843], JSP. The editorial apparatus identifies “at a time,” “unless the Lord directs otherwise,” and the marginal “to be revised” as insertions in the handwriting of Thomas Bullock.

The Revelation of July 12, 1843 (Doctrine and Covenants 132)

The theological logic of divine reversal finds its fullest and most systematic expression in the 1843 revelation on plural marriage. This revelation, dated July 12, 1843, survives only in later manuscript copies, including versions associated with Willard Richards, Joseph Kingsbury and later, Horace Whitney.⁴⁵ Richards's role as church historian and recorder positioned him to influence the transmission and preservation of the text as it moved into the Church's developing documentary record.

At its core, Doctrine and Covenants 132 converts moral law from an absolute prohibition into a radical conditional moral framework, the ultimate realization of the "divine reversal clause." The text accomplishes this through two mechanisms that align with the logic of Richards's earlier editorial work.

First, the revelation explicitly grants justification, a declared state of righteousness, for actions that would otherwise constitute adultery, provided they occur within the boundaries of the new covenant. This language institutionalizes the reasoning that appeared earlier in the "Happiness Letter:"

And as pertaining to the law of the priesthood—if any man espouse a virgin, and desire to espouse another, and the first give her consent . . . then is he justified; he cannot commit adultery for they belong unto him, and they are given unto him; therefore is he justified (D&C 132:61).

Here, adultery becomes morally exempt from sin, as long as it follows the conditions of covenantal authorization.

Second, the revelation places the power to authorize such reversals exclusively with the prophet, echoing Richards's insertion of the "unless the Lord directs otherwise" clause in Joseph Smith's journal:

⁴⁵Revelation, 12 July 1843 [D&C 132], 1, JSP, *LINK*; The copies can be found in: Revelations collection, circa 1829-1876; Selected Collections version; Section 132; CHL, MS 4583, *LINK* (Willard Richards copy 1-7, Kingsbury Copy 9-17); Revelation on plural marriage, CHL, MS 7876, *LINK* (Horace Whitney partial copy); Revelation on plural marriage, CHL, MS 3497 *LINK* (Horace Whitney full copy).

I reveal it unto you, my servant Joseph, then shall you have power, by the power of my Holy Priesthood, to take her and give her unto him that hath not committed adultery but hath been faithful; for he shall be made ruler over many (D&C 132:44).

In this structure, moral transgression is no longer defined by behavior but by the presence or absence of prophetic sanction or divine decree. Moral law thus becomes radically conditional.

Although the revelation is traditionally portrayed as a straightforward dictation from Joseph Smith to William Clayton,⁴⁶ there is enough contradictory evidence that alternate narratives should be considered. For example:

1. The text of the revelation as we now have it was not made public until August 1852, eight years after Joseph Smith's death and nine years after it is said to have been received.
2. When accusations from the *Nauvoo Expositor* regarding the July 12 revelation were being discussed in the Nauvoo City Council meeting on June 10, 1844, Joseph Smith declared that in the *Expositor* affidavits "the truth of God is (sic) was transform[e]d into a lie."⁴⁷ Hyrum Smith, in the same meeting, "spoke to show the falsehoods of Austin Cowles in relation to the revelati[o]n referred to.—that it referr[e]d to fo[r]mer days—not the pres[e]nt time as stated by Cowles."⁴⁸
3. William Law, the publisher of the *Expositor*, later stated about the revelation:

I was astonished to see in your book that the revelation was such a long document. I remember **DISTINCTLY** that the original given me by Hyrum was **MUCH SHORTER**. It covered not more than two or three pages of foolscap. The contents are

⁴⁶In 1874 William Clayton signed an affidavit stating that the published revelation was exactly as he had written it from the mouth of Joseph Smith; Affidavits about celestial marriage, 1869-1915; William Clayton affidavit, 1874 February 16; William Clayton affidavit; CHL, MS 3423, *LINK*.

⁴⁷Minutes, 10 June 1844, 0, JSP, *LINK*.

⁴⁸Minutes, 10 June 1844, 0.

substantially the same, but there was not that theological introduction. The thing consisted simply in the command of doing it, and that command was restricted to the High Priesthood and to virgins and widows.⁴⁹

4. James Whitehead also testified in the Temple Lot trial that the revelation he was shown by Bishop Whitney was three pages and that the version of the revelation he had seen was “not the same at all. It was entirely changed.”⁵⁰
5. Jason W. Briggs later claimed that W. W. Phelps admitted in testimony that the text of the revelation was produced over “ten or twelve days” and that Phelps “wrote some of it.”⁵¹

These sources are just a few samples of evidence that suggest the possibility that the revelation received on July 12 may not have been the same revelation that is now known as Section 132. Some of these are late or antagonistic sources. The Briggs claim, reported decades later and through a potentially hostile witness, should be treated cautiously. However, there is enough contrary evidence that historians and scholars should not discount the possibility that Section 132 in its current form is the result of a much more collaborative process of revision and doctrinal consolidation.

Because the doctrine in Section 132 so closely relates to the doctrines already discussed in this study, it is worth examining how much involvement Willard Richards might have had in the production of the final version. For example, one of the four extant copies of the revelation is in Willard Richards’s handwriting and includes paragraph markings, punctuation corrections, textual alterations and the notation “ex. as altered in pencil Aug 7, 52,” indicating that the text was actively edited less than a month before its public debut.⁵² These late edits show that the document remained open to revision and possible doctrinal harmonization

⁴⁹William Law, Interview by Wilhelm Wyl (Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal), “The Law Interview.” *Salt Lake Daily Tribune*, July 31, 1887, [6].

⁵⁰United States testimony 1892, 92-193, MS 1160, Questions 95-107, CHL, *LINK*.

⁵¹Jason W. Briggs, *The Basis of Brighamite Polygamy: A Criticism upon the (So Called) Revelation of July 12th, 1843* (Lamoni, IA: Reorganized Church of Christ, n.d.).

⁵²Revelations collection, circa 1829-1876, Section 132, MS 4583, CHL, *LINK*.

immediately before publication. In his exhaustive study of the document, William Victor Smith summarized: “The nature of the revelation (that is, its text and context) suggests that its present form results from a fusion of several revelations and ideas that developed during Joseph Smith’s lifetime.”⁵³ His analysis suggests the possibility that the document could have been refined, systematized, and adapted by later revisions. This process is consistent with editorial practices observed in other records under Richards’s custodianship. William Victor Smith, himself, does not conclude that Joseph Smith did not dictate Section 132. Neither does this paper resolve the question of authorship. However, the plural marriage revelation exhibits the very phenomenon this paper has traced throughout the Nauvoo documents: the evolution of divine command through Willard Richards’s interpretive hand.

The Book of Mormon and the Search for Precedent

It could be asserted that the divine reversal principle had already been introduced in The Book of Mormon—based on the interpretation that Jacob 2:30 might conditionally command “many wives and concubines”—and thus did not require further development in Nauvoo. This section addresses that assumption by examining how the verse was read before 1853. The verse reads:

For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things (Jacob 2:30).

Since 1853, this passage has been treated as a scriptural reversal clause permitting plural marriage when divinely commanded. It is commonly understood to mean something along these lines: “If I will raise up seed unto myself, I will command my people to practice polygamy; otherwise, they should obey the law of monogamy outlined in the rest of Jacob’s sermon.” A closer grammatical reading allows a different construction: the conditional phrase “I will command my people” may reaffirm the monogamy rule rather

⁵³William Victor Smith, *Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants: The Plural Marriage Revelation* (Greg Kofford Books, 2018), 5.

than suspend it. Based on this reading, the verse warns that unless God personally intervenes to raise up a covenant people, the Saints will relapse into the condemned practices of pride and having “many wives and concubines.”⁵⁴

Contemporary usage during Joseph Smith’s lifetime seems to support the latter interpretation, as there is no record of this verse being cited to justify having many wives before 1844. On May 14, 1843, Hyrum Smith invoked Jacob 2 to denounce David’s and Solomon’s polygamy and the practice of polygamy in general:

May 14 [1843] attended [a] meeting at the temple a.m. Hyrum Smith addressed the people. Subjects from the book Mormon, 2d chap Jacob . . . said there were many that had a great deal to say about the ancient order of things as Solomon and David having many wives and concubines—but it’s an abomination in the sight of god—if an angel from heaven should come and preach such doctrine would be sure to see his cloven foot & cloud of blackness over his head,—though his garments might shine as white as snow—a man might have one wife,—concubines he should have none—observed that, the idea was that this was given to Jacob for a perpetual principle.⁵⁵

This sermon presents monogamy as a fixed law, leaving no room for divine reversal.

Another example showing that the early Saints did not read Jacob 2:30 as a loophole for polygamy can be found in John Corrill’s 1839 work, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints* which was written after Corrill had left the church for reasons not related to polygamy. In it, Corrill writes:

I found that the Book of Mormon taught all the morality, piety, virtue, honesty, righteousness and Godliness

⁵⁴For discussion of Jacob’s moral rhetoric and prophetic voice, see Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 142–44. Some modern commentaries suggest that Jacob 2:30 does not establish an open exception for plural marriage but instead reinforces monogamy, see Steve Reed, “A Proposed Reinterpretation of Jacob 2:30,” OneClimbs blog, January 5, 2017, [LINK](#).

⁵⁵Levi Richards, Journal, May 14, 1843, MS 1284, box 1, CHL, [LINK](#).

that the Bible did, and even condemned the whoredoms of David, Solomon and others.⁵⁶

It is clear from his mention of David and Solomon that Corrill was referring directly to Jacob 2 and that he understood the Book of Mormon to reject polygamy. Importantly, Corrill makes no allowance for a reversal clause, special permission, or divine loophole. If such an exception to Jacob's condemnation had been understood or taught among the Saints in 1839, it is likely that Corrill would have referenced such a dramatic departure from established morals. Instead, he presents the passage as a straightforward condemnation without qualification. The 1835 "References to the Book of Mormon" and the 1841 "Index to Book of Mormon—1st European Edition" both state that in Jacob chapter 2 "more than one wife [is] forbidden"⁵⁷

Modern historians agree that contemporaneous evidence does not support Jacob 2: 30 being read as divine reversal. Jeff Lindsay, a Vice President of the Interpreter Foundation and co-editor of their journal, quoted Brian C. Hales regarding his research into the early use of Jacob 2:30:

"It is interesting to note that, according to all available documents, JS never referred to Jacob 2:30 to justify the restoration of PM [plural marriage]. Undoubtedly later voices have done so."

He later commented:

"I just did another search of my JS polygamy manuscripts and some other databases. No one quotes JS as referring to the BofM and Jacob 2:30 to justify his introduction of plural marriage."⁵⁸

⁵⁶John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1839*, 16, JSP, [LINK](#).

⁵⁷For a treatment on how the Book of Mormon was used in the pre-Utah time period especially the summaries of Jacob 2 found in the *References to the Book of Mormon (1835)* and *Index to Book of Mormon—1st European Edition (1841)*, see Grant Underwood, "Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 37–75, [LINK](#).

⁵⁸Jeff Lindsay, "What does Jacob 2:30 say about polygamy? Is the church's traditional interpretation wrong?" Jun. 8, 2023, Arise from the Dust blog, [LINK](#).

It is clear that Jacob 2:30 acquires its later meaning only after Smith's death. The reversal appears to originate with Orson Pratt, who employs the verse as the cornerstone of his 1853 theological defense of polygamy.⁵⁹ Pratt's reinterpretation functioned as a retrospective harmonization like those found in Richards's editorial interventions. The shift from Hyrum's absolutism to Pratt's conditionalism demonstrates that the "divine reversal" was not inherent in the text but was constructed through subsequent interpretation. Although this intervention originated with Pratt, it need not be assumed that it did so independent of Richards's interpretive framework. Pratt and Richards and many other prominent leaders met together in August 1852 to discuss plural marriage shortly before the public announcement of the revelation, demonstrating leadership and clerical collaboration prior to the release of Pratt's theological defense of polygamy.⁶⁰

Thus, the evolution of Jacob 2:30 from a prohibition against polygamy in Nauvoo to a loophole justifying divinely commanded polygamy in Utah, reflects the pattern of transforming absolute moral laws into conditional ones by those who controlled the Church's textual memory. Richards's divine reversal framework introduced the theological mechanism that made this reinterpretation possible.

Defenders of divine reversal theology often appeal to earlier scriptural narratives to argue that exceptions to moral absolutes have always been permitted based on divine command. Two frequently cited passages are Nephi's slaying of Laban (1 Ne. 4) and Abraham's presentation of Sarah as his sister (Gen. 12:20). While at first glance these episodes appear to support divine reversal of prohibitions against murder and lying, neither establishes a positive inversion of sin. Instead, both function as narrowly bounded justifications rather than as sanctifications of the acts themselves.

In 1 Nephi 4, the text emphasizes Nephi's moral resistance to killing Laban—"I shrunk and would that I might not slay him" (1 Nephi 4:10)—and frames the act as a catastrophic necessity rather than a virtuous deed. The rationale offered, "It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in

⁵⁹Orson Pratt, "Celestial Marriage," *The Seer* 1, no. 2 (Feb. 1853): 25-32, *LINK*.

⁶⁰Historical Department journal history of the Church, Aug. 15, 1852, [193] *CHL*, *LINK*.

unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:13), operates as a tragic calculus, not a moral transformation. Crucially, the narrative neither generalizes the act nor institutionalizes it; Nephi does not teach that killing becomes righteous under divine command. The act remains morally grievous even where it is justified. Notably, the Book of Mormon recounts several other stories where the protagonist’s enemies are delivered to them either drunk or asleep and the narrative makes a point to note that these enemies were not killed, even though it could have been equally justified (See Alma 55, Mosiah 22, Mosiah 24).

The case of Abram’s supposed deception in Egypt is even more complex. Joseph Smith’s Biblical revision attributes the instruction for Sarai to introduce herself as Abraham’s sister in order to preserve Abraham’s life to God, not Abraham himself. (Abraham 2:22-24). Ellis T. Rasmussen explains that, “Abram and Sarai told no untruth in Egypt in identifying Sarai by her blood relationship rather than her marital relationship with Abram. Because they were descended from a common ancestor, Terah (Gen. 11:26–32, 20:12; Abr. 2:25), according to their custom she could be called Abram’s sister.”⁶¹ In addition, God’s direction for Abram and Sarai to introduce themselves in terms of one relationship, rather than the other, does not invert God’s prohibition against lying. The text does not imply that God commands lying, nor does it praise half-truths or derive from the episode a principle that falsehood becomes righteous when advantageous.

In both cases, scripture permits the selection of a lesser evil under extreme conditions, while preserving the underlying moral prohibition. Killing and the withholding of information remain wrong even where individual circumstances require specific application. This stands in sharp contrast to later plural marriage theology, in which prohibited acts are explicitly reclassified as righteous, commanded, and incapable of constituting sin when properly authorized.

When Jacob 2:30 is read against this broader scriptural pattern, post-1844 interpretations that treat it as permission to set aside the prohibitions against adultery become increasingly implausible. Earlier scripture consistently resists turning moral

⁶¹Ellis T. Rasmussen, *A Latter-day Saint Commentary on the Old Testament* (Deseret Book, 2004), 38–39. See also Susan Easton Black, *400 Questions and Answers about the Old Testament* (Covenant Communications, 2013), 45.

prohibitions into approved practices. The shift from tolerated exception to sanctified command therefore appears to represent a theological development rather than the continuation of an earlier scriptural pattern.

Institutionalization of “the new order of things”

After Joseph Smith’s death in June 1844, Willard Richards’s role expanded. As Church historian and recorder, he assumed custody of Joseph’s journals, letters, and revelation manuscripts. Working with George A. Smith and Thomas Bullock, he supervised the creation of the *Manuscript History of Joseph Smith*—a sprawling compilation that would later form the foundation of the multi-volume *History of the Church*.⁶²

Within this editorial project, Richards and his team faced a fundamental challenge: how to reconcile Joseph’s public teachings with the new leadership’s post-Nauvoo doctrinal innovations. Their solution lay in retrospective framing and editorial revision.

Evidence that this editorial shaping was deliberate and systemic appears in the later testimony of Charles Wesley Wandell, an early Church clerk who worked on the compilation in Nauvoo. Writing in his diary about a decade later (ca. 1855–56), Wandell recalled:

I notice the interpolations because having been employed in the Historian’s Office at Nauvoo by Doctor Richards, and employed, too, in 1845 in compiling this very autobiography, I know that after Joseph’s death his memoir was ‘doctored’ to suit the new order of things, and this, too, by the direct order of Brigham Young to Doctor Richards and systematically by Richards.

Wandell’s recollection suggests that contemporaries were aware of conscious editorial efforts to align the record with later theological developments. It undermines the assumption that Richards’s revisions grew out of a desire to more accurately portray Joseph

⁶²Dean C. Jessee, “The Writing of Joseph Smith’s History,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 11, no. 4 (1971): 439-473, *LINK*.

Smith's independent teachings. Instead, it reveals an effort to construct historical and theological continuity.

Further evidence supports Wandell's observation. After Richards's death in 1854, his successor George A. Smith and his clerks continued revising the *Manuscript History*. Modern scholars such as Ronald O. Barney and Howard Searle have shown that their revisions included doctrinal smoothing, chronological adjustment, and rhetorical polishing to create the appearance of consistency between the early church and Utah-era doctrines and leadership structures. Barney states that "Richards's procedure in preparing text was to take primary source documentation . . . while at the same time adding his own recollections and viewpoint." He explains that Richards transposed material from other writers and sources into the first person of Joseph Smith, "which thereafter created the incorrect perception that JS authored everything that had been written . . . Richards also applied an interpretive angle to the manuscript," "fleshed out events for which there was little documentation," and "augmented scant notation with expanded constructions."⁶³

These editorial practices exemplify the pattern of retrospective harmonization. Through his control of Joseph's documentary legacy, Richards contributed to the appearance of continuity in Brigham Young's doctrinal and succession claims, implying that his innovations were mere expansions of the doctrinal foundations established by Joseph Smith.

The historiographical implications of these textual revisions cannot be overstated. When later historians such as B. H. Roberts and Joseph Fielding Smith compiled *History of the Church*, they drew upon these already-revised texts as though they were verbatim dictations. Richards's editorial fingerprint thus became embedded in the Church's collective memory.

Joseph Smith's Public Moral Teachings

In contrast to the excessive moral relativism found in certain writings associated with Willard Richards, the preserved public

⁶³Ronald O. Barney, *Joseph Smith: History, Methods, and Memory* (University of Utah Press, 2020): 76; and Howard C. Searle, "Willard Richards as Historian," *BYU Studies* 31, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 48.

sermons and statements of Joseph and Hyrum Smith reflect a consistent stance, especially regarding monogamy and sexual purity, leaving no room for divine reversal. Joseph Smith's Nauvoo preaching in 1842 articulated an explicitly non-negotiable moral theology. In an April 10, 1842 discourse he warned that "as far as we degenerate from God, we descend to the devil, and lose knowledge," insisting that "the Church must be cleansed, and I proclaim against all iniquity."⁶⁴ Later that month, speaking to the Nauvoo Female Relief Society on April 28, he applied the same strict standard to the community: "if one member becomes corrupt, and you know it, you must immediately put it away, or it will either injure or destroy the whole body . . . [lest] all become contaminated; you must put down iniquity."⁶⁵ In the same address he cautioned that even spectacular religious achievements could not offset later deliberate sin: "though a man should become mighty, do great things, overturn mountains, perform mighty works, and should then turn from his high station to do evil, to eat and drink with the drunken, all his former deeds would not save him, but he would go to destruction!"⁶⁶ These 1842 sermons, as publicly recorded and circulated, leave no indication of a generalized "unless the Lord directs otherwise" reversal framework.

This absolute theology is also illustrated by the scriptures that Smith produced. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 42:75 states: "But if ye shall find that any persons have left their companions for the sake of adultery, and they themselves are the offenders, and their companions are living, they shall be cast out from among you." Section 1 verse 31 states: "For I the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance." This type of consistent theology permeated Smith's revelations as well as his public teachings. The previously treated text of the March 31, 1842, Relief Society letter recorded in the Minute Book explains that Joseph would never teach anything contrary to "established morals":

we don't want any body to believe any thing as coming
from us contrary to the old established morals & virtues

⁶⁴Joseph Smith, discourse, 10 April 1842, in *History, 1838–1856*, volume C-1 Addenda, 63, JSP, *LINK*.

⁶⁵Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, 28 April 1842, 38–39, JSP, *LINK*.

⁶⁶Joseph Smith, discourse, 28 April 1842, in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 76; also in "Discourses to Nauvoo Female Relief Society," Church Historian's Press, *LINK*.

& scriptural laws regulating the habits customs & conduct of Society.⁶⁷

Smith denies any possibility of a conditional license for transgression: “no such authority *ever has, ever can, or ever will be given to any man.*” This teaching clearly precludes the possibility of divinely authorized versions of these practices under any circumstance. The language of the document reads as a firm, unbending moral code. The inclusion of the phrase “unless it be by message del[iv]ered to you by our own mouth, by actual revelation & commandment” in the Richards draft, therefore, does not clarify the existing text. Instead, it muddies its meaning and reverses its force.

In his June 1844 testimony before the Nauvoo City Council regarding the *Expositor* affidavits, Smith denied that the revelation was about what the accusers alleged, and “said he had never preached the revelation in private, as he had in public—had not taught it to the anointed in the church in private, which statement many present confirmed.”⁶⁸ The established narrative frames Smith’s assertions that he had not taught polygamy privately as a lie he told to protect himself. Whether one accepts or rejects Joseph Smith’s testimony that he had not privately taught plural marriage, the historical record converges on a significant point: he did not publicly promote a doctrine of divine moral reversal.

Some historians, such as William Victor Smith, who accept the established provenance of the July 12th revelation, have argued that the revelation was only put in writing at Hyrum Smith’s insistence and was never intended for public circulation.⁶⁹ In this reading, the document functioned as a restricted internal text rather than a proclamation of a new moral order. Gary Bergera, in reviewing Smith’s work, affirms and expands this position, emphasizing the revelation’s “problematic nature.”⁷⁰ If this assessment is correct, the question of why a private document was introduced to the body of the Church eight years after the death of Smith must be

⁶⁷Letter to Emma Smith and the Relief Society, 31 March 1842, p. 1, JSP, [LINK](#).

⁶⁸Revised Minutes, 17 June 1844, as Published in *Nauvoo Neighbor*, 3, JSP, [LINK](#).

⁶⁹William V. Smith, *Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants: The Plural Marriage Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018).

⁷⁰Gary James Bergera, “A Private Revelation — William Victor Smith, Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants: The Plural Marriage Revelation.” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2018), [LINK](#).

grappled with. If Smith was reluctant to commit the revelation to writing and did not intend for it to circulate publicly, the later public announcement, institutional adoption, and eventual canonization raise significant questions about the grounds on which these developments occurred. The process, carried out largely by those who controlled the Church's archival records, may have moved beyond Smith's intentions. Similar questions could be asked regarding the "Happiness Letter" and the October 5, 1843 journal entry. Whether Joseph privately taught plural marriage or not, the embedding of divine reversal into the historical record did not reflect his public declarations and was not accomplished by him or by his stated directions, but occurred through editorial revisions after his death.

Joseph Smith, Revelation, and the Limits of Divine Override

Any claim that a doctrine of moral reversal emerged only after Joseph Smith's death must contend with the fact that he did, at times, teach that revelation was responsive to circumstance and that God's instructions varied across dispensations. Several passages in Joseph Smith's sermons and early church publications can be cited to suggest that Joseph endorsed a version of the doctrine of divine reversal. A closer examination, however, shows that these teachings are limited and do not constitute the reversal or sanctification of moral prohibitions.

Joseph Smith repeatedly emphasized that revelation was adapted to the "peculiar situation and circumstances" of different peoples and eras. In an 1834 discourse, he explained that earlier revelations could not be mechanically applied to the present because "we are differently situated from any other people that ever existed upon this earth," and therefore "those former revelations cannot be suited to our condition, because they were given to other people who were before us."⁷¹ Similar language appeared in the Church's early newspaper, *The Evening and the Morning Star*, which stressed that God had always provided revelations "wisely calculated to govern"

⁷¹Minutes and Discourse, 21 April 1834, 43, JSP, *LINK*.

each church according to its circumstances, and that successive covenants differed in form and application across dispensations.⁷²

While these statements have been seen as evidence of Joseph Smith's openness to divine reversals, they do not articulate inversions of moral prohibitions. Rather, they are limited to variations in specific institutional structure, ritual practice, and Church governance, while retaining the stability of moral law. The distinction is crucial. Joseph Smith's teaching that ongoing revelation governs the organization of the Church does not imply that acts consistently condemned as immoral can be transformed into righteousness by divine command.

Joseph Smith's revelation that states, "I, the Lord, command and revoke, as it seemeth me good" (D&C 56:3-6) is sometimes interpreted as evidence that God revokes commandments. However, the context of the revelation, as outlined in the explanatory header, concerns situational instructions—missionary assignments, travel directives, and individual responsibilities tied to specific circumstances contingent upon time and place. Nothing in this section suggests that commands such as "Thou shalt not kill" or "Thou shalt not commit adultery" are subject to reversal or revocation. The revelation assumes moral continuity while affirming divine authority over individual administrative instructions.

Doctrine and Covenants 98 is similarly misread when cited as evidence of moral exception. The section describes a framework for defensive violence that closely parallels the "just war principle" long established within Western Christian ethics. It emphasizes patience, forbearance, and repeated non-retaliation, permitting force only as a last resort under escalating aggression. The revelation does not sanctify killing or redefine it as a righteous act. It treats violence as an undesirable response to repeated aggression, justified only under extreme duress, and never as a standing religious obligation. The moral prohibition against killing remains intact.

Smith's November 7, 1841 sermon is also relevant. There are three extant accounts of this sermon: one from Wilford Woodruff, one from Willard Richards written in a letter to Levi Richards,

⁷²"The Elders in the Land of Zion to the Church of Christ Scattered Abroad," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 2 (Jul. 1832): [5]; "The Old and New Revelations," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 4 (Sep. 1832): [5].

and one from George A. Smith in the Addenda in the *Manuscript History of the Church*. Wilford Woodruff recorded it as follows:

Elder Wm [O.] Clark preached about 2 hours when Br Joseph arose & reprov'd him as pharisaical & hypocritical & not edifying the people Br Joseph then deliver[e]d unto us an edifying ad[d]ress showing us what temperance faith virtue, charity & truth was he also said if we did not accuse one another God would not accuse us & if we had no accuser we should enter heaven he would take us there as his backload . . . if we would throw a cloak of charity over his sins he would over ours for charity cover[e]d a multitude of sins & what many people called sin was not sin & he did many things to break down superstition & he would break it down.⁷³

This discourse is of interest primarily for the statement that “what many people call sin is not sin.” Read in isolation, this phrase could appear to suggest a principle of divine reversal. Yet when placed within the wider context of the sermon, the statement is seen to address a different concern. Joseph Smith’s remarks were directed against the tendency among some Saints to impose overly rigid or puritanical standards upon one another. Smith’s explanation that “what many people called sin was not sin” and that he often acted deliberately to “break down superstition,” was in service of his more critical message that judging one another was the greater sin. The central emphasis of the sermon was not the suspension of moral law but a warning against self-righteous judgment and cultural taboos mistaken for divine commandments.

Woodruff recorded Smith teaching that “if we did not accuse one another God would not accuse us,” and that if the Saints would “throw a cloak of charity over his sins he would over ours, for charity cover[e]d a multitude of sins.” George A. Smith’s later reconstruction similarly emphasizes the same message: “If you do not accuse each other God will not accuse you. If you have no accuser you will enter heaven.”⁷⁴ In both versions, the theme of the sermon is unmistakable: culturally contested behaviors were of less concern than the spirit of condemnation.

⁷³Discourse, 7 November 1841, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff, 109, JSP, *LINK*.

⁷⁴History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 Addenda, 19, JSP, *LINK*.

Wilford Woodruff's diary entry represents the most contemporaneous account, likely reflecting notes taken during or immediately after the sermon. Willard Richards's account was written several days later in a letter to his brother Levi and contains additional teachings on morality that are not present in the other accounts. Richards reported:

God gives laws to suit the circumstances of his creatures. Laws in themselves contradictory; "Thou shalt not kill;" then to Abraham "Slay thy son Isaac." Abraham rendered obedience, nothing doubting. This was virtue, perfecting his faith by works.⁷⁵

He also wrote:

"No man will be condemned before God who has no accuser." Like the woman who was taken in the very act and they came accusing &c. "Let him without sin cast the first stone." "Where are thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? No man Lord. Neither do I."⁷⁶

These two questions of morality, the command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and the woman taken in adultery, appear only in Richards's summary and echo similar language found in the "Happiness Letter"⁷⁷

More than a decade later, George A. Smith produced an expanded reconstruction of the sermon while compiling the *Manuscript History of the Church*. Although his account was written much later it likely depended on sources such as Woodruff's diary, and the editors of the Joseph Smith Papers note that George A. Smith was likely present when the sermon was originally delivered, giving him firsthand familiarity with the event.

Neither Woodruff's contemporaneous notes nor George A. Smith's later reconstruction includes the moral reversals Richards reports. Richards's unique interpretation or revision of Joseph's teachings reported to his brother in November 1841 a few months before his February 1842 letter to Jennetta could be considered

⁷⁵Discourse, 7 November 1841, as Reported by Willard Richards.

⁷⁶Discourse, 7 November 1841, as Reported by Willard Richards.

⁷⁷Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 244.

the earliest articulation of his divine reversal theology. As the two other accounts did not include these moral arguments, if Joseph Smith did include them in his sermon, then, once again, it is only through Richards's interpretive retelling that divine reversal enters the documentary record.

Beyond Plural Marriage: Blood Atonement

The logic of divine reversal traced throughout the Nauvoo record did not terminate with the canonization of plural marriage. Rather, following Joseph Smith's death, the same reversal framework expanded outward, providing theological justification for actions that directly contravened universal biblical prohibitions. One doctrine in particular, so-called "blood atonement," demonstrates how deeply the principle of divinely sanctioned reversal became embedded in post-Nauvoo Mormon culture.

The doctrine that became known as blood atonement emerged publicly in Utah sermons during the 1850s, especially under Brigham Young. Its core premise was that certain sins were so grave that Christ's atonement did not apply unless the sinner's own blood was shed. While often softened in later apologetic treatments, contemporaneous statements framed the act not merely as permissible, but as righteous, loving, and commanded under certain circumstances.

In an 1856 sermon, Brigham Young stated:

There are sins that men commit for which they cannot receive forgiveness in this world, or in that which is to come, and if they had their eyes open to see their true condition, they would be perfectly willing to have their blood spilt upon the ground, that the smoke thereof might ascend to heaven as an offering for their sins."⁷⁸

He continued by asserting that such an act would not be murder but would be charity: "I know, when you hear my brethren telling about cutting people off from the earth, that you consider it a harsh doctrine; but it is to save them, not to destroy them."⁷⁹

⁷⁸Brigham Young, Discourse, Sep. 21, 1856, *Journal of Discourses* 4:53, [LINK](#).

⁷⁹Young, Discourse, Sep. 21, 1856, 4:53.

Here, the absolute moral prohibition against killing is inverted. Under divine sanction, killing becomes an act of salvific compassion. The moral status of the act is determined by the presence of priesthood authorization—precisely the same mechanism by which adultery was transformed into righteousness in Doctrine and Covenants 132.

The doctrine of blood atonement illustrates the maturation of the divine reversal framework traced earlier in this study. What began in Nauvoo as a reversal clause, “unless the Lord directs otherwise,” expanded in Utah into a comprehensive moral system in which any commandment could, in principle, be suspended by authorized revelation. Though actual implementation remains historically contested, the doctrinal framework itself reveals how divine reversal had become normalized within leadership discourse.

The post-Joseph emergence of this doctrine therefore reinforces the central argument of this paper. Divine reversal did not originate as a fully articulated public teaching of Joseph Smith, but as an interpretive framework developed and normalized by his clerks and successors. Once institutionalized, it proved capable of justifying not only plural marriage but the suspension of the most fundamental moral absolutes of the Christian tradition.

Conclusion

Examining the core documents under Richards’s control reveals a doctrine of divine reversal that shaped the development of polygamous theology. The evolution of this reversal logic seems clear from the examined record. It was first hinted at in Richard’s letter to his brother in November 1841. It was then more fully articulated in Richards’s private correspondence to Jennetta in February 1842, and soon thereafter in the “Happiness Letter” and the draft version of the letter to the Relief Society. With the latter we see the possible creation of a dual record: the insertion of “unless it be a divine message” preserved legality for any insiders while its omission in the Minute Book preserved public denial. Next, this logic was retrofitted into the October 5, 1843 journal entry, demonstrating Richards’s gatekeeping and harmonization at work. The later insertion of “unless the Lord directs otherwise” showed possible reversal of commandments under divine authority. Finally,

this accumulated framework was realized in the canonized revelation of D&C 132, where Richards's custodianship could possibly have overseen the final form. This progression demonstrates that the reversal principle, while absent from the Smiths' unmediated sermons, was repeatedly introduced and preserved by Richards's clerical hand across the Nauvoo record.

While later institutional memory would identify Joseph Smith as the originator of the "divine reversal" framework, the surviving record tells a different story. Joseph Smith's writings and verified sermons do not include this concept. Only in the decade following his death, through the editorial and theological work of his clerks and successors, did the doctrine of divine reversal become attached to his name. Willard Richards stands at the center of this process. His meticulous recordkeeping gave the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints a coherent documentary identity, but it blurred the boundary between recording and creating revelation. If Joseph did not publicly teach divine reversal as it later appeared, Richards's editorial interventions were instrumental in constructing the appearance that he did.

At each juncture where a moral prohibition became reversible, where "thou shalt not" gained an "unless the Lord directs otherwise," Richards's editorial work can be traced. His continued influence into the Utah period ensured the dominance of this doctrine. Though initially peripheral, the "divine reversal" doctrine survived scrutiny, gained legitimacy, and entered the canon. As mentioned previously, in May 1844 Joseph Smith expressed confidence that the clerical record kept by his scribes would protect him from false accusations, so that his enemies could not charge him without written evidence.⁸⁰ Ironically, the clerical system Joseph trusted to preserve an unimpeachable record of his actions and teachings introduced new ideas not evidenced in contemporaneous documents.

Near this same period of time Joseph Smith famously declared, "You never knew my heart; no man knows my history."⁸¹ In light of the evidence explored here, the statement reads as remarkably prescient. Knowledge of the historical Joseph is scant. The man behind the sermons, revelations, and journals, comes to us largely through those entrusted to record and interpret his words. Among

⁸⁰Discourse, 26 May 1844.

⁸¹Discourse, 7 April 1844, as published in *Times and Seasons*, 612, JSP, *LINK*.

them, Willard Richards played an especially consequential role. Standing at the crossroads of transcription and transformation, Richards inserted into the record a theology of divine reversal that Joseph never publicly taught, yet which ultimately became institutionalized. Richards's persistent inclusion of divine reversal logic, whether in letters, journal entries, or retrospective editorial work, gradually shaped the Church's doctrinal memory. Through his pen, Joseph's legacy was both preserved and reinterpreted. Recalling the opening observation that history is often written not by the victors themselves but by those they entrust to record it, Richards emerges as a quiet but decisive victor.