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The *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* fosters respectful, inclusive, and scholarly dialogue on one of Mormon history's most debated topics. By bridging credentialed historians and independent researchers, we elevate discussions beyond polemics while maintaining high academic standards.

Polygamy's secrecy and controversy have long complicated its study. Our journal embraces democratized historical research, recognizing that valuable insights come from both professional and independent scholars. To support non-credentialed researchers, we offer guidelines, mentorship, and meticulous double-blind peer review, ensuring rigorous methodology without lowering scholarly expectations.

We publish in multiple formats—online, print, and Audible—to reach both scholars and the public. Our annual conference, podcast, website, and social media serve as hubs for ongoing discussion.

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Our approach is grounded in core historical principles:

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- **Contextualization:** Polygamy is analyzed within its broader religious, cultural, and legal settings to avoid anachronism.
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Through these methodological commitments, the *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* engages not only in the study of the past but also in the broader intellectual project of understanding how historical narratives are constructed, challenged, and redefined. By fostering rigorous, inclusive, and respectful scholarship, we aim to enrich both academic and public conversations on this vital topic.

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A Detailed Linguistic Analysis of Doctrine and Covenants 132

Ethan Lloyd

Journal of Mormon Polygamy vol. 2, no. 1 (2026)*

Doctrine and Covenants (D&C) 132 occupies a unique and controversial position within the Latter-day Saint scriptural canon. Although the text has long been associated with Joseph Smith and traditionally understood as a dictated revelation from July 1843, the historical record surrounding its production, preservation, and transmission is fragmented and contested. Eyewitness accounts differ in detail and are oftentimes contradictory; manuscript lines of descent are uncertain; and later recollections often reflect decades of interpretive development. This has generated an extensive—and frequently inconclusive—scholarly debate over the origins and authorship of the document.

What has been largely absent from this discussion is systematic linguistic analysis. Stylometry, the quantitative study of authorial style through function-word patterns and statistical modeling, offers an independent means of evaluating a text's stylistic alignment with an author's known writings. While not a replacement for traditional historical methods, stylometry can introduce a statistical layer of evidence into authorship questions that have otherwise relied heavily on retrospective testimony and interpretive inference.

This paper applies modern stylometric tools to assess whether D&C 132 conforms to Joseph Smith's established linguistic profile. Using function-word distributions, principal component analysis, and cross-validated classification models, this study compares the stylometric signature of D&C 132 to that of Joseph's authenticated revelations recorded within approximately the same period.

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

The aim is not to reconstruct the historical circumstances of the revelation's production—a task requiring separate, dedicated treatment—but to determine whether the text's internal linguistic features align with Joseph's known dictation patterns.

By focusing narrowly on the stylometric evidence, this study provides an analytically grounded perspective on the authorship of D&C 132. The findings do not attempt to resolve the broader historical debate but instead contribute a quantitative foundation upon which future historiographical work can build.

Preliminary Considerations: Doctrinal and Tonal Discontinuities

Before turning to a more formal stylometric analysis, several preliminary observations can be made regarding doctrinal content and rhetorical tone. These observations are not offered as quantitative evidence of authorship but as contextual indicators of potential discontinuity within the text. Notable shifts in tone, modes of address, and doctrinal framing within Doctrine and Covenants 132 raise questions that warrant closer examination. Identifying such doctrinal and tonal irregularities establishes the need for a more rigorous, data-driven analysis and helps frame the stylometric results that follow. The purpose of this section, therefore, is to outline qualitative discontinuities that motivate the subsequent computational investigation, rather than to substitute for it.

A close reading of D&C 132 reveals pronounced shifts in both doctrinal content and rhetorical tone when compared to Joseph Smith's verified revelations. In Joseph's established prophetic voice, revelations tend to focus on broad spiritual principles, moral exhortations, and expansive theological visions, often expressed in a pastoral tone designed to teach, comfort, and inspire. They typically situate commands within the larger redemptive narrative of the Restoration, emphasizing repentance, unity, and the pursuit of holiness. D&C 132, however, adopts an unusually contractual register, detailing harsh commands and "conditions," particularly under which plural marriage may be practiced. This meticulous, rules-based language reads more like a conditional contract than the

flowing, revelatory prose characteristic of Joseph's other recorded revelations.

At the level of surface content, portions of D&C 132 appear to stand in tension with other scriptural texts associated with Joseph Smith. For example, the Book of Mormon plainly states that "David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord" (Jacob 2:24). By contrast, D&C 132 portrays the same figures as having received many wives with divine approval, asserting that they "did not sin" except in specific, narrowly defined circumstances (D&C 132:38-39). Similarly, Joseph Smith's inspired revision of the Bible modifies passages traditionally read as permitting plural marriage in ways that emphasize a monogamous framework, contradicting the general permissiveness of the practice in D&C 132.¹ Taken together, these contrasts warrant suspicion and highlight internal scriptural divergence that has long complicated attempts to treat D&C 132 as congruent with Joseph Smith's earlier scriptural productions.

A related divergence appears at the level of tone and rhetorical structure. D&C 132 exhibits an unusually dense repetition of formulaic divine titles. Phrases such as "the Lord your God" or "the Lord thy God" occur far more densely in D&C 132 than in any other section. In Joseph's authentic revelations, "the Lord your God" is generally reserved for moments of emphasis; in 132, the repetition is almost rhythmic, functioning like a signature after each clause (See D&C 132:28, 40, 47, 49, 53, 54, 56, 57). This constant reassertion of divine authority creates a formalized, authoritarian cadence dissimilar from most of Joseph's earlier work.

The harshness and the judicial tone of D&C 132 are also striking. While condemnations appear in other revelations, they are typically tempered with words of comfort, promises of mercy, and open invitations to repentance (e.g., D&C 29:40-42, D&C 42:74-92, D&C 63:14-20, D&C 84:56-57). In D&C 132, however, such balancing language is rare, or unequal. Instead, the text frequently pairs formal divine authority with absolute, irrevocable decrees such as "shall be destroyed" (vv. 54, 64), and "I will

¹See 2 Samuel 12:13 JST and 1 Kings 3:14 JST; 1 Kings 11:4,6 JST and 1 Kings 14:8 JST in Thomas E. Sherry and W. Jeffrey Marsh, "Precious Truths Restored: Joseph Smith Translation Changes Not Included in Our Bible," *Religious Educator* 5, no. 2 (2004): 57-74, *LINK*.

destroy her” (v. 64), leaving little room for reassurance or pastoral encouragement—a contrast from Joseph’s other revelations.

The tonal break becomes arguably most jarring in the “D&C 132 Polygamy” section, where the Lord threatens Emma Smith specifically with destruction should she reject the “law” being revealed (D&C 132:51-57). In the rest of the Doctrine and Covenants, “destroy” almost always appears in one of two contexts: (1) Satan as the destroyer, seeking spiritual ruin, or (2) God as the destroyer of wicked nations or hostile outsiders. When directed at individuals, it is generally aimed at outright antagonists, not covenant-keeping insiders. Emma herself is described in D&C 25 as “an elect lady” with a divine calling, and even in sharp rebukes (e.g., Joseph in D&C 3:9–10; Martin Harris in D&C 5:27–28), the Lord stops short of threatening annihilation without offering words of repentance and comfort. The D&C 132 threat represents an anomalous, highly personalized usage inconsistent with Joseph’s established revelatory tone and theological approach.

Pronoun usage further underscores the stylistic departure. Many of Joseph’s revelations address “my people,” “my friends,” or “brethren,” softening the voice and reinforcing communal solidarity. In contrast, D&C 132 more often uses personal pronouns directly in connection with imperatives or judgments towards individuals, heightening the confrontational tone. Notably, “friend” or “beloved” language is virtually absent. This absence is particularly striking given that the “D&C 132 Polygamy” section registers some of the highest overall rates of pronoun usage among Joseph’s doctrinal revelations—a density that could otherwise lend itself to warmth and love, but here instead creates a confrontational atmosphere. The text exhibits lower preposition usage than is typical in Joseph’s revelations, suggesting a heavier reliance on direct address and simple syntactic linking rather than the more descriptive, relational phrasing found in his authenticated prophetic voice.

Narrative elements—common in Joseph’s lengthier revelations, such as D&C 29, D&C 45, and D&C 84—are also missing. Those sections interweave commands with doctrinal exposition, parables, scriptural paraphrasing, or visionary sequences. D&C 132, by contrast, is almost entirely prescriptive, consisting of commands,

conditions, and penalties, with minimal theological narrative beyond what is necessary to justify doctrine.

These patterns—the elevated density of formulaic divine titles, the harsh judicial register, the contractual structuring, the absence of narrative, the confrontational pronoun usage, the anomalous threat toward Emma—form a profile that diverges from revelations commonly attributed to Joseph Smith. These differences may be more consistent with a later author operating in the polemical and administrative context of 1850s Utah, where the defense of plural marriage demanded both legalistic framing and uncompromising authority, though investigation of 1850s alternative authorship would necessitate a separate study.

Function Word Stylometric Analysis

Given the observed discontinuities, a stylometric study of D&C 132 was deemed fit for further analysis. Stylometry is the quantitative study of linguistic style, typically using statistical methods to measure unconscious patterns in an author's word choice and syntax. Because certain elements of writing—such as vocabulary preferences, sentence structure, and the use of common grammatical words—tend to remain consistent for an individual author, stylometry can be used to attribute anonymous or disputed works with a certain degree of confidence. One of the most reliable indicators of authorship is the distribution of function words (also known as stop words). Function words are short, high-frequency words such as *a*, *and*, *the*, *or*, *but* that carry little topical meaning but are used unconsciously and habitually. In the case of D&C 132, this also includes words typically considered more archaic due to the biblical-style language Joseph frequently used in his revelations, such as *ye*, *shall*, *unto*, etc. Since function words are less influenced by subject matter, they preserve the “wordprint” of an author more reliably than content words.

Function word frequency analysis has been shown effective in multiple landmark authorship studies, most famously in the resolution of the authorship of *The Federalist Papers* by statisticians Frederick Mosteller and David Wallace.² The method has also been

²Frederick Mosteller and David L. Wallace, “Inference in an Authorship Problem,” *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 58, no. 302 (1963): 275–309, *LINK*.

used in detecting multiple authorship within Mormon scripture, particularly the Book of Mormon.³ However, only two known stylometric studies have specifically examined the authorship of D&C 132: a 1969 master's thesis by RLDS graduate student Enid DeBarthe,⁴ and a more recently published study through *The Interpreter Foundation*.⁵ The latter study will be covered in detail later.

DeBarthe's study analyzed features such as redundancies or tautologies, neologisms, valedictories, unique phrases, and sentence structure, comparing D&C 132 to the writings of Brigham Young, Orson Pratt, Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, and others. She concluded that Brigham Young wrote section 132 rather than Joseph or Hyrum Smith. While her work was pioneering for its time, several methodological limitations reduced its accuracy by modern standards:

- **Technological Constraints:** Without computer assistance, DeBarthe manually identified lexical features, increasing the likelihood of oversight and limiting precision.
- **Lack of Frequency Normalization:** She reported raw counts of linguistic features without adjusting for differences in text length—some of which varied by over 1,000 words—rather than segmenting texts into equal-length samples and calculating relative frequencies.
- **Small Corpus Size:** Her Joseph Smith dataset contained only four revelations (including D&C 132), limiting statistical reliability.
- **Failure to Control for Genre:** She did not distinguish between Joseph's revelatory style and his personal correspondence, despite their distinct word usage patterns.

³Matthew Roper, Paul J. Fields, and G. Bruce Schaalje, "Stylometric Analyses of the Book of Mormon: A Short History," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012): Article 4, [LINK](#).

⁴Enid Stubbart DeBarthe, *A Bibliography on Joseph Smith II, the Mormon Prophet-Leader* (qualifying paper, Northern Illinois University, 1969), [LINK](#).

⁵Paul Fields, Steven T. Densley Jr., Matthew Roper, and Larry Bassist, "Historical and Stylometric Evidence for the Authorship of Doctrine and Covenants 132," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 67 (2025): 1–70, [LINK](#).

- **Overemphasis on Unique Phrases:** She gave disproportionate weight to rare expressions in D&C 132 without considering that biblical-style phrasing common in Joseph’s authenticated revelations, or simply low usage frequency, may be potential explanations. For instance, DeBarthe noted that “go in thereat” appears nowhere else in the D&C, yet the phrase simply uses verbiage from Matthew 7:13.

While DeBarthe’s conclusions cannot be considered definitive, her work remains important for highlighting significant stylistic differences between D&C 132 and Joseph Smith’s authenticated revelations. Her study laid the groundwork for further investigation, and the present research builds on her insight—applying modern computational stylometry, larger and genre-consistent corpora, and statistical visualization to reexamine the question of whether the polygamous portions of D&C 132 originated with Joseph Smith.

Methodology and Corpus Selection

Hypothesis

This study proceeds from the hypothesis that the linguistic profile of Doctrine and Covenants 132 reflects an authorial fingerprint distinct from that of Joseph Smith. Given the complex transmission history of the text, the absence of any extant dictated manuscript in the handwriting of Joseph Smith or his known scribes at the time the text was purportedly produced, and the denials by Joseph and Hyrum Smith that the original revelation authorized modern polygamy, it is reasonable to consider the possibility that the scripture as it exists today differs from the original dictated text.

Under this hypothesis, the portions of D&C 132 addressing plural marriage—and potentially the material related to eternal marriage—would be expected to form a distinct stylistic cluster, showing measurable separation from Joseph Smith’s objectively verified revelations. Conversely, if the text aligns closely with Joseph’s established stylistic signature across core function-word features and similarity metrics, that would weaken the hypothesis.

Corpus Selection and Study Design

This study employs a function-word frequency analysis to compare the linguistic profile of D&C 132 with a control corpus of Joseph Smith’s authenticated revelations. All texts were processed using an automated Python-based workflow that normalized formatting, applied consistent tokenization, and extracted standardized function-word frequency vectors prior to analysis. The control corpus consists of multiple 665-word samples drawn from confirmed Joseph Smith revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, all belonging to the prophetic/revelatory genre. Every sample was taken from the earliest available manuscript to ensure textual reliability.

Revelations and chunks were selected to approximate as closely as possible the doctrinal density and prophetic tone of D&C 132, while excluding materials whose genre or content would introduce stylistic noise. Specifically, passages dominated by scriptural paraphrase or quotation (e.g., D&C 93, 133), personal correspondence (e.g., D&C 121, 128), and administrative or dialogic instruction (e.g., D&C 20, 68, 104, 107) were omitted. Revelations received during the Book of Mormon translation period (approximately D&C 3–19) were also excluded to avoid potential linguistic cross-contamination, as Joseph Smith’s stylistic patterns during that period may have been directly shaped by the syntax of the Book of Mormon translation process—something that would warrant a follow-up study. Revelations suspected of co-authorship (e.g., D&C 76) were also excluded to preserve stylistic purity.

The primary corpus for Joseph Smith’s middle-period revelatory style was drawn from D&C 29, 38, 42, 45, 50, 58, 63, 84, 88, 98, and 101 (dating 1830–1833). A secondary analysis incorporated Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo-era revelations (D&C 124–126) to assess potential temporal drift, as authorial style can subtly evolve over time.

Preparation of the Target Text (D&C 132)

The text of D&C 132 was cleaned, stripped of punctuation, lowercased, and segmented into seven 665-word samples using a 50% rolling window (“rolling stylometry”), producing three segments corresponding to the polygamy-related portion and four to the non-

polygamy portion.⁶ This procedure preserved contextual continuity, ensured comparability between samples, and generated a sufficient number of segments for statistical analysis.

The division into the “polygamy” and “no-polygamy” portions was informed by Joseph and Hyrum Smith’s contemporaneous, public explanation that the July 12, 1843 revelation concerned eternal, monogamous marriage, with only a possible brief reference to ancient patriarchal marriage practices.⁷ This clarification directly contradicts the *Nauvoo Expositor*’s claim that the revelation endorsed plural marriage.⁸ Based on this contextual comparison, verses 1–3, 34–44, and 51–66 are designated as the polygamy-related portion, while verses 4–33, 45–50, and the final sentence of verse 66 are treated as the non-polygamy portion for the purposes of this analysis.

Preparation of the Joseph Smith Control Corpus

The primary corpus was also preprocessed by removing punctuation, converting all text to lowercase, and combining the revelations into a continuous sequence. The text was then segmented into uniform 665-word chunks with a 50% overlap to preserve contextual continuity, after which function-word frequencies were calculated for each segment. To isolate the most stable portion of Joseph Smith’s stylistic signal, the upper and lower 15% of observations were trimmed, retaining the central 70% of the distribution. Trimming was based on distance from Joseph’s centroid. This approach—directly analogous to trimmed-mean methods such as “core inflation” measures in economics—is a well-established technique for reducing noise and attenuating the influence of statistical outliers without throwing away meaningful data.⁹ In

⁶For other studies utilizing rolling stylometry, see Maciej Eder, “Through the Magnifying Glass: Rolling Stylometry for Collaborative Authorship,” in *Digital Humanities 2015: Book of Abstracts* (University of Western Sydney, 2015), [LINK](#).

⁷Minutes, 10 June 1844, 25, The Joseph Smith Papers (hereafter JSP), [LINK](#). Published in the *Nauvoo Neighbor* on June 19, 1844. See Nauvoo City Council, Revised Minutes, Hancock County, Illinois, 17 June 1844, “For the Neighbor,” *Nauvoo Neighbor* 2, no. 8 (Jun. 19, 1844): 2–3. [LINK](#).

⁸*Nauvoo Expositor* 1, no. 1 (Jun. 7, 1844): 2, JSP, [LINK](#).

⁹Jim Dolmas and Evan Koenig, *Which Core to Believe? Trimmed Mean versus Ex-Food-and-Energy Inflation*, May 28, 2019, [LINK](#); Robert Dixon and G. C. Lim, “Underlying Inflation in Australia: Are the Existing Measures Satisfactory?,” *Economic Record* 80, no. 251 (December 2004): 373–86; Tareef Kamil Mustafa, “Non-Word

a corpus as heterogeneous as the Doctrine and Covenants, with its shifting audiences, topics, and scribal influences, as well as its extensive biblical paraphrase, this trimming procedure enhances the reliability and interpretability of Joseph Smith's resulting stylistic profile. The final corpus consisted of 51 overlapping 665-word chunks.

The Nauvoo-era corpus (approximately 5,700 words) was also segmented into 665-word chunks with a 50% overlap. Combined with the polygamy and non-polygamy portions of D&C 132, this produced 23 total samples. Given the limited corpus size, the effective number of independent samples was small, and the results of this secondary analysis should be interpreted cautiously.

Function-Word Selection and Normalization

All text samples were normalized to occurrences per 665 words to ensure comparability. The function-word set consisted of the highest-frequency, distributionally stable tokens across Joseph Smith's revelations, including articles (e.g., *the*), pronouns (e.g., *I*, *you*, *they*), conjunctions (e.g., *and*, *but*), prepositions (e.g., *in*, *on*, *by*), auxiliaries (e.g., *shall*, *will*), and determiners (e.g., *this*, *that*). Female-gendered pronouns (*she*, *her*) were intentionally excluded due to their disproportionate frequency in D&C 132, resulting from the revelation's unusual and extended hostile address to Emma Smith.

The initial candidate set consisted of the 75 most frequent function words in the Doctrine and Covenants. Two filters were used to refine this list:

- Frequency filter: Tokens needed a mean relative frequency across the corpus of approximately 0.15% to avoid rare-word noise.
- Part-of-speech consistency filter: Tokens that alternated between content and function roles (e.g., *behold*, *come*) were removed.

After filtering, 50 high-frequency, consistently used function words remained. These formed the feature set for all stylometric

Attributes' Efficiency in Text Mining Authorship Prediction," *Journal of Intelligent Systems* 29, no. 1 (2020): 1415, [LINK](#).

comparisons. The final list was:

the, and, of, by, to, in, I, shall, that, be, unto, you, my, is, for, a, are, not, have, they, which, all, it, this, he, as, his, their, will, them, with, your, who, ye, him, from, upon, may, me, or, was, if, at, on, before, those, but, an, am, were.

Statistical Analysis

Normalized function-word frequencies were analyzed using several complementary statistical techniques:

1. Principal Component Analysis (PCA)

PCA was used to visualize clustering among samples and to identify stylistic deviations. This approach is standard in stylometry for detecting outliers and exploring stylistic patterns.¹⁰

2. Cosine Similarity

Cosine similarity matrices were generated using standardized (z-scored) frequencies. This measured directional consistency in function-word usage between each D&C 132 segment and the Joseph Smith stylistic centroid. Results were visualized through heatmaps.

Together, these methods quantified how closely each D&C 132 segment aligned with Joseph Smith's authenticated stylistic profile.

Rationale

Function words reflect unconscious linguistic habits largely independent of topic or doctrine. By combining genre-controlled sampling, robust outlier trimming, rolling stylometry, and multi-metric validation, this study isolates deep structural patterns in Joseph Smith's revelatory prose. Deviation within the D&C 132

¹⁰Carmen Klaussner and Carl Vogel, "A Diachronic Corpus for Literary Style Analysis," in *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC 2018)* (Miyazaki, Japan: European Language Resources Association, 2018), 3496–97, *LINK*; Maciej Eder, Jan Rybicki, and Mike Kestemont, "Stylometry with R: A Package for Computational Text Analysis," *The R Journal* 8, no. 1 (2015): 107–21, *LINK*.

text itself may suggest compositional layering, editorial expansion, or non-Joseph authorship beyond normal stylistic variation.

Findings

The function word frequency analysis reveals clear and measurable stylistic differences between the “D&C 132 Polygamy” revelation and the authenticated Joseph Smith revelations in the control corpus. When standardized function word frequencies are plotted using Principal Component Analysis (PCA), the Joseph Smith samples cluster relatively tightly together, reflecting the internal consistency of his prophetic/revelatory style, even despite the inevitable variation in topics and audiences. In contrast, the “D&C 132 Polygamy” section chunks appear in their own cluster as clear outliers, positioned visually outside the Joseph Smith cluster in PCA space.

Additionally, the cosine-similarity matrices reveal a clear and stable three-way stylistic division within the corpus. The Joseph Smith baseline (JS), the “no-polygamy” segments of D&C 132 (132N), and the “polygamy” segments (132P) each form internally coherent stylistic clusters. For visual clarity, the individual 51 JS chunks are omitted from the figures; when included, they cluster around their centroid (approximately -0.28 to $+0.55$), reflecting the expected internal variation of Joseph Smith’s revelations while maintaining a consistent stylistic direction. In both heat maps, however, the JS centroid shows uniformly negative similarity to every D&C 132 segment (approximately -0.38 to -0.71), indicating a pronounced stylistic divergence between D&C 132 and Joseph Smith’s established profile. By contrast, both D&C 132 subsets exhibit moderate to strong internal cohesion: 132N ranges from 0.081 to 0.55 among its segments, while 132P ranges from 0.243 to 0.648. Their respective centroids align even more strongly with their component segments, with 132N clustering at roughly 0.54 to 0.82 and 132P at approximately 0.76 to 0.93, indicating two relatively distinct but internally stable non-JS stylistic voices. Although the 132N and 132P sections form separate stylistic signatures, they remain substantially closer to one another than to the Joseph Smith baseline. This pattern holds across both cosine-similarity comparisons—against Joseph Smith’s middle-period corpus and

against sections 124–126—yielding a consistent result: JS, 132N, and 132P behave as three internally cohesive yet distinct stylistic profiles.

Function word analysis shows that the polygamous portions of D&C 132 depart from Joseph Smith’s baseline style. The most striking deviation is in the use of the word *the*, which occurs at a rate of about 3.75% in the polygamy portion of D&C 132 words compared to an average of 7% for the rest of the corpus. Other underused features include common determiners (*of*) and conjunctions (*that*). Overused features include clause-linking conjunctions (*and*), gender-specific pronouns (*him*, *he*), archaic markers (*unto*), and conditional language (*if*, *were*). This combination produces a stylistic profile of D&C 132 that is more verbose, personalized, and conditional than Joseph’s authenticated revelations, aligning with the authoritarian tone identified in the aforementioned qualitative analysis. The “D&C 132 Polygamy” section’s pronoun usage ranks among the highest across all Joseph-era doctrinal revelations, yet this density does not produce the warmer, communal tone typical of Joseph’s style.¹¹ Preposition usage is lower, on average, than the Joseph Smith mean, creating a more abrupt, directive sentence structure.¹²

Additionally, measures of lexical diversity (unique words ÷ total words) indicate that the combined D&C 132 chunks exhibit low vocabulary variation compared to the other chunks in the corpus, with an average lexical diversity of around 29.6%, compared to the corpus average of around 34.3%. Whereas most revelations generally maintain a broad distribution of unique word forms relative to length, D&C 132 relies heavily on repeated doctrinal phrases and recycled grammatical constructions. This restricted lexical palette suggests a more formulaic composition style and reduced linguistic variety, setting it apart as the least lexically diverse chunks of text analyzed.

¹¹The “D&C 132 Polygamy” section contains an average pronoun rate of about 23% compared to about 19% for Joseph’s corpus mean.

¹²The “D&C 132 Polygamy” section contains an average preposition rate of about 13% compared to about 14% for Joseph’s corpus mean.

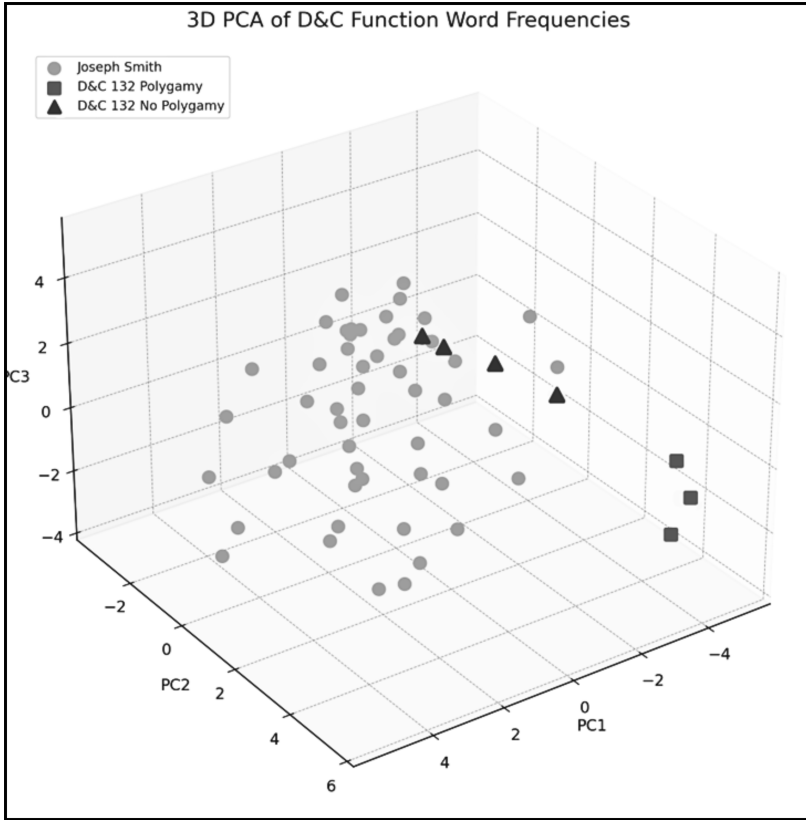


Figure 1: A three-dimensional PCA visualization displaying stylistic variation among Joseph Smith’s middle-period revelation segments using the first three principal components derived from 50 function-word frequencies per 665-word chunk. Circles represent the baseline Joseph Smith corpus (known-author control). The four triangles denote the D&C 132 (no-polygamy) segments, while the three squares represent the D&C 132 (polygamy) segments. The polygamy chunks cluster away from the main Joseph Smith centroid, showing greater stylistic distance along all three principal components. This separation aligns with the negative cosine similarity observed in the quantitative analysis, indicating a measurable divergence in linguistic profile within the broader Doctrine and Covenants corpus.

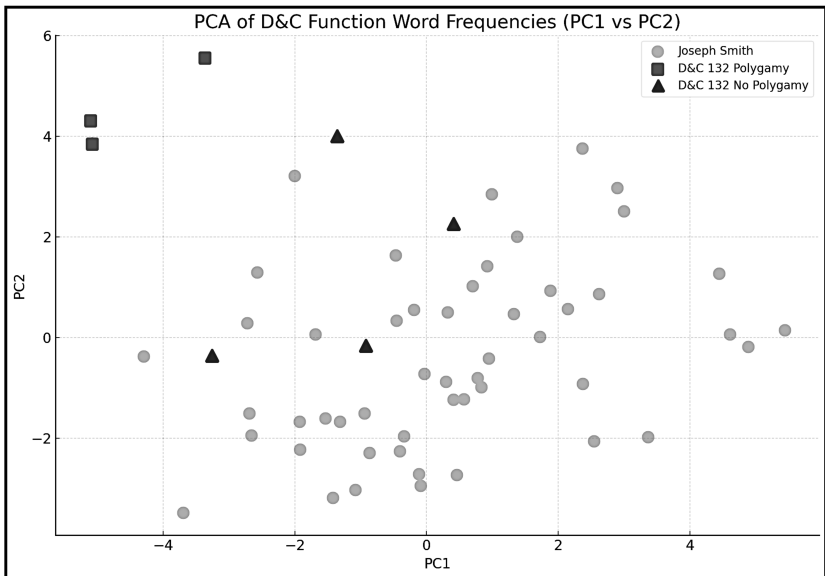


Figure 2: A two-dimensional PCA visualization displaying stylistic variance within the first two principal components derived from 50 function-word frequencies per 665-word chunk. PC1 vs. PC2 explains the greatest amount of stylistic variance between the data points. The distribution of the “Joseph Smith” chunks suggests natural stylistic variation in a heterogeneous text like D&C. The polygamy chunks clearly form a separate cluster from the main Joseph Smith group, with two of the “no-polygamy” chunks appearing on the edge.

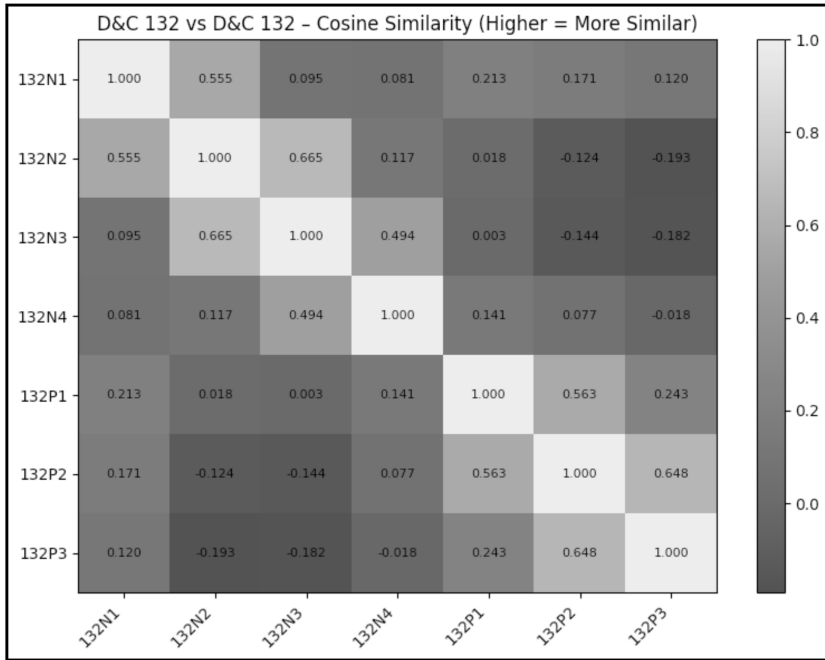


Figure 3: A cosine heat map showing pairwise cosine similarity among seven individual 665-word chunks from D&C 132, computed on z-scored function-word frequencies. Rows and columns represent individual chunks, labeled 132N1–132N4 (non-polygamy sections) and 132P1–132P3 (polygamy sections). Cell values indicate cosine similarity coefficients, where higher values reflect greater stylistic similarity. The map shows moderate to strong within-group similarity among non-polygamy chunks and stronger, more uniform similarity among polygamy chunks, with moderate to moderately weak similarity between the two groups.

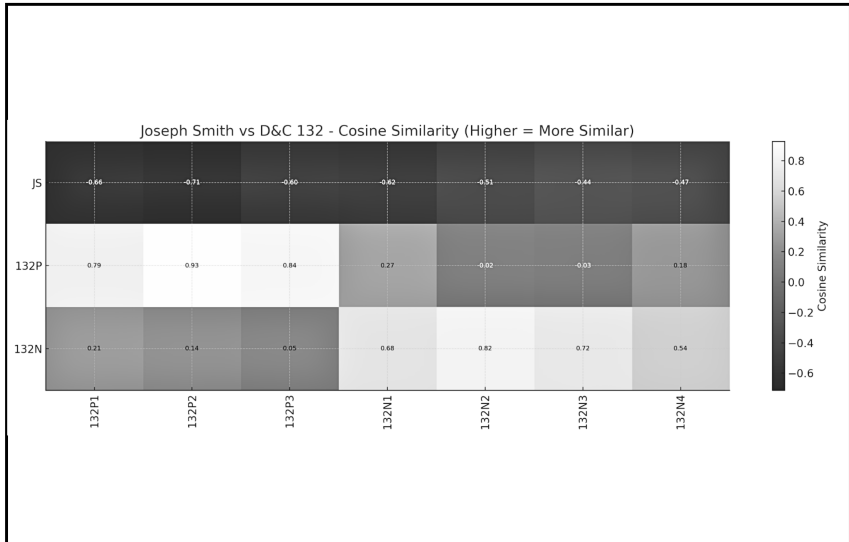


Figure 4: A cosine similarity heat map comparing the centroid profiles of Joseph Smith’s middle revelations, the proposed “no-polygamy” voice in D&C 132 (132N), and the “polygamy” voice (132P) against the seven polygamy and non-polygamy chunks of D&C 132. JS shows consistently negative similarity values across all segments, indicating a strong stylistic mismatch, though less so against the “no-polygamy” voice which is attested to in the PCA (Figure 2). In contrast, the 132P centroid aligns tightly with the three 132P segments (0.79–0.93) and less so with the 132N segments (0.68–0.82) and mild similarity with the 132P segments. The 132N centroid displays high similarity with its four corresponding segments (0.68–0.82) and mild similarity with the 132P segments. The pattern reveals two distinct stylometric signatures within D&C 132—132P and 132N—both of which differ substantially from JS.

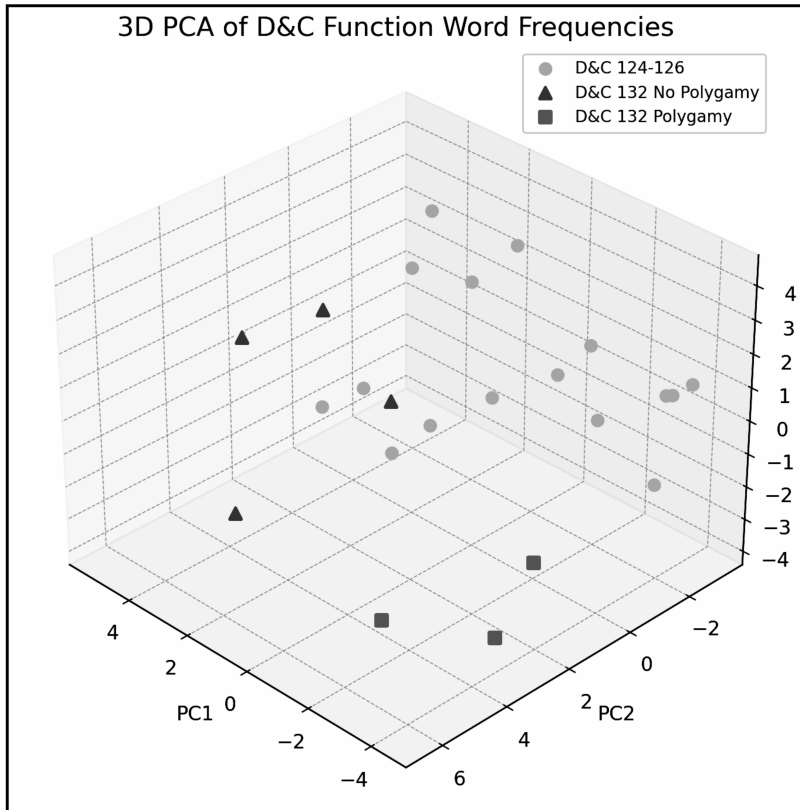


Figure 5: A three-dimensional PCA visualization displaying stylistic variance among Joseph Smith's Nauvoo-era revelations (D&C 124–126) and the D&C 132 (polygamy and non-polygamy) segments. The same 50 function words used in the primary analysis were retained to ensure direct comparability. The Nauvoo corpus was divided into 16 overlapping 665-word chunks to control for potential temporal drift, as an author's style tends to evolve subtly over time. The D&C 132 chunks again appear stylistically displaced from the Nauvoo-era Joseph Smith centroid, reinforcing that their linguistic divergence cannot be attributed solely to chronological drift.

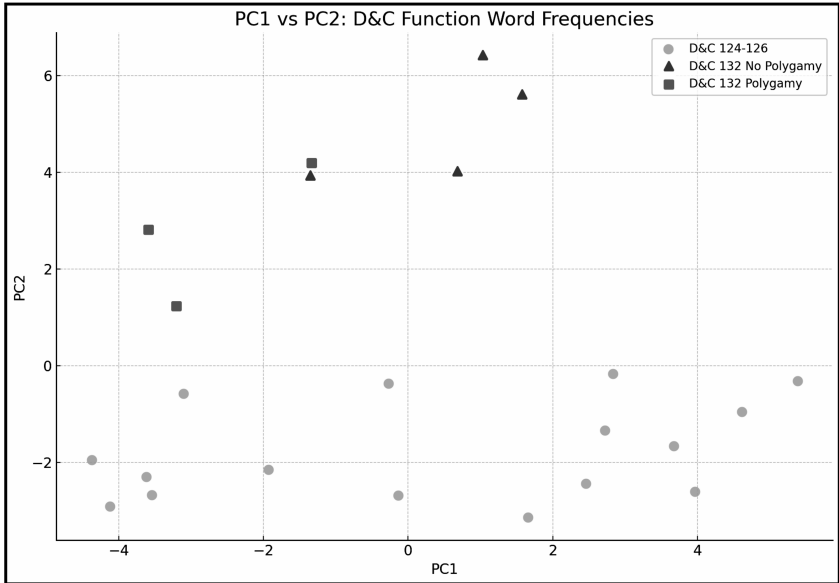


Figure 6: A two-dimensional PCA visualization displaying stylistic variance within the first two principal components displaying stylistic variance between Joseph Smith's Nauvoo-era revelations (D&C 124–126) and D&C 132. The clear separation between the clusters demonstrates that the stylistic divergence identified in the primary analysis persists even when controlling for temporal drift, indicating that the linguistic differences are not simply artifacts of time or shifting historical context but instead reflect deeper compositional variation. Some caution is warranted, however: D&C 124–126, while revelatory in form, contain a mixture of doctrinal, instructional, and administrative material, with substantial scribal mediation that cannot be fully excluded. These factors likely contribute to the broader dispersion of their chunks along the PC1 axis.

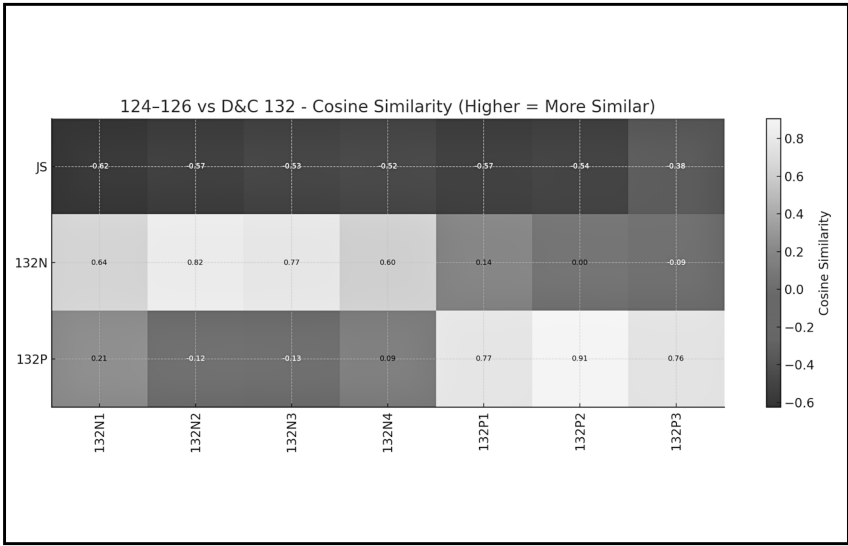


Figure 7: A cosine similarity heat map comparing the centroid profiles of D&C 124–126 (JS), the proposed “no-polygamy” voice in D&C 132 (132N), and the “polygamy” voice (132P) against the seven polygamy and non-polygamy chunks of D&C 132. Higher values indicate greater stylistic similarity in 50-function-word spaces. JS shows consistently negative similarity with all 132 chunks, while 132N aligns strongly with 132N1–4 and 132P aligns strongly with 132P1–3, confirming three distinct stylometric signatures. This map supports the three distinct clusters in the principle component analyses in figures 5 and 6.

Limitations

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged:

1. First, the Nauvoo-era corpus available for comparison is relatively small, consisting of approximately 5,700 words. Although the use of rolling 665-word windows increases the number of analyzable segments, the number of samples remains limited. In addition to having a particularly large scribal influence, portions of these Nauvoo-era revelations are also more instructional or administrative (e.g., D&C 124:62–83) in tone than strictly doctrinal, which introduces a degree of stylistic variability that cannot be entirely eliminated.
2. Second, this study is necessarily limited to the Doctrine and Covenants as the primary source of Joseph Smith’s revelatory style. While this ensures genre consistency—a critical requirement in stylometric authorship analysis—it also constrains the size and diversity of the available corpus. Other texts by Joseph Smith exist, but they differ markedly in genre, register, or collaborative authorship, and therefore could not be included without introducing confounding stylistic noise.
3. Third, despite extensive filtering, normalization, and trimming procedures, some degree of heterogeneity within Joseph Smith’s writings remains unavoidable. Variation in audience, purpose, historical context, and scribal mediation can influence surface linguistic features, even within a single author’s revelatory corpus. Although the methods employed here substantially reduce such noise, they cannot eliminate it entirely.
4. Fourth, while stylometric methods—particularly those relying on noncontextual function-word distributions—are generally robust against deliberate attempts to imitate another author’s style, no approach can entirely eliminate the possibility that a skilled imitator might introduce partial overlap with an established stylistic profile. If portions of D&C 132 were composed by someone consciously trying to approximate Joseph Smith’s revelatory language, traces of that imitation

could persist in the data and subtly influence the resulting stylistic measurements. While the multi-method approach used in this study reduces the likelihood of such confounding effects, the possibility cannot be fully eliminated.

5. Fifth, this study necessarily relies on computerized preprocessing and statistical analysis. The volume of text involved—spanning tens of thousands of words, multiple rolling windows, and high-dimensional frequency matrices—necessitates automated cleaning, tokenization, normalization, and computation. While these tools make large-scale stylometric comparison possible, they also introduce a layer of abstraction between the researcher and the raw text. Though still more accurate than manual processing, algorithmic decisions regarding tokenization rules, word-boundary detection, and punctuation removal can subtly shape the resulting frequency distributions, and no preprocessing pipeline is entirely free from such artifacts. Moreover, the interpretive clarity of computational outputs such as PCA clusters, cosine similarity matrices, and z-score distributions depends on the assumptions embedded in these algorithms. Although steps were taken to mitigate these concerns—such as manual review of chunks, transparent preprocessing procedures, and the use of well-established statistical methods—the dependence on machine processing remains an inherent constraint. Consequently, the findings of this study should be understood as computationally informed approximations of underlying stylistic tendencies rather than definitive, error-free measurements of authorial voice.
6. Finally, no stylometric analysis, however rigorous, can provide absolute certainty as to authorial attribution. Stylometry does not function as a deterministic authorship test but as a probabilistic tool that identifies patterns, divergences, and stylistic consistencies across texts. Its conclusions must always be interpreted in light of historical context, documentary transmission, genre, and the inevitable imperfections of surviving sources. While the multi-method approach employed in this study yields strong and convergent evidence regarding the compositional structure of D&C 132, it cannot produce a mathematically infallible attribution. Instead, stylometry

offers a disciplined, data-driven framework for evaluating competing hypotheses, clarifying what the text most likely reflects—and what it almost certainly does not—within the limits of the available evidence.

These limitations do not invalidate the study’s findings, but they do frame them appropriately. Future work incorporating newly discovered early manuscripts, larger corpora of comparable revelatory texts, or more advanced hierarchical stylometric models may help refine the conclusions further.

Counterarguments

Exclusion of Additional Principal Components

Critics may argue that excluding visualizations involving the third principal component (PC3) reduces the completeness or interpretive power of the analysis. However, this objection reflects a misunderstanding of how PCA functions in stylometric research. As statistician Hugh Craig explains, PCA redistributes linguistic variance across ranked orthogonal components, with the first few components capturing nearly all meaningful stylistic structure, while later ones primarily represent residual or noise-driven variance.¹³ Empirical permutation testing consistently confirms that PC1 and PC2 contain the statistically significant authorial signal, whereas subsequent components seldom account for variance beyond chance levels. In fact, studies have found that the first two principal components can capture 99% of relevant variance across principal components.¹⁴

Stylometric convention, following Burrows and Craig, therefore treats PC1 and PC2 jointly as the most informative space for authorial discrimination—not because later components are ignored arbitrarily, but because they do not meaningfully contribute to classification. As Craig demonstrates through multiple attribution trials, combining just the first two components has yielded accuracy

¹³Hugh Craig, “Principal Components Analysis in Stylometry,” *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 39, no. 1 (April 2024): 97–108, *LINK*.

¹⁴Mehmet Can, “Authorship Attribution Using Principal Component Analysis and Competitive Neural Networks,” *Mathematical and Computational Applications* 19, no. 1 (2014): 31, *LINK*.

rates above 90% in known-author tests, confirming that authorial separation is both robust and statistically valid when restricted to PC1 and PC2.¹⁵

Topic and Audience as Explanations for Linguistic Differences

Another counterargument is that the linguistic deviations in the polygamy portion of D&C 132 could be explained by its subject matter or intended audience. In this view, the conditional tone and unusual function word distribution might simply reflect the fact that the revelation addressed a sensitive marital dispute, necessitating more formal, prescriptive language than Joseph typically used.

However, this explanation does not hold when tested against comparable-length revelations of similar doctrinal complexity. Other section chunks which address detailed procedural matters, binding covenants, and conditions for blessings and penalties like D&C 132, including sections D&C 42 and D&C 58, also retain Joseph's baseline stylistic profile in both function word usage and overall tone. In fact, chunks from these revelations were found to have clustered much more closely to the overall mean of Joseph Smith's known corpus. Even when dealing with weighty disciplinary issues, Joseph's authenticated revelations tend to interweave instruction with narrative, pastoral encouragement, and collective admonitions, rather than relying almost exclusively on direct, second-person imperatives and conditional threats.¹⁶ The sharp stylistic break in D&C 132's polygamy portion is therefore not adequately explained by topic or audience alone.

¹⁵Craig, "Principal Components Analysis in Stylometry," 100, 106.

¹⁶D&C 42 is a prime example of this: "*If he or she...*" or "*if they...*" are much more collective in admonition than the verbiage used in D&C 132 (ex. "*if he...*" or "*if she...*").

A Response to “Historical and Stylometric Evidence for the Authorship of Doctrine and Covenants 132,” by Fields, Densley, Roper, and Bassist

A recent article by Fields, *et al.*, published in *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, incorporates stylometric testing into an argument affirming Joseph Smith’s authorship of D&C 132.¹⁷ Because their statistical approach addresses the same question examined in the present study, a brief methodological response is necessary to clarify the points at which our analyses diverge.

This critique focuses solely on the stylometric dimension of their work. While Fields, *et al.* combine historical discussion with computational analysis, the present paper does not engage the historical component of their argument; those issues fall outside the scope of this study and would require a separate publication. Instead, the response below evaluates the technical assumptions, feature-selection strategies, and statistical choices underlying their stylometric conclusions. Several of these choices—particularly their treatment of genre, their resampling approach to short texts, and their covariance-inflation methodology—create strong structural biases toward a “Joseph Smith” outcome regardless of the underlying signal in the data.

The purpose of this response is not adversarial. Stylometry is a developing tool within Latter-day Saint studies, and methodological transparency is essential to its refinement. By examining how different modeling choices influence outcomes, this critique aims to situate the present study’s findings within a broader computational context and to highlight why alternate methodological paths can yield markedly different results. The goal is not to settle historical debates, but to ensure that stylometric claims rest on valid and reproducible analytical foundations.

¹⁷Paul J. Fields, Steven T. Densley Jr., Matthew Roper, and Larry Bassist, “Historical and Stylometric Evidence for the Authorship of Doctrine and Covenants 132,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 67 (2025): 1–70, *LINK*.

Stylometric Argument

Following their historical discussion, Fields, *et al.* turn to stylometry as supposed empirical validation of that conclusion. Part Three of their study, titled “Authorial Stylometric Analysis of Section 132,” attempts to quantify authorship by comparing word-use patterns within the revelation to writings of Joseph Smith, his Nauvoo clerks, and other potential contributors.¹⁸ Their results are presented as statistically conclusive: both the polygamy and non-polygamy portions of D&C 132 are said to align with Joseph’s early revelations and to differ sharply from the writings of Brigham Young or any other candidate.

At first glance, these findings appear authoritative, especially when embedded within visually sophisticated three-dimensional plots and confidence ellipsoids. Yet a closer examination shows that the study’s design strongly predisposes the analysis toward the study’s final outcome. Choices regarding corpus construction, sample resampling, feature inclusion, and visualization parameters collectively shape an environment in which a “Joseph Smith” result becomes the default rather than a discriminative conclusion. In effect, the stylometric analysis functions less as an independent test and more as a confirmation of the assumptions built into its structure.

The following response evaluates these methodological issues in detail, examining how specific analytical decisions—particularly in feature selection, genre handling, covariance scaling, and dimensional reduction—affect the apparent clustering of D&C 132. The goal is not to contest historical claims but to assess the stylometric component on its own terms and to clarify why its results should be interpreted with caution.

Visual Compression Through Confidence Ellipsoids

The most visually persuasive element of Fields, *et al.*’s stylometric presentation is their use of three-dimensional confidence ellipsoids.¹⁹ These overlapping 99.9 percent ellipsoids are designed to project an image of statistical cohesion between the two halves of D&C 132 and Joseph Smith’s early revelations. Yet the visual effect

¹⁸Fields, *et al.*, “Historical and Stylometric Evidence,” 35-47.

¹⁹Fields, *et al.*, “Historical and Stylometric Evidence,” 43-47. See their figures 5-11.

they produce is not a reflection of true authorial similarity—it is a byproduct of graphical compression. The broader the confidence interval chosen, the more likely that the ellipsoids of unrelated datasets will overlap, creating the illusion of sameness. By opting for an extraordinarily high 99.9 percent confidence level, Fields, *et al.* essentially guarantee overlap, because this threshold represents an almost all-inclusive boundary—encompassing all but 0.1 percent of potential variance. In other words, the ellipsoids would overlap even if the texts shared little stylistic affinity. As Eder cautions in his analysis of visual clustering in stylometry, many of the cluster-based displays may encourage overinterpretation of overlapping or adjacent sets as evidence of identical authorship, when they may simply reflect genre or source similarities.²⁰ Although their data isn't presented in a manner that can be replicated, it's highly likely that when the ellipsoids in Fields, *et al.*'s graphs are replaced by raw data points or by standard 60–95 percent confidence intervals, the apparent cohesion becomes far less pronounced, and the distinctness of the D&C 132 sub-clusters becomes more visible. Thus, what appears as confirmation of Joseph Smith's authorship is, upon inspection, a visual artifact of lenient statistical framing rather than proof of linguistic unity.

Misleading Visualization Through Genre Collapsing

Although Fields, *et al.* acknowledge that Joseph Smith's writings fall into distinct genres—prophetic revelations, epistles, instructions, and scribe-recorded materials—they undermine that very distinction in their analysis and conclusion.

Only three of the twelve corpora used by Fields, *et al.* consisted of revelatory-style texts, excluding D&C 132 itself.²¹ These were Joseph Smith's early- and late-period revelations and Brigham Young's revelations. Brigham's corpus included his January 30, 1846 Revelation for Reuben Miller, Doctrine and Covenants 136, and his February 17, 1847 dream about Joseph Smith.²² The inclusion of this dream narrative is unusual, as it is a descriptive visionary account rather than a Doctrine and Covenants-style

²⁰Maciej Eder, "Visualization in Stylometry: Cluster Analysis Using Networks," *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 32 (2017): 50–64.

²¹Fields, *et al.*, "Historical and Stylometric Evidence," 57–62.

²²Cited in Fields, *et al.*, "Historical and Stylometric Evidence," 61–62.

revelation such as D&C 136, and therefore introduces an inherent stylistic mismatch within Brigham's own corpus.

Additionally, Fields, *et al.* excluded uncanonized revelations from other nineteenth-century LDS leaders on the grounds that these authors had "no potential connection to Doctrine and Covenants 132."²³ Yet, using their own logic, revelatory material from Heber C. Kimball, John Taylor, and Wilford Woodruff—all prominent polygamists and central figures in the development of early Utah theology—could have been included.²⁴ Their writings would have provided more appropriate and genre-consistent control corpora than the nine additional non-revelatory prose chunks Fields, *et al.* relied upon. The omission of these more relevant comparators further skews the analysis toward predetermined stylistic boundaries and weakens the validity of their conclusions.

After conducting genre-specific discriminant analyses, Fields, *et al.* overlay all of these distinct datasets within the same three-dimensional cube, placing D&C 132 among every category simultaneously.²⁵ This maneuver gives the impression that the revelation naturally clusters within Joseph Smith's stylistic range as a whole, when in fact the apparent proximity results from the stacking of multiple genre clouds into one display space. By visually merging revelation, correspondence, and dictated materials, Fields, *et al.* blur the contextual boundaries they claim to respect. The result is an inflated perception of stylistic coherence: D&C 132 appears to "fit" Joseph's voice only because the axes of their cube contain heterogeneous subgenres that collectively span an enormous stylistic territory. When these genres are analyzed separately—as they show in later figures—the distances between D&C 132 and Joseph's later Nauvoo revelations remain clearly visible. The choice to superimpose all categories in a single composite plot is therefore not an act of clarity but of rhetorical compression. It converts genre variance into visual overlap, creating an illusion of closeness that the data, when properly segregated, do not sustain.

For these reasons, the author of this paper found it more suitable to rely exclusively on Joseph Smith's own revelatory-style

²³Fields, *et al.*, "Historical and Stylometric Evidence," 62.

²⁴See "List of non-canonical revelations in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," Wikipedia, s.v., *LINK*.

²⁵Fields, *et al.*, "Historical and Stylometric Evidence," 40–44. See their figures 2–7.

writings as the control corpus. This corpus provides ample material for comparison and offers the most appropriate stylistic baseline against which to evaluate D&C 132. When properly filtered, it also avoids the distortions that arise from mixing genres or stylistic registers—an issue known to skew authorship analyses even when all texts originate from the same author.²⁶

Temporal Inversion and Chronological Drift

Perhaps the most self-defeating outcome in Fields, *et al.*'s stylometric analysis is the revelation's unexpected proximity to Joseph Smith's early Kirtland revelations rather than his later Nauvoo compositions. According to their own figures (particularly figures 5–7), both halves of D&C 132 cluster most closely with sections 38 through 57—texts produced from 1831 to 1833—and only secondarily with the Nauvoo revelations from 1841 to 1844.²⁷ This temporal inversion is difficult to reconcile with the traditional claim that section 132 was dictated to William Clayton in one sitting in July 1843.²⁸ If their model were genuinely capturing authorial evolution, one would expect the revelation's style to align most closely with Joseph's other late works, such as sections 124 through 131, which share the same period and theological setting. Instead, their interpretive analysis effectively claims that section 132 is linguistically connected to the early 1830s—a period a decade removed from the text's supposed dictation.

Rather than squarely addressing this discrepancy, Fields, *et al.* treat it as corroboration, arguing that if the revelation originated in the early 1830s (as some Church sources assert), then its stylistic similarity to early revelations simply “confirms” its authenticity.²⁹ This reverses the direction of inference: because section 132 resembles Joseph's early writings, they conclude it must therefore have been first composed in that period. In any scenario in which the text did not circulate in stable written form from the early 1830s onward, this is linguistically implausible. It would require

²⁶ Artjoms Šeļa, “Corpus Building for Authorship Attribution,” in *Survey of Methods in Computational Literary Studies* (2023), [LINK](#); [LINK](#).

²⁷ Fields, *et al.*, “Historical and Stylometric Evidence,” 42–44.

²⁸ William Clayton, Letter to Madison Scott, November 11, 1871, MS 3423, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, [LINK](#).

²⁹ Fields, *et al.*, “Historical and Stylometric Evidence,” 47.

Joseph either to retain in memory a lengthy revelation essentially verbatim for more than a decade, or, in 1843, to reconstruct the unconscious distribution of his 1830s function-word habits while extemporaneously dictating to William Clayton. Experimental work on memory and authorship imitation indicates that such fine-grained stylistic fidelity across long intervals, without a written exemplar or sustained rehearsal, is highly unlikely.³⁰ The discovery that an 1843 dictation clusters tightly with 1831–33 material should have prompted reconsideration of the text’s composition history or of the stylometric model itself, not celebration of its supposed “consistency.” By redefining a tension between date and style as confirmation, Fields, *et al.* blunt a potentially misleading result and reveal the circular logic structuring their stylometric framework.

Resampling and the Problem of Synthetic Samples

Fields, *et al.* seek to equalize the sizes of their authorial corpora by drawing “2,500-word samples” from each candidate author and from both halves of D&C 132. As they describe their procedure:

Using resampling, we drew 6,000 samples, each of 2,500 words randomly drawn from each of the thirteen sets of texts from the candidate authors, as well as from the two parts of section 132.³¹

This step is a central part of their analysis. However, it is also the point at which their method becomes unsuitable for a short and potentially composite text like section 132 and other corpora they used in their study.³² Neither the polygamy portion ($\approx 1,300$ words) nor the non-polygamy portion ($\approx 1,800$ words) contains 2,500 contiguous words. It is therefore mathematically impossible to obtain even a single 2,500-word chunk from either half without duplicating at least 700–1,200 tokens. The only way such samples can be produced is by resampling words with replacement from each half of section 132 until 2,500 tokens have been accumulated. Such

³⁰Jacques Savoy, *Machine Learning Methods for Stylometry: Authorship Attribution and Author Profiling* (Springer International Publishing, 2020).

³¹Fields, *et al.*, “Historical and Stylometric Evidence,” 38.

³²For example, their combined Brigham Young “revelatory” corpus is only about 2,000 words.

bootstrapping can, in such settings, give an illusion of precision or stability that the underlying data cannot support.³³

This procedure has two consequences. First, each “sample” is not a new textual observation but a synthetic pseudo-document built by duplicating the same small set of words and phrases. Second, the resulting pseudo-samples are inevitably non-independent: each one derives from the same underlying distribution and contains the same vocabulary in nearly the same proportions. Treating these artificially constructed samples as independent data points in Stepwise Discriminant Analysis gives the appearance of a rich and stable dataset, but no additional independent stylometric information has been created. The variance of the group is artificially compressed; its centroid is artificially stabilized, and the discriminant function can easily achieve near-perfect classification—not because the underlying texts are highly separable, but because the input data have been homogenized through resampling.

By contrast, the present study does not attempt to enlarge the text beyond its natural limits, instead prioritizing sample quality over sample quantity. In the current study, section 132 is divided into its two major thematic portions—the polygamy section and the non-polygamy section—and each portion is analyzed using real, contiguous 665-word windows with 50% overlap, a standard and methodologically sound approach in stylometry.³⁴ The polygamy section yields three windows; the non-polygamy section yields four. While these windows share some overlap, each one is composed of actual, unaltered text rather than synthetic content. Overlap creates mild correlation between adjacent windows, but it does not create artificial documents, nor does it distort the natural distribution of function words.

Because each window represents a genuine continuous sample of language, the method preserves local stylistic variance—exactly the kind of variance that would be flattened out or lost entirely under a full-text resampling method. If the polygamy and non-polygamy portions of the revelation differ stylistically, those differences will be visible across their respective windows; if they do not,

³³Barmak Mostofian and Daniel M. Zuckerman, “Statistical Uncertainty Analysis for Small-Sample, High Log-Variance Data: Cautions for Bootstrapping and Bayesian Bootstrapping,” *Journal of Chemical Theory and Computation* 15, no. 6 (2019): 3499–3509, *LINK*.

³⁴Eder, “Through the Magnifying Glass.”

the windows will cluster together naturally. In other words, the windowed PCA approach is not artificially generating additional “documents,” but rather extracting all meaningful contiguous evidence that actually exists in the text. Furthermore, because PCA is an unsupervised method, it does not manufacture separation between pre-labeled groups. It simply reveals whether the windows from each portion fall into overlapping or distinct regions of stylistic space. This makes the analysis sensitive to internal heterogeneity in a way implausible for the SDA-based resampling used in Fields, *et al.*, which treats each half of section 132 as a single homogeneous pool of tokens.

These effects are further amplified by the choice of classification method. The use of Stepwise Discriminant Analysis (SDA) in Fields, *et al.*'s stylometric framework warrants careful methodological consideration. In the broader statistical literature, stepwise procedures have often been criticized for their tendency to capitalize on chance associations, yielding unstable feature sets and overly optimistic classification results—especially in settings with many predictors and few truly independent observations.³⁵ These concerns are well documented and have led methodologists to caution that stepwise approaches are best treated as exploratory tools rather than as a basis for confirmatory inference.³⁶ When SDA is applied to synthetically resampled, non-independent pseudo-documents—as in Fields, *et al.*—these known weaknesses are amplified: within-group variance is further compressed, separation becomes easier to achieve, and high classification accuracy can emerge even when the underlying authorial signal is not robust. For this reason, SDA-based attribution results obtained under such conditions should be interpreted with caution and understood as exploratory rather than decisive. The present study therefore avoids stepwise discriminant procedures as an evidentiary foundation, favoring instead contiguous windowing, transparent function-word distributions, and unsupervised analyses that do not depend on feature hunting or synthetic sample expansion.

³⁵Bruce Thompson, “Stepwise Regression and Stepwise Discriminant Analysis Need Not Apply Here: A Guidelines Editorial,” *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 55, no. 4 (1995): 525–34, [LINK](#).

³⁶Thompson, “Stepwise Regression,” 525–34.

Persistent Sub-Clusters and Masking Anomalies

Even after broadening their dataset, inflating their feature count, and overlaying heterogeneous genres within a single display, Fields, *et al.*'s own figures quietly reveal what their conclusions attempt to deny—D&C 132 continues to form distinct sub-clusters with their own centroids, separate from Joseph Smith's revelations. In their Figures 5 through 7, both the polygamy and non-polygamy segments of the revelation appear as discrete red and purple groupings that don't clearly merge with clusters representing Joseph's early or late revelations.³⁷ Rather than treating this separation as evidence of stylistic divergence, Fields, *et al.* visually obscure it by deploying enormous 99.9-percent confidence ellipsoids that conveniently swallow the outlying points. This maneuver transforms what should be recognized as statistically significant deviations into a superficial "overlap."

They also introduce a 2-D projection of "Function A" versus "Function C"—the discriminant-analysis equivalent of plotting PC1 against PC3 in a PCA—which naturally appears to show increased overlap within the D&C 132 samples.³⁸ Yet, as explained earlier in this study, that dimension captures only a minimal share of the total variance, since the overwhelming majority is already explained in the first two functions.³⁹ Emphasizing such a low-information projection only magnifies the illusion of similarity rather than providing meaningful evidence against divergence.

The problem is not merely aesthetic but methodological. When stylometric data points occupy distinct spaces within a multivariate field—even if partially enclosed within a broad confidence region—the separation signifies that the text's linguistic behavior is measurably different. Yoffe, *et al.* show how clusters can reflect formulaic reuse rather than genuine authorial similarity.⁴⁰ By visually smoothing their data, Fields, *et al.* transform what

³⁷Fields, *et al.*, "Historical and Stylometric Evidence," 42-44.

³⁸Fields, *et al.*, "Historical and Stylometric Evidence," 45.

³⁹See above under "Exclusion of Additional Principal Components."

⁴⁰Gideon Yoffe, Yair Segev, and Barak Sober, "An Unsupervised Information-Theoretic Approach to Identifying Formulaic Clusters in Textual Data," *Computational Humanities Research* 1 (2025): e9, *LINK*; David Kernot, Terry Bossomaier, and Roger Bradbury, "Stylometric Techniques for Multiple Author Clustering: Shakespeare's Authorship in The Passionate Pilgrim," *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications* 8 (2017), *LINK*.

could have been an instructive finding—that D&C 132 exhibits a distinct stylistic signature—into a non-result. Ironically, the very need for such smoothing betrays the fact that the text does not naturally blend with Joseph Smith’s corpus. The revelation’s two halves cluster relatively closely amongst themselves but remain separate from Joseph’s other works, suggesting internal cohesion but external anomaly—a pattern that may be more consistent with later attempts at copying or composite redaction than with seamless authorship, though further analyses would be needed to test this possibility.

It appears that Fields, *et al.* attempt to cushion these contradictory findings by introducing a Mahalanobis distance comparison. They present their Figures 1 and 2 as evidence that D&C 132 “clusters closest” to Joseph Smith’s revelatory sections based on Mahalanobis distance across 221 function words in a twelve-dimensional space.⁴¹ This comparison is primarily relative and constrained by the candidate set; it shows which included corpus is least distant in this feature space, not whether the match is uniquely or strongly indicative of authorship. Since Joseph’s and Brigham’s revelations were the only texts of comparable prophetic genre, their stylistic similarity was inevitable. This explains why, despite coming from a completely separate author, Brigham’s revelations measure the 4th closest in similarity to D&C 132 compared to the rest of the corpus and Joseph’s non-revelatory texts are so far away. As discussed earlier, it is likely Brigham’s corpus would cluster even closer to Joseph’s if the authors had not included his February 17, 1847 dream narrative, which is more of a descriptive text rather than Brigham’s Doctrine and Covenants-style revelation voice, such as that found in D&C 136.

⁴¹Fields, *et al.*, “Historical and Stylometric Evidence,” 38, 64.

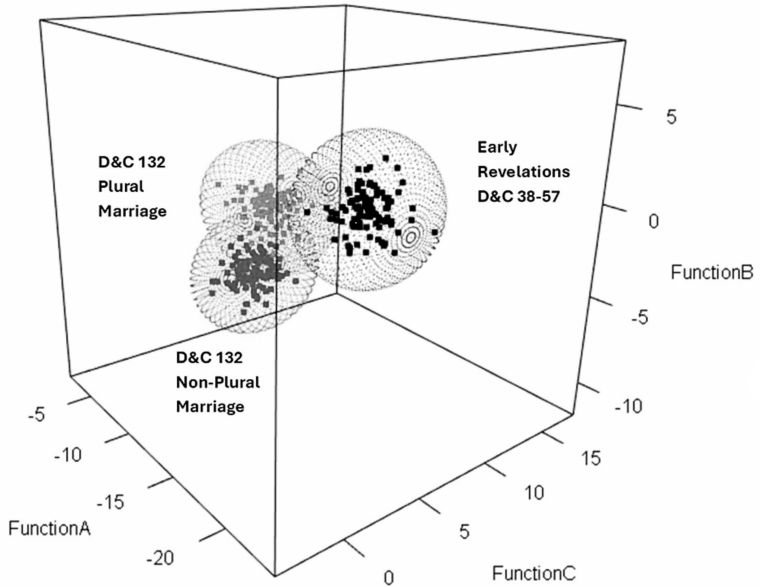


Figure 8: *Figure 8 in Fields, et al. displays three distinct centroids—corresponding to the “Plural Marriage,” “Non-Plural Marriage,” and “Early Revelations” corpora—when the data are centered. They claim these centroids aren’t “meaningfully distinctive” with a huge 99.9% ellipsoid confidence interval, and yet are distinctive enough to form their own clusters. Image from Paul Fields, et al., “Historical and Stylometric Evidence for the Authorship of Doctrine and Covenants 132,” Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship 67 (2025): 44.*

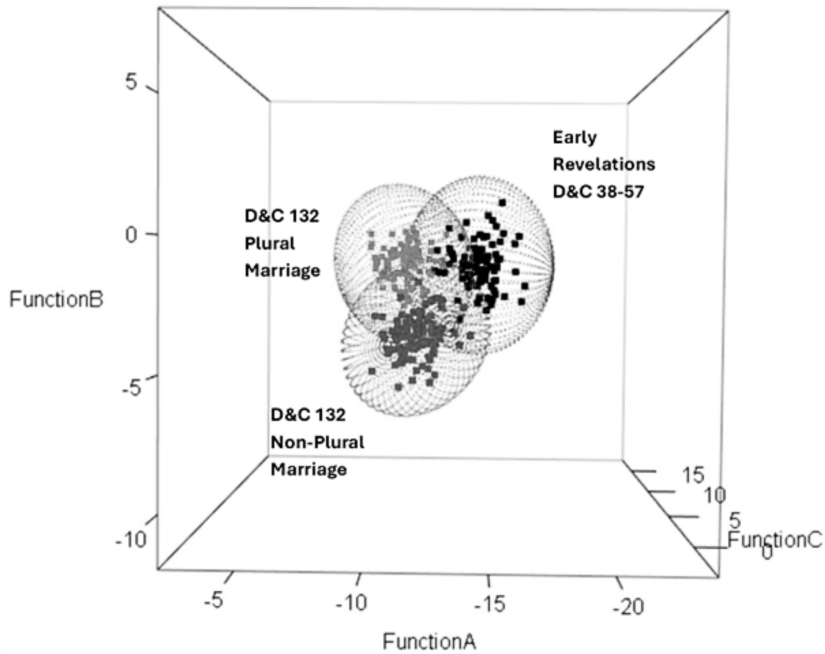


Figure 9: *Figure 9 in Fields, et al. plots the first two discriminant functions—the functions accounting for the greatest proportion of the model’s relative variance—on a two-dimensional plane, where the separation between the centroids is again visibly pronounced. Image from Fields, et al., “Historical and Stylometric Evidence for the Authorship of Doctrine and Covenants 132,” Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship 67 (2025): 45.*

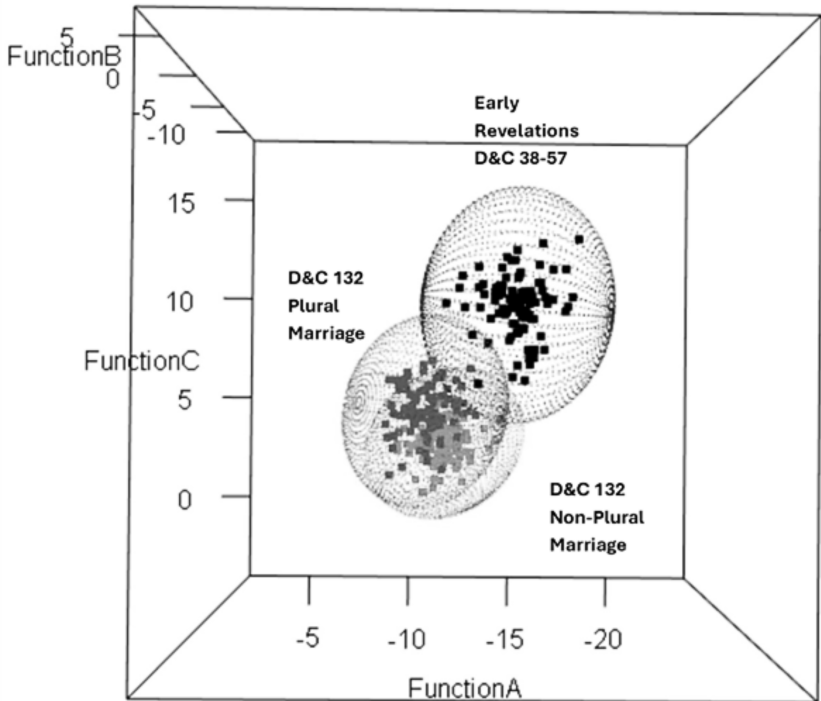


Figure 10: *Figure 10 in Fields, et al. plots the first and third discriminant functions. As noted earlier, the third function (Function C in this case) accounts for only a minimal portion of the total relevant variance, making Fields, et al.'s assertion of "considerable overlap" in this dimension misleading. Image from Fields, et al., "Historical and Stylometric Evidence for the Authorship of Doctrine and Covenants 132," Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship 67 (2025): 45*

The finding of “least dissimilarity” merely confirms that D&C 132 reads closer to other nineteenth-century revelatory texts, not that Joseph wrote it. Moreover, the use of dozens of resampled pseudo-samples from small corpora artificially compresses variance, resulting in low distances and the visual impression of cohesion. Without effect sizes or significance testing, these relative distances are descriptive, not evidentiary—they demonstrate perceived similarity, not conclusive evidence of shared authorship.

Feature Inflation and Dilution of Authorial Signal

The final weakness in Fields, *et al.*'s stylometric methodology lies in their indiscriminate use of 221 function words—a feature set far exceeding standard practice and well beyond the range of statistically meaningful analysis for texts of this size.⁴² In authorship studies, the reliability of function-word analysis depends not on how many words are counted but on how consistently those words appear across samples. Only the most frequent and distributionally stable tokens—usually between forty and seventy, depending on corpus size—provide a clear signal of authorial habit. Fields, *et al.* might argue that their use of 2,500-word samples ensures adequate stabilization of word frequencies; however, this assumption is misleading. As discussed earlier, repeatedly drawing 2,500-word samples from small corpora does not increase the amount of unique linguistic information available—it merely recycles the same limited vocabulary, producing an illusion of statistical robustness while leaving token frequencies just as sparse and unstable as before.

Within Joseph Smith's authenticated revelations, this study identified only about fifty commonly recurring function words suitable for analysis after examining their frequencies across the entire corpus. When rare or context-sensitive forms are included, the resulting frequency matrix becomes sparse and the discriminative power of the model rapidly collapses. As noted by researcher Sundararajan, when using lexical features (word-based models) in cross-domain stylometry, many features become “sparse especially for short texts because most word sequences do not occur.”⁴³ By expanding their feature set to more than triple the typical size,

⁴²Fields, *et al.*, “Historical and Stylometric Evidence,” 38.

⁴³Krishnan Sundararajan, *Analysis of Stylometry as a Cognitive Biometric Trait* (PhD diss., University of Florida, 2017), 16, *LINK*.

Fields, *et al.* introduce exactly this problem: statistical noise overwhelms meaningful stylistic patterns.

The issue is compounded by the small size of several of the corpora. With fewer than 4,000 words in section 132, many of the 221 “function” words used by Fields, *et al.* to discriminate the other authors occur too infrequently within section 132 itself to produce stable or representative frequencies. This violates one of stylometry’s most fundamental assumptions—that word frequencies approximate normal distribution only when tokens appear often enough to be statistically meaningful and genuinely topic-neutral.⁴⁴ By forcing hundreds of low-frequency words into their analysis, Fields, *et al.* inadvertently dilute the influence of the most informative high-frequency variables—such as *the*, *and*, *of*, and *to*—while inflating the weight of sporadic particles that carry little or no authorial significance. It is also unclear in their paper whether their function-word list included archaic forms common in Joseph Smith’s revelations (e.g., *unto*, *ye*, *shall*). The omission or inclusion of such terms, given their methods and corpora, would significantly distort the results, as these forms are ubiquitous in revelatory-style texts but largely absent from administrative writings, personal letters, and several of the other corpora used in their comparison.

Fields, *et al.* further compound these problems through their use of Stepwise Discriminant Analysis to “identify the linear combinations of function-word frequencies that best distinguish the sets.”⁴⁵ SDA selects variables solely on the basis of how much they increase within-sample group separation, not on whether the variables represent stable authorial habits. When applied to high-dimensional, sparse data—such as 221 function words counted in 2,500-word windows in less than 4,000-word texts—SDA, as with all discriminate-analysis methods, can be prone to overfitting.⁴⁶ The stylometric survey by Stamatatos corroborates that authorship-attribution tasks are particularly sensitive to high feature/small sample ratios and sparse token distributions.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Fields,

⁴⁴Savoy, *Machine Learning Methods for Stylometry*.

⁴⁵Fields, *et al.*, “Historical and Stylometric Evidence,” 38.

⁴⁶Jyothi Subramanian and Richard Simon, “Overfitting in Prediction Models—Is It a Problem Only in High Dimensions?,” *Contemporary Clinical Trials* 36, no. 2 (2013): 636–41, *LINK*.

⁴⁷Efstathios Stamatatos, “A Survey of Modern Authorship Attribution Methods,” *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 60 (2009): 538–56, *LINK*.

et al. themselves imply in a separate publication that effective stylometric use of SDA requires a highly restricted feature set: in their analysis of *The Federalist Papers*—a vastly larger and more linguistically diverse corpus—they selected only 29 of the most discriminating words, in stark contrast to the 221 tokens employed in their D&C 132 study.⁴⁸

Although Fields, *et al.* do not publish their complete function-word list, the methodological consequence is clear: they employ a bloated, high-dimensional feature space coupled with a classifier highly sensitive to variance, applied to corpora too small to stabilize the majority of their variables. The result is an analytical framework whose statistical sophistication masks an unstable foundation, rendering their classification results unreliable.

Lack of Transparency and Reproducibility

It should be noted that perhaps the most troubling aspect of Fields, *et al.*'s analysis is its lack of methodological transparency. Despite claiming rigorous statistical precision, the authors do not provide the full list of the 221 function words used in their discriminant model, nor do they explain why certain candidate revelations were excluded—even though numerous texts of comparable length, style, and historical relevance were readily available and could have strengthened their “Early Revelations” corpus. Likewise, they offer no description of how, or whether, the corpora were cleaned prior to tokenization: whether verse numbers, punctuation, or editorial annotations were removed, or whether capitalization was standardized. Because each of these preprocessing steps can dramatically affect function-word frequencies—especially in short archaic texts—the absence of this information prevents readers from determining what the model was actually measuring.

Compounding this opacity is the absence of any formal limitations section. The authors never address the constraints imposed by their corpora, their extensive resampling procedures, or the high-dimensional feature set they employ. In stylometry, acknowledging such limitations is essential for preventing overinterpretation and

⁴⁸Paul Fields, Larry Bassist, and Matthew Roper, “Choosing Words for Stylometric Authorship Attribution: Evaluating Most Distinguishing Words (MDWs) vs. Most Frequent Words (MFWs),” *Digital Humanities 2016: Conference Abstracts* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University and Pedagogical University, 2016), 504–7.

for signaling where conclusions are tentative rather than definitive. Fields, *et al.*'s silence on these issues leaves readers without critical context and obscures the extent to which their results may be artifacts of methodological choices rather than genuine stylistic signal.

The sensitive nature of wordprint studies inherently requires the explanation of explicit preprocessing criteria, full word lists, sampling logic, and clearly stated methodological limitations to enable replication and critical evaluation. In a discipline where transparency is the only safeguard against confirmation bias, Fields, *et al.*'s refusal to document their pipeline renders their conclusions empirically unverifiable and, by extension, scientifically weak.

Summary of Stylometric Response

Taken together, these methodological issues reveal that Fields, *et al.*'s stylometric analysis is neither transparent nor statistically sound. Their inflated resampling procedure recycles limited corpora into hundreds of pseudo-samples, destroying statistical independence; their 99.9 percent confidence ellipsoids visually blur genuine separation; and their use of Mahalanobis distance within a closed, genre-uneven candidate set guarantees that Joseph Smith's revelations will appear "least dissimilar." The inclusion of 221 function words, many too infrequent to be meaningful, further weakens the discriminant model by flooding it with noise. Compounding these flaws is a lack of methodological transparency—no public function-word list, no corpus-cleaning protocol, and no rationale for excluding other contemporaneous revelations. The result is an analysis that presents the appearance of mathematical sophistication but fails tests of reproducibility, independence, and falsifiability. When these weaknesses are controlled for, the evidence does not point to stylistic unity between D&C 132 and Joseph Smith's authenticated revelations. Instead, it reveals a text whose linguistic behavior remains anomalous—internally cohesive but externally distinct.

Response to Appendix E

In Appendix E, Fields, *et al.* dedicate several pages to criticizing an early, unpublished stylometric experiment I conducted

over a year ago that was briefly summarized in an online forum.⁴⁹ This informal analysis—posted long before my present study—was explicitly exploratory and never presented as a finished, peer-reviewed work. Yet Fields *et al.* treat it as though it were a competing publication, devoting an entire appendix to refuting an early draft that I myself have long since superseded. Their portrayal of that post as “circulated among members of the Church” and “appearing sophisticated” is inaccurate and misleading; it was a short demonstration of method, not a formal claim of authorship attribution.

The criticisms they list—chiefly concerning my use of principal-components analysis (PCA), limited function-word set, and small corpus segmentation—ignore the context in which that preliminary analysis was performed. It was clearly labeled as exploratory, designed to visualize potential linguistic divergence within D&C 132 rather than to produce a definitive attribution model. In fact, the paper’s “Methodology” and “Limitations” sections explicitly describe the restricted corpus and the necessity of a future, more comprehensive function-word analysis: “While the study presented here seems to offer a decisive conclusion . . . there were a few limitations that should be recognized for transparency reasons.”⁵⁰ Nowhere did the draft present itself as statistically conclusive. In fact, stylometry can never be statistically conclusive. The draft’s goal was to test feasibility using openly available tools—an introductory, visual exercise that later evolved into the more robust study presented in this paper. To treat that rough experiment as a published claim demanding formal refutation is methodologically misplaced and rhetorically defensive.

Moreover, Fields, *et al.*’s own “re-analysis” of my data introduces errors more serious than any they allege. They substitute their own resampling procedure and Bonferroni adjustments into a dataset they did not compile and then declare the results “deficient,” without ever demonstrating that they reproduced my preprocessing steps, normalization criteria, or block definitions. In effect, they took my spreadsheet output and proceeded using their

⁴⁹Fields, *et al.*, “Historical and Stylometric Evidence,” 65-67.

⁵⁰Ethan Lloyd, “A Stylometric Analysis of Doctrine and Covenants 132,” (unpublished, 2024), 12, shared on social media, [LINK](#).

own approach—without reconstructing the methodological context that gave those numbers meaning.

They further assert that principal components analysis (PCA) is “not appropriate given the data,” a claim at odds with decades of stylometric practice.⁵¹ Dozens of peer-reviewed authorship studies since the 1990s have relied on PCA precisely to visualize stylistic clustering of function word frequencies and identify potential outliers. As Craig’s 2024 study shows, PCA and multidimensional scaling have remained standard exploratory tools for detecting stylistic divergence.⁵² Fields, *et al.* also fault my preliminary study for not including a corpus of external authors, but this critique misconstrues its stated aim. The past, and current, goals are not to identify an alternative author for D&C 132—a task made difficult by the text’s complex transmission history and unique genre—but to determine whether it behaves as a stylistic outlier when compared exclusively to Joseph Smith’s authenticated revelations. For such an internal-comparison design, PCA is entirely appropriate.

Their insistence that a 99.9 percent confidence ellipse be used to judge “outlier” status further demonstrates methodological overreach. In small-sample linguistic data, a 95–99 percent threshold is conventional; pushing the level to 99.9 percent ensures that no data point will qualify as distinct. Their decision to apply such an extreme criterion and then pronounce the results “not outliers” simply illustrates how their analysis was designed to preclude difference.

Finally, the presence of this appendix in a paper claiming statistical neutrality raises questions of motive. Rather than engaging the broader evidence of linguistic anomaly within section 132, Fields, *et al.* devote several pages to discrediting a student’s exploratory post, suggesting a defensive rather than scholarly impulse. My present analysis—conducted with a complete function-word corpus, rigorous normalization, and genre control—addresses precisely the limitations they cite and arrives at the opposite conclusion: that section 132’s verses remain linguistically distinct from Joseph Smith’s revelatory style.

⁵¹Fields, *et al.*, “Historical and Stylometric Evidence,” 66.

⁵²Craig, “Principal Components Analysis in Stylometry,” 97-108.

Conclusions

The stylometric evidence presented in this study indicates that Doctrine and Covenants 132 diverges in measurable ways from Joseph Smith's established revelatory voice. Across multiple function-word feature sets, the text—particularly the sections addressing plural marriage—exhibits elevated rates of personal pronouns, conditional constructions, and other stylistic markers that differ from Joseph's authenticated revelations. These differences persist across PCA visualizations and cosine-similarity measures and are not easily explained by genre, topic, or audience effects alone.

While stylometric analysis cannot reconstruct the historical circumstances of the revelation's production or determine the precise origin of any specific passage, it can identify whether a text aligns with the unconscious linguistic patterns that characterize an author's typical dictation style. In this case, the results suggest that significant portions of D&C 132 do not conform to Joseph Smith's established stylistic profile, instead forming a distinct cluster that departs from his known revelations. This finding does not resolve broader historical debates, but it does provide a quantitative basis for questioning the assumption of single-author composition.

Further research will be required to clarify these issues. Expanded corpora, more comprehensive comparative datasets, and the application of additional stylometric techniques—such as larger-scale feature testing or supervised classification models once sufficient data become available—may offer deeper insight into the textual formation of D&C 132 and related nineteenth-century revelation texts. Stylometry cannot, by itself, settle questions of authorship, but it can help determine the range of plausible scenarios and signal where traditional narratives may require re-examination.

Within those methodological limits, the present analysis supports a cautious conclusion: D&C 132 contains stylistic patterns that are atypical of Joseph Smith's authenticated revelations and consistent with the presence of additional authorial influences or compositional layers. Future interdisciplinary work—including historical investigation, manuscript analysis, and broader computational study—may help to determine how these layers emerged

and how they relate to Joseph Smith's original teachings on eternal marriage.

Appendix A: Post-Study Observations Through Joseph and Emma Smith's Notes and Letters

Shown below is an extensive list of first-hand, contemporaneous documents or letters between Joseph and Emma containing wording relevant to their relationship during their lifetimes. Authorship style can often be discerned not only through quantitative measures but also through surface-level rhetorical patterns and modes of address. These statements may help readers intuitively form a sense of Joseph Smith's customary writing voice when addressing his wife, which can then be compared qualitatively with the tone, diction, and rhetorical posture found in the extant text of Doctrine and Covenants 132.

1830

- Joseph in July: “Behold, thy sins are for given thee & thou art an Elect Lady, whom I have called . . . & thou needest not fear for thy husband shall support thee.” (D&C 25)⁵³

1832

- Joseph on October 13: “I feel as if I wanted to say something to you to comfort you in your beculier [peculiar] triel and presant affliction[.] I hope God will give you strength that you may not faint[.] I pray God to soften the hearts of those arou[n]d you to be kind to you and take ^\the/ burdon off[f] your shoulders as much as posable and not afflict you . . . you have one true and living friend on Earth your Husband”⁵⁴

1834

- Joseph on May 18: “I sit down in my tent to write a few lines to you to let you know that you are on my mind and that I am sensible of the dut[i]es of a Husband and Father . . . The few lines you wrote . . . gave me satisfaction and comfort and

⁵³Revelation, July 1830–C [D&C 25], 34, JSP, *LINK*.

⁵⁴Letter to Emma Smith, 13 October 1832, 1–3, JSP, *LINK*.

I hope you will continue to communicate to me by your own hand for this is a consolation to me to converse \with/ you in this way in my lonely moments which is not easily discribed.”⁵⁵

- Joseph on June 4: “I want you to make use of the money I send you in wisdom, for such things as you need, and make yourselves as comfortable and contented as you can and continue to pray to the Lord to hasten the day when we shall be permitted to behold each other’s face again and enjoy the blessing of the family circle in peace . . . Be assured that I always remember you to my Heavenly Father.”⁵⁶

1837

- Emma on April 25: “I cannot tell you my feelings when I found I could not see you before you left, yet I expect you can realize them.”⁵⁷

1838

- Joseph on November 4: “I cannot express my feelings, my heart is full, Farewell Oh my kind and affectionate Emma I am yours forever your Husband and true friend.”⁵⁸
- Joseph on November 12: “I received your letter which I read over and over again, it was a sweet morsal to me, Oh God grant that I may have the privaliege of seeing once more my lovely Family, in the injoyment, of the sweets of liberty, and sotiaial life, to press them to my bosam and kiss their lovely cheeks would fill my heart with unspeakable grattitude.”⁵⁹
- Joseph on December 1: “My dear companion . . . ”⁶⁰

⁵⁵Letter to Emma Smith, May 18, 1834, 1, JSP, *LINK*.

⁵⁶Letter to Emma Smith, 4 June 1834, 59, JSP, *LINK*.

⁵⁷Letter from Emma Smith, 25 April 1837, 35, JSP, *LINK*.

⁵⁸Letter to Emma Smith, 4 November 1838, 3, JSP, *LINK*.

⁵⁹Letter to Emma Smith, 12 November 1838, 1, JSP *LINK*.

⁶⁰Letter to Emma Smith, 1 December 1838, 1, JSP, *LINK*.

1839

- Emma on March 7: “The situation in which you are, the walls, bars, and bolts, rolling rivers, running streams, rising hills, sinking vallies and spreading prairies that separate us, and the cruel injustice that first cast you into prison and still holds you there, with many other considerations, places my feelings far beyond description . . . but I still live and am yet willing to suffer more if it is the will of kind Heaven, that I should for your sake.”⁶¹
- Joseph on March 21: “Dear Emma I very well know your toils and simpathise with you if God will spare my life once more to have the privelege of takeing care of you I will ease your care and indeavour to cumfort your heart.”⁶²
- Joseph on April 4: “if you want to know how much I want to see you, examine your feelings, how much you want to see me, and judge for ^\you[r]self/, I would gladly ^\walk/ from here to you barefoot, and bareheaded, and half naked, to see you and think it great pleasure, and never count it toil.”⁶³
- Joseph on November 9: “I shall be filled ^\with/constant anxiety about you and the children until I hear from you.”⁶⁴
- Emma on December 6: “There is great anxiety manifest in this place for your prosperity and the time lingers long that is set for your return.”⁶⁵

1840

- Joseph on January 20: “I feel very anxious to see you all once more in this world the time seems long that I am deprived of your sosiety . . . I pray God to spare you all untill I git home my dear Emma my heart is intertwined arround you and those little ones.”⁶⁶

⁶¹Letter from Emma Smith, 7 March 1839, 37, JSP, *LINK*.

⁶²Letter to Emma Smith, 21 March 1839, 1, JSP, *LINK*.

⁶³Letter to Emma Smith, 4 April 1839, 2, JSP, *LINK*.

⁶⁴Letter to Emma Smith, 9 November 1839, 1, JSP, *LINK*.

⁶⁵Letter from Emma Smith, 6 December 1839, 2, JSP, *LINK*.

⁶⁶Letter to Emma Smith, 20–25 January 1840, 1, JSP, *LINK*.

1842

- Joseph on August 16: “With what unspeakable delight, and what transports of joy swelled my bosom, when I took by the hand on that night, my beloved Emma . . . Oh! what a comingling of thought filled my mind for the moment, Again she \is/ here, even in the seventh trouble, undaunted, firm and unwavering, unchangeable, affectionate Emma.”⁶⁷
- Emma on August 16: “Yours affectionately forever, Emma Smith”⁶⁸
- Joseph on August 16: “Your affectionate husband untill death, through all eternity forevermore.”⁶⁹
- Emma on August 16: “My husband; who has not committed any crime whatever; neither has he transgressed any of the laws, or any part of the constitution of the United States; neither has he at any time infringed upon the rights of any man, or of any class of men or community of any description.”⁷⁰
- Emma on August 27: “Why then, be so strenuous to have my husband taken, when you know him to be innocent.”⁷¹

1844

- Joseph on June 23: “If God ev[e]r opens a door that is possible for me I will see you again . . . My heart ble[e]ds.”⁷²
- Joseph on June 27 “Dear Emma I am very much resigned to my lot knowing I am justified and have done the best that could be done give my love to the children.”⁷³

⁶⁷Reflections and Blessings, 16 and 23 August 1842, 164, JSP, *LINK*. Less than a year after this quote, Joseph would have supposedly dictated D&C 132.

⁶⁸Letter from Emma Smith, 16 August 1842, 175, JSP, *LINK*.

⁶⁹Letter to Emma Smith, 16 August 1842, 175, JSP, *LINK*.

⁷⁰Journal, December 1841–December 1842, 176, JSP, *LINK*.

⁷¹Journal, December 1841–December 1842, 188, JSP, *LINK*.

⁷²Letter to Emma Smith, 23 June 1844, 1, JSP, *LINK*.

⁷³Letter to Emma Smith, 27 June 1844, JSP, *LINK*.

1867

- Emma Smith in April: Emma denies the authenticity of D&C 132. “It is false in all its parts, *made out of whole cloth*, without any foundation in truth.”⁷⁴

1879

- Emma Smith on October 1: “He had no other wife but me; nor did he to my knowledge ever have . . . He did not have improper relations with any woman that ever came to my knowledge . . . I know that he had no other wife or wives than myself, in any sense, either spiritual or otherwise.”⁷⁵
- Emma Smith on October 1: “I believe he was everything he professed to be.”⁷⁶
- Emma Smith on October 1: “There was no necessity for any quarreling. He knew that I wished for nothing but what was right; and, as he wished for nothing else, we did not disagree.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴Jason W. Briggs, Interview with Emma Hale Smith Bidamon, April 1867, in Joseph Smith III and Heman C. Smith, comps., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1844–1872* (Lamoni, IA: Board of Publication of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1908), 3:352, [LINK](#).

⁷⁵“Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saint’s Herald* 26, no. 19 (Oct. 1, 1879): 289-90, [LINK](#).

⁷⁶“Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 289–90.

⁷⁷“Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 289–90.

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Hidden in Plain Sight: A Rediscovered List of Joseph Smith's Wives

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In January 1854, during one of the coldest winters the Mormon settlers had experienced since moving to Utah, Patty Bartlett (Sessions) went about her daily duties as a midwife, immersed in the practical realities of early pioneer life. During the first two weeks of the month, Patty was involved in the births of multiple children, showing no sign of slowing down, despite lack of sleep and the bitter cold. On January 2, she helped Lorenzo Snow's wife deliver a son. The following day, she attended a dance at the schoolhouse, and by the end of the week, she had officiated in the birth of twins and the death of a local man, donating a shirt to lay him out in. Her month was filled with social, ecclesiastical, and civic events, routine demands, and crucial medical operations.¹ Unbeknownst to her, as she navigated her everyday activities that year, male Church historians in Salt Lake City were compiling a confidential list, with her name on it.

This list, here named as the *Bullock/Kimball 1854-1866 List of 33 Wives of Joseph Smith*, is the first of its kind known to be compiled in an effort by Latter-day Saint leaders to record and document the first Mormon prophet's wives. Created between 1854 and 1866 in the Church Historian's Office, the list began when clerk Thomas Bullock penned twenty-four women's names on a single, lined sheet of paper over the period of six years. In 1866, under the direction of Heber C. Kimball and in the presence of George A.

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

¹Patty B. Sessions diary, Vol. 4, January 1853–January 1856, [26], MS 1462, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, hereafter CHL, *LINK*.

Smith and Joseph F. Smith, additional names and corrections were added in pencil by scribe Robert L. Campbell.²

This paper introduces and analyzes the Bullock/Kimball list. It argues that this record inaugurated a documentary tradition that influenced how both institutional and independent historians have defined and remembered these women. Through an examination of similar lists compiled across 170 years, the paper demonstrates how early modes of recordkeeping that originated in male ecclesiastical authority continued to shape later efforts to recover and interpret the lives of Mormon plural wives. Throughout this study, I strive to move beyond the confines of these lists by telling the women's stories in fuller and more personal ways.

Intent of the List

The purpose, authenticity, and intent of the Bullock/Kimball list remain subjects of intrigue. Thomas Bullock, Heber C. Kimball, George A. Smith, and Joseph F. Smith were all participants in the preservation and shaping of early Latter-day Saint history, and the list emerges from within that developing historical culture. Its structure suggests an internal effort to gather and stabilize information.

The document's physical and contextual features support this interpretation. It appears to have remained privately within the historian's office and was revisited when Heber C. Kimball arrived with relevant information.³ This pattern suggests that the list functioned as a working reference capable of amendment. Its inconsistent spelling, variable penmanship, and occasional uncertainty about women's first names are characteristic of nineteenth-century clerical practice, but in this context they also align with the habits of an evolving compilation rather than a finalized register. Its spare format, lack of explanation, and absence of any claim

²Names of Relief Society Members circa 1854, MS 3157, CHL, *LINK*. The document states: "The names in pencil added by Pres. Kimball Sep 14, 1866 in presence of Geo A. & Joseph F. Smith & R. L. Campbell. The other names in Thomas Bullocks hand writing were got up in the Historians office in early times (1854 till 1860)."

³Historical Department office journal, Volume 29, Jun. 1, 1866–Jun. 1, 1868, [71], CR 100 1, 64-65, CHL, *LINK*. On September 14, the Church Historical Department office journal records, "Pres. Heber C. Kimball called at the office to-day and related his experience in connection with the establishment of polygamy."

to completeness or authority reinforce the impression that it was not intended as a finished historical statement. In this sense, it reflects the beginnings of an effort to assemble the names of women connected to emerging accounts of plural marriage at a time when no standardized narrative yet existed. This task was complicated by the secrecy surrounding plural marriage, incomplete records, and shifting theological priorities.

Questions about motive naturally attend a document of this kind. Some readers may interpret the list as an effort to link plural marriage more explicitly to Joseph Smith. Others may view it as the preservation of fragile recollections before they disappeared. The document itself does not announce its purpose. What it does disclose is a moment in which remembered relationships were first gathered into documentary form. Later generations would revisit, expand, defend, and systematize these claims. The Bullock/Kimball list stands at the threshold in the development of archival consolidation.

Mislabeling Hid the List in Plain Sight

The labeling of the Bullock/Kimball document as “Female Relief Society 1844” appears to have shaped how the list was understood for decades. This label, written along the side of the document by an unknown archivist, was common practice in the Church Historian’s Office in the 1850s and 1860s. Clerks often relied on quick side annotations, or notes on the reverse, to categorize loose documents for filing.

There is, however, a significant mismatch between the label and the content of the list. The names it contains do not align with the meticulously kept Relief Society roster of 1842-44.⁴ Ten of the thirty-three women on the Bullock/Kimball list were not members of the Nauvoo Relief Society at all.⁵ Moreover, some of the most influential women in the Relief Society are not included

⁴See “A Book of Records Containing the proceedings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo,” images at The First Fifty Years of Relief Society website, *LINK*; and Katherine Pollock, “Reference List: 1338 Members of the Nauvoo Relief Society Matched with Biographical Links,” *LINK*.

⁵These were: Sarah and Maria Lawrence, Lucy Walker, Helen Mar Kimball, Melissa Lott, Flora Woodworth, Eveline Knight, Cordelia Morley, Almera Johnson, and Emeline Hibbard (White).

on the Bullock/Kimball list.⁶ Instead, as this paper will show, the list aligns strikingly with names both earlier and later identified as plural wives of Joseph Smith.

Given the contentious nature of plural marriage, especially in Nauvoo, associating Joseph Smith's wives with the Relief Society could have been a deliberate effort to link them with a more socially acceptable, non-controversial institution. The Relief Society, a women's organization that focused on charity, service, and spiritual development, was widely respected and less politically charged than was the practice of polygamy. Detaching the list from connection with Joseph Smith's plural marriages would have allowed the Historian's Office to protect these women's identities, shielding them from scrutiny and criticism should the list become public.⁷

Alternatively, if the Relief Society label was added later by someone unfamiliar with the context, it may reflect a common historical oversight in how women's roles in polygamy were understood. Without recognizing the complex relationship these women had with Joseph Smith as plural wives, someone might have mistakenly assumed the list was an innocuous, organizational roster of Relief Society members. This later misinterpretation highlights a persistent issue in Mormon historiography: the tendency to overlook or misunderstand the role of women, particularly in relation to the practice of polygamy.

The women included on the Bullock/Kimball list were not actively involved in decisions about their inclusion on this list. This tends to erase their agency in revealing or not revealing their level of participation in the controversial practice of polygamy. It keeps them from emerging as full participants in the foundational events of the early Church.

Whether applied mistakenly or as an intentional form of masking, the label provided a socially acceptable cover under which

⁶For example, Sarah Granger (Kimball), Phebe Wheeler and Agnes Coolbrith (Smith) are not on the Bullock/Kimball list.

⁷This concern was expressed by Wilford Woodruff and the Twelve later, in 1887, when Andrew Jenson was compiling his list of Joseph Smith's plural wives. Woodruff did "not think it a wise step to give these names to the world," because "advantage may be taken of their publication and, in some instances, to the injury, perhaps, of families or relatives of those whose names are mentioned. There are too many persons living who are interested in these matters, and who may have reasons for not wishing any exposure of this character." "Letter to Andrew Jenson, 6 August 1887," 1, The Wilford Woodruff Papers website, *LINK*.

a sensitive document could be preserved. A list explicitly titled “Wives of Joseph Smith” might have drawn unwanted scrutiny; a list labeled “Relief Society” could quietly disappear into institutional storage. Thus, the mislabeling became part of the document’s history. Not only did it obscure the women’s identities in their own time, it continued to hide them from historiographical recognition for over a century. In a twist of irony, these women, already marginalized in history, are here quite literally written into the margins.

Designs, Designers, and Denizens of the List

Initiated by Thomas Bullock beginning in 1854, the document probably emerged as part of his efforts to support the compilation of Joseph Smith’s history. Bullock, a skilled clerk known for his meticulous handwriting and systematic organizational style, played a central role in the Church Historian’s Office during a period when the preservation of the Prophet’s legacy was of great importance. Working under George A. Smith, he was engaged in constructing official church history as a cohesive and faith-promoting narrative of the Restoration. Bullock’s work on Joseph Smith’s history involved compiling and organizing an array of sources, including journals, letters, and affidavits. He was also personally familiar with many of the events and personalities he wrote about. For example, Bullock traveled in the Brigham Young pioneer company with Louisa Beaman, Emily Partridge, and Zina Huntington, all women who became known as Joseph Smith’s plural wives.⁸ Within this context, the Bullock/Kimball list can be understood as a reference tool, cataloging key individuals connected to this sensitive aspect of Church history.

The later additions by Heber C. Kimball in 1866 seem to have been in response to anti-polygamy preaching in Utah by Joseph Smith’s son, Alexander, in late August of that year. On September 14, the day after Alexander and his company left the state, Heber C. Kimball went to the Church Historian’s Office “and related his experience in connection with the establishment of polygamy.”⁹

⁸This was the second Mormon pioneer company that departed in a wagon train from Winter Quarters, Nebraska, on June 5, 1848, and consisted of 1220 individuals. See the online Church History Biographical Database, *LINK*.

⁹Historical Department Office Journal, Vol. 29, Sep. 14, 1866, 65, CHL, *LINK*.

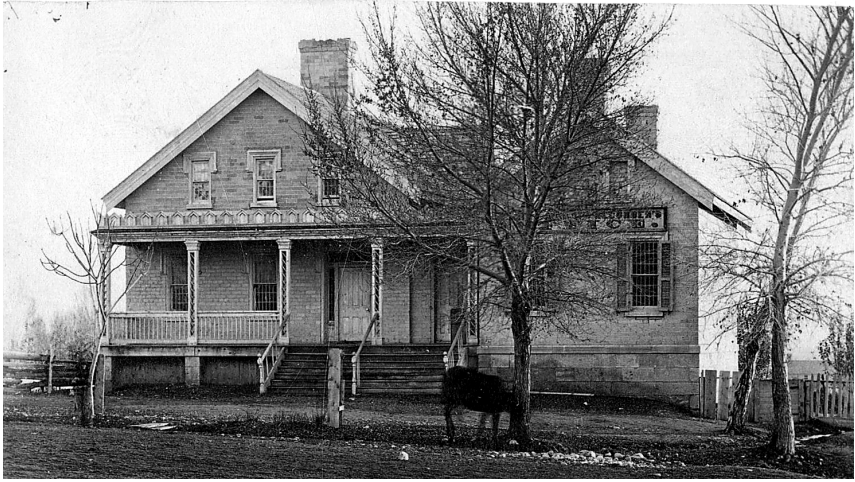
Kimball would have been familiar with information and individuals associated with plural marriage that Bullock, who became involved later, may not have known.¹⁰ He thus made one correction and added eight names to the Bullock/Kimball list. This experience reflects a shift in the document's use. The notes, added in the presence of George A. Smith, Joseph F. Smith, and scribe Robert L. Campbell, emphasize the collaborative and deliberate nature of this project.

Kimball's contributions to the Bullock/Kimball list reflect his role as defender of the Church's theological framework. As a member of the First Presidency and a devoted advocate of plural marriage, Kimball's involvement highlights the complex intersections of faith, loyalty, and opposition that defined this period in Church history. For him, the list seems to be an opportunity to declare and to legitimize his commitment to polygamy in the face of opposition.

George A. Smith, member of the Twelve since 1841, was a Nauvoo polygamist and had been sealed to eight women in the Nauvoo temple before moving West.¹¹ As Church historian and a cousin of Joseph Smith, George played a key role in shaping LDS institutional memory. His work on the Church's documentary history often focused on defending Joseph Smith's reputation and ensuring that his legacy aligned with the Church's evolving doctrinal emphasis. The Bullock/Kimball list provided George an opportunity to cement the historical foundation of polygamy as an essential aspect of Joseph Smith's prophetic mission. His collaboration on the project shows how the list supported the Church's theological and institutional priorities.

¹⁰Kimball took his first plural wife, Sarah Peake Noon, in 1842, and Bullock took his first plural wife, Lucy C. Clayton, on January 23, 1843. George D. Smith, "Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841-46, A Preliminary Demographic Report," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 1 (Spring, 1994): 136, [LINK](#).

¹¹Bathsheba W. Bigler, Lucy Meserve Smith, Nancy Clements, Zilpha Stark, Sarah Ann Libby, Hannah Mariah Libby, Agnes Coolbrith (Smith), Susanna Ogden Bigler. Lisle G. Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings: A Comprehensive Register of Persons Receiving LDS Temple Ordinances, 1841-1846* (The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2006), 277, [LINK](#).



Residence of George A. Smith with Historian's Office at right, 1866. Photograph by Savage and Ottinger, Great Salt Lake City, Utah. Collection of Bathsbea W. Bigler Smith, PH 8004, CHL.

Joseph F. Smith, also present during the 1866 additions, brought his own motivations to the document's creation. A son of Hyrum Smith and a future president of the Church, Joseph F. viewed polygamy as a cornerstone of his family's spiritual legacy and the Church's theological foundation. He married his first plural wife, Julina Lambson, this same year, on May 5, 1866. His involvement in curating the historical record of plural marriage served both personal and institutional purposes. Personally, it allowed him to defend his father's role in the early church and to ensure that Hyrum was recognized as a key advocate of the practice.¹² The timing of the list, particularly its updates in 1866, suggests a defensive purpose as Joseph F. sought to respond to RLDS claims that Joseph Smith had not taught or practiced polygamy.¹³ By documenting connections to specific women, the list could serve as a tangible assertion of Joseph Smith's involvement and the acceptance of plural marriage by those closest to him.

¹²See Cheryl L. Bruno and Michelle Stone, "Crafting a Sacred Story: Joseph F. Smith and the William Clayton Affidavits," *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* 1, no. 1 (2025): 1-28, *LINK*.

¹³See E. C. Briggs and R. M. Attwood, revised by Joseph Smith and William W. Blair, *Address to the Saints in Utah and California, Polygamy Proven an Abomination by Holy Writ* (Plano, Ill.: [Reorganized] Church of J. C. Of L. D. Saints, 1869), *LINK*. The pamphlet was first circulated in 1864 and later revised and republished in 1869.

The interplay between Bullock's meticulous record-keeping, Kimball's theological motivations, George A. Smith's focus on institutional memory, and Joseph F. Smith's personal and institutional concerns, reflects the multifaceted purposes of the document. Yet despite its apparent utility, it was never brought forward publicly to defend the principle or to identify the women it sought to memorialize, leaving its silence puzzling.

Women Included on the Bullock/Kimball List

Compiled during the Utah period but referencing events in Nauvoo, the Bullock/Kimball list serves as a stark reminder of how little contemporary documentation of plural marriage during Joseph's ministry is extant and how much of the evidence for it was later pieced together through retrospective testimonies. The list itself, while sparse in details, guides us to the stories of the women it names and helps illuminate the scope of Nauvoo polygamy.

Among those listed, the wives' experiences vary widely, reflecting a diversity of circumstances that shaped their relationships with Joseph Smith. Some were young single women, others widows, and a few already married to other men. In the years following the 1852 public announcement of Mormon polygamy,¹⁴ some of the women's voices were captured in affidavits, journals, and interviews.¹⁵ These comprised an enduring narrative of Nauvoo polygamy. The stories became powerful tools in bolstering the historical claim of polygamy. Other women listed in the document left less detailed accounts, yet their inclusion broadens the scope of Joseph's polygamy. Their accounts collectively reinforce the idea that polygamy was practiced on a scale beyond a few isolated instances, even if the precise nature of their relationships with Joseph remains unclear. The document lists the following thirty-three women, plus Joseph's legal wife, Emma. (For searchability, I

¹⁴On August 29, 1852, the plural marriage revelation that became D&C 132 was publicly acknowledged by church leaders. Orson Pratt, "Celestial Marriage," Reported by G. D. Watt, *Journal of Discourses* 1 (Aug. 29, 1852): 53-66, *LINK*; and Brigham Young, Special Conference Address, Aug. 29, 1852, CR 100 317, CHL, *LINK*.

¹⁵Among those listed, women who left records of their sealing to Joseph Smith were: Eliza R. Snow, Eliza Partridge, Emily Partridge, Sarah Whitney, Elvira Cowles, Lucy Walker, Helen Mar Kimball, Melissa Lott, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Presendia Huntington, Zina Huntington, Ruth Vose, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Almera Johnson, Marinda Johnson, Martha McBride, and Desdemona Fullmer.

have standardized the spellings of the women's names on lists. Last names of husbands are sometimes noted in parentheses. Authors' spelling conventions can be found at the links provided. Names with asterisks are those added or corrected by Kimball in 1866.)

First column (single women):

Louisa Beaman
Eliza R. Snow
Hannah Ells
Eliza Partridge
Emily Partridge
Sarah Whitney
Elvira Cowles
Sarah Lawrence
Maria Lawrence
Lucy Walker
Olive Frost
*Helen Mar Kimball
Melissa Lott
Flora Woodworth
Eveline Knight
*Cordelia Morley

Second column (married women):

Emma Hale (Smith) [Joseph Smith]
Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland) [John Cleveland]
Patty Bartlett (Sessions) [David Sessions]
Elizabeth Davis (Durfee) [Jabez Durfee]
Sylvia Sessions (Lyon) [Windsor Lyon]
Presendia Huntington (Buell) [Norman Buell]
Zina Huntington (Jacobs) [Henry Jacobs]
Ruth Vose (Sayers) [Edward Sayers]
Mary Elizabeth Rollins (Lightner) [Adam Lightner]
Phebe Watrous (Woodworth) [Lucien R. Woodworth]
*Mary Heron (Snyder) [John Snyder]
*Jane Silverthorn (Law) [William Law]
*Almera Johnson [single woman]¹⁶

¹⁶Almera is the one woman in this column who was not married.

*Marinda Nancy Johnson [Orson Hyde]

Bottom of page (widowed, divorced, nonmember)

*Delcena Johnson (Sherman) [Widow Lyman Sherman]

*Martha McBride (Knight) [Widow Vinson Knight]

*Desdemona Fullmer [divorced Ezra T. Benson, 1852,
divorced Harrison McLane, 1864]

*Emeline Hibbard (White) [Hugh White]

The inclusion of Emma Smith's name on the list is significant, given her unique and complicated position within early Church history. As Joseph Smith's first and only legal wife, Emma occupied a central role in the Restoration and was a well-known figure to Church members. However, her relationship to plural marriage was combative and multifaceted. Her public support of "The Voice of Innocence" made her opposition to polygamy in Nauvoo clear.¹⁷ But at the time Bullock began compiling his list, Emma had not yet joined the rival Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), which would not be formally established until 1860.

Despite her estrangement from Brigham Young and the Utah Church following Joseph's death, Emma's name carried historic and symbolic weight. The very act of including her on a list alongside Joseph's possible plural wives situated her within the polygamy narrative, even if her relationship to the practice was ambivalent or adversarial. Brigham Young had already begun framing Emma as an opponent of polygamy, famously telling a story of her destroying the original 1843 revelation on plural marriage. His claim emphasized Emma's resistance to the practice while justifying its secrecy and subsequent preservation by male leaders.¹⁸

¹⁷"The Voice of Innocence," drafted by W. W. Phelps and amended by Emma Smith, was published in March 1844 as a response to accusations made by Orsamus Bostwick against Hyrum Smith. The document denounces polygamy and related practices as morally corrupt, calling them "a grand scheme of profligates to seduce women." Emma's leadership in promoting this declaration made her public stance against polygamy unmistakable. "The Voice of Innocence from Nauvoo," MS 15540, CHL, *LINK*.

¹⁸Young, Special Conference Address, Aug. 29, 1852, *LINK*. Another account places the destruction of the manuscript on Joseph's shoulders. See W.E. McClellan to Joseph Smith III, Jan. 10, 1861, 2, p13 f137, Community of Christ Library and Archives.

1844
 Female Relief Society

Loisa Beeman	M ^{rs} Emma Smith	Agnes
Eliza H. Snow	Sarah M. Cleveland	
Hannah Ellis	Esty Sessions	
Eliza Barnidge	Deuphy	
Emily Cartbridge	Sylvia Lyons	
Sarah Whitney	Piscinda Buel	Julia Huntington
Livira Cole	Ruth Laper	
Sarah Lawrence	Mary Lightner	
Maria Lawrence	Mrs. John Snyder	
Lucy Walker	Mrs. Mary Law	
Olive Frost	Almira Johnson	
Hellen Kimball	Marinda M. Johnson	
Melissa Lott		
Nora Woodworth	Luciers R. Woodworth's wife	
Eveline Knight		
Martha Cordelia		
Marley		

Widow Sherman
 Widow Winson Knight (maiden name) Martha M. Bride
 Desdemona Fullmer
 Emeline Hibbard (Mrs. White) 33

The names in pencil added by Pres. Kimball Sep 14, 1866 in presence of Geo. A. & Joseph F. Smith & R. L. Campbell. The other names in Thomas Bullen's hand writing were got up in the Historian office in early times (1844 to 1860)

Document labeled "Names of Female Relief Society 1844," MS 3157, CHL

Jane Law's presence on the list is particularly striking, given her and her husband William Law's roles in publicly opposing Joseph Smith and polygamy. The Laws' 1844 affidavits, published in the *Nauvoo Expositor*, testified that they had seen a polygamy revelation associated with Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Jane drew attention to the unsettling idea that "it authorized some to have the number of ten [wives], and set forth that those women who would not allow their husbands to have more wives than one should be under condemnation before God."¹⁹ The allegations in the *Expositor*, coupled with the Laws' dissent against Joseph's leadership, contributed to the events leading to his death. In 1866, both Jane and William Law were alive and living in Shullsburg, Lafayette County, Wisconsin. Despite Jane's firm opposition to polygamy and her husband's denunciation of the practice, Kimball's addition of her name to the list suggests an effort to reframe her narrative within a polygamous framework.

Jane's inclusion on the list reflects the theological logic that governed sealing practices. Late reminiscences suggest that she may have been sealed to Joseph Smith on the premise that her legal husband was spiritually inadequate to secure her exaltation.²⁰ Whether this sealing occurred with or without her knowledge cannot be determined with certainty. However, even if she gave consent after such public rejection, such consent would have been shaped by a doctrine that tied a woman's eternal future to the righteousness of a male priesthood holder. Within that context, spiritual aspiration and personal autonomy could not easily be separated.

The emphasis on women who were married to men considered less faithful, or widows like Martha McBride (Knight), reinforces the idea that polygamy was a means of securing blessings for women deemed in need of spiritual "protection." In fact, five of the eight women added by Kimball were named in terms of their

¹⁹Jane Law, "Affidavits," *Nauvoo Expositor* 1, no. 1 (June 7, 1844): 2, *TEXT*.

²⁰John Hawley autobiography, Jan. 1, 1885, 97, CCLA. "[Wilford Woodruff] als[o] toald me [in 1867] that when Brigham Young got the records of the Church in his hands, after the death of Joseph, he found by examination that his wife had be[e]n seal[e]d to Joseph that Laws wife and Higbys wife L Wights wife and Fosters wife had all be[e]n seal[e]d to Joseph, as their Husbands could not save them." See also Bathsheba W. Smith, Temple Lot Testimony, United States Testimony 1892, Q566-79, MS 1160, CHL, *LINK*, where Bathsheba names Jane Law as a plural wife of Joseph Smith, and connects her with the doctrinal idea that a woman must be sealed to a righteous man in order to be exalted.

husbands: i.e., “Widow Sherman,” “Widow Vinson Knight,” “Mrs. John Snyder,” Mrs. Wm. Law,” and “Lucien R. Woodworth’s wife.” Kimball may simply not have recalled these women’s first names. Yet the fact that he remembered their husbands’ names indicates that in his memory, women’s identities and spiritual status were mediated through their male relationships. Such language helped normalize an emerging theological logic in which plural marriage linked the faithful in an eternal, male-centered hierarchy.

Comparative Analysis of Plural Wife Lists

By placing the Bullock/Kimball list in dialogue with other rosters of Joseph Smith’s plural wives, we can trace efforts to recover the identities of women who were hidden in plain sight. To assess and compare these lists, this study employs a documentary and historiographical methodology that does not treat each compilation as a record of historical fact but rather as a reflection of the motives, sources, and assumptions of its compiler. Each list is examined for its date of creation, intended audience, and use of primary evidence. The narrative or institutional context in which the lists appeared is considered. Particular attention is given to the ways later lists reproduce, expand upon, or correct earlier ones, revealing changing standards of evidentiary rigor and evolving conceptions of authority. By comparing patterns of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the treatment of women’s voices within these compilations, the analysis seeks to determine how definitions of reliability have shifted over time.

Early Exposés

Names of women alleged to be Joseph Smith’s plural wives appeared in four places during his lifetime. These are as follows:

1. John C. Bennett, 1842 (7 names)²¹

(On this and the following lists, names in italics will indicate those women who are not included on the Bullock/Kimball list.)

²¹John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints: Or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), 256, *LINK*.

Mrs. A**** S**** [*Agnes Coolbrith (Smith)*]
Miss L***** B***** [*Louisa Beaman*]
Mrs. B**** [*Presendia Huntington (Buell)*]
Mrs. D***** [*Elizabeth Davis (Durfee)*]
Mrs. S***** [*Patty Bartlett (Sessions)*]
Mrs. G***** [*Unknown*]²²
Miss B***** [*Sarah Bapson*]²³

Bennett's 1842 list represents the earliest known published attempt to associate specific women with Joseph Smith in the context of plural marriage. Bennett claimed to have personal knowledge from his brief period of intimacy with Joseph Smith's inner circle. However, the list was produced shortly after Bennett's excommunication and during his highly publicized campaign against Joseph Smith in *The Sangamo Journal* and his book *The History of the Saints*. Its timing situates it within a moment of personal vendetta and public controversy. The list therefore reflects polemical motives.

Bennett's audience was an anti-Mormon public eager for scandalous details. His use of disguised names with initials and asterisks allows him to appear both cautious and sensational, signaling insider knowledge while maintaining a veneer of moral restraint. By asserting that Brigham Young and Joseph Bates Noble performed the ceremonies, he invokes recognizable ecclesiastical figures to lend authority to his accusations.²⁴

Bennett's objective, it appears, was to expose what he portrayed as the corruption and hypocrisy of Smith's leadership. Its enduring influence lies not in the accuracy of its claims but in the framework it introduces for later efforts to name and interpret the women associated with early Mormon polygamy.

²²Identified as "Sally Ann Fuller Gulley" by Ivins, Brodie, and Compton. However, she was not married to Samuel Gully until 1847, so she would not have been "Mrs. G*****" in 1842. Stanley Ivins notes that Sally was sealed to Joseph Smith with Samuel Gulley standing proxy on Jan. 29, 1847, but does not include a source. Stanley S. Ivins, "Women Sealed to Joseph Smith," Stanley Snow Ivins Papers, Utah State Historical Society, scan of typed list available here: [LINK](#).

²³Identified as Sarah Bapson by Stanley S. Ivins, "Wives of Joseph Smith," Stanley Snow Ivins Papers, box 12, folder 1, Utah State Historical Society, scan of typed list available here: [LINK](#).

²⁴Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 256.

2. Oliver Olney, ca. 1843-45 (8 names)²⁵

Louisa Beaman
Agnes [Coolbrith] Smith
Eliza R. Snow
Emily Partridge
Eliza Partridge
Ms. Sylvia Lyons
Ms. Sessions
Mrs. Granger

Olney's list is written on the back of an 1843 application to the Nauvoo Female Relief Society by Susan Cuthbertson. Olney's access to the document may be explained by his marriage to Phebe Wheeler, a founding member and assistant secretary of the Relief Society, from whom he could have obtained leftover or discarded papers.

Unlike John C. Bennett's 1842 publication, Olney's list was private. Its fragmentary nature suggests a personal record of speculation or notes for a future exposé. His other marginal writings on the same sheet, including "Joseph did not trick that woman she went to see whether she should marry her husband for eternity" and "Hyrum art a wicked man because he has sin[ne]d in marrying women," as well as a shorter accompanying list that may have represented Hyrum's supposed wives, reveal a preoccupation with marriage theology and moral condemnation.²⁶ No evidence indicates that Olney had direct knowledge of plural marriages. His information likely derives from hearsay and rumor. Yet, several of the women he lists—Louisa Beaman, Eliza and Emily Partridge, Sylvia Sessions Lyon, and Eliza R. Snow—appear on the Bullock/Kimball list. Later testimony names them as plural wives of Joseph Smith. This overlap suggests that Olney's notes were not purely imaginative but reflected reports already circulating among Nauvoo insiders. His inclusion of a mysterious "Mrs. Granger," however, points to the ambiguity and fluidity of early reports.

²⁵Oliver Olney, Manuscript fragment, 1843, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, [LINK](#).

²⁶Olney, Manuscript fragment.

3. Joseph H. Jackson's three facilitators, 1844 (3 names)²⁷

Early Mormon critic Joseph Jackson's 1844 exposé belongs to the same dissident impulse as Bennett and Olney. In it, he names three women who Joseph Smith had "in his employ . . . called 'Mothers in Israel,'"²⁸ who assisted him in proposing plural marriage to younger women. These have been considered by some writers on the subject to have themselves been his plural wives.²⁹

*Mrs. Taylor*³⁰

Madam [Elizabeth] Durfee

Madam [Patty] Sessions

Jackson's framing of female intermediaries complicates simplistic victim/perpetrator binaries. Taylor, Durfee, and Sessions were not just subjects of accusation; they were depicted as active enablers. This suggests that roles within early plural marriage were already being differentiated, extending beyond sexual relationships to include a coordinated network managed by trusted female insiders.

4. "Buckeye's Lamentation," 1844 (4 names)³¹

"Buckeye's Lamentation" appeared in February 1844 in the *Warsaw Message*, a paper known for its fierce opposition to the Saints. Its readership consisted of people already inclined to view Nauvoo with suspicion. The poem employs allegory, such as "Partridges, Snow-birds or Knight-ingales!" to gesture playfully but pointedly at specific women. The poem was written to mock rather than to document, yet effective satire depends on

²⁸Jackson, *A Narrative*, 13.

²⁹See, for example, Todd Compton, "A Trajectory of Plurality: An Overview of Joseph Smith's Thirty-three Plural Wives," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 2 (1996): 5, fn 6, *LINK*.

³⁰Mrs. Taylor has not been positively identified by historical researchers. One possibility is Agnes Taylor, mother of later Church president John Taylor and his sister Elizabeth. Elizabeth was married to William Arrowsmith, who claimed that he slept at his mother-in-law's [Agnes Taylor] "when Joseph Smith slept with Orson Hyde's wife, under the same roof." John Bowes, *Mormonism Exposed* (London: E. Ward, [1850]), 63, *LINK*.

³¹Anonymous, "Buckeye's Lamentation for Want of More Wives," *Warsaw Message* 1, no. 47 (Feb. 7, 1844): 1.

shared assumptions. The author expected readers to recognize his allusions.

[Emily] Partridge
[Eliza] Partridge
[Eliza R.] Snow
[?] Knight

Gary Bergera's identification of Francis Higbee as the author strengthens its significance.³² Higbee, suitor of Sidney Rigdon's daughter Nancy, was an Ohio native (thus, Buckeye). He had once belonged to Joseph Smith's inner circles before aligning himself with dissenters. His proximity to Nauvoo leadership could mean that his references drew upon insider information or firsthand observation.

Despite its mocking tone, the poem behaves like an early list. It reproduces names appearing in Olney, indicating cross-source stability, while expanding the tradition by adding "Knight." Bergera suggests Martha McBride (Knight), but Eveline Knight is also possible.

Even though the compilers of these Nauvoo-era lists wrote with different motives, whether scandal-seeking in Bennett, private notes in Olney, public accusation in Jackson, or satire in Buckeye, all four indicated that Joseph Smith engaged in polygamy during his lifetime. Although there is no indication of direct borrowing, the lists converge around Louisa Beaman, the Partridges, Eliza R. Snow, Patty Sessions, and Elizabeth Durfee, all women on the Bullock/Kimball list.

Yet the lists include several mysterious names. Bennett's "Mrs. G*****" and "Miss B*****" haven't been satisfactorily identified, while Olney's "Mrs. Granger" is unconnected to any known person. Jackson's "Mrs. Taylor" is ambiguous, and Buckeye's "Knightingale" could indicate Martha McBride (Knight), Eveline Knight, or even Lydia Goldthwaite (Knight). These stray inclusions show that even as some names were becoming fixed, others floated in and out of rumor networks without stabilization. This tension between

³²Gary James Bergera, "Buckeye's Laments: Two Early Insider Exposés of Mormon Polygamy and Their Authorship," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 95, no. 4 (Winter, 2002/2003): 357-58, fn 45, *LINK*. Before Bergera's identification, the poem was traditionally attributed to Wilson Law.

a core consensus and a fluid periphery continued into later Utah-era lists, marking the beginnings of what would become perennial “possibles” in Mormon historiography.

Together, these four lists capture polygamy at a liminal stage; no longer quite secret, but not yet doctrinally justified. The foundation for the Utah polygamy narrative standardized by Brigham Young and Joseph F. Smith was already taking shape. These lists do not prove Joseph Smith had plural wives. They prove it was already being publicly talked about—which may be just as significant.

Nauvoo Temple Records

Following the death of Joseph Smith and before the Latter-day Saints’ move to Utah, thirty-two women were sealed to the deceased Prophet for eternity, with another man—usually a Church leader—standing as proxy for him. Then the woman was sealed to the proxy husband “for time,” with the understanding that he would deliver the woman up to Joseph Smith in the resurrection.³³ Twenty-seven of these sealings are recorded in *A Book of Proxey*,³⁴ which contains marriage sealings performed in the Nauvoo Temple in early 1846. Four additional women were recorded in *Book of Anointings*³⁵ as being anointed “to” Joseph Smith, presuming a previous temple marriage sealing. One additional woman was included in *Sealings and Adoptions*,³⁶ Joseph F. Smith’s index of proxy sealings.

³³See sealing of Elizabeth Davis to Cornelius Lott, with Lott “promising to deliver (E. Smith to her husband J. Smith in Eternity,” *A Book of Proxey*, Nauvoo Temple proxy sealings, Jan. 7 to Feb. 5, 1846, 19.

³⁴*A Book of Proxey*, Nauvoo Temple proxy sealings, Jan. 7 to Feb. 5, 1846, Special Collections, Family History Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, UT, reproduced in Todd Compton Polygamy sources.pdf, P129 f13, CCLA.

³⁵*Book of Anointings*, Jan. 8-Feb. 7, 1846, CR 342 3, Box 4, CHL.

³⁶*Sealings and Adoptions*, 1846-1857, compiled by Joseph F. Smith (ca. 1869-70), original in LDS Archives; microfilm 183373, Special Collections, Family History Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; and photocopy in Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

5. Nauvoo Temple Sealings, Jan 7 – Feb 5, 1846 (32 names of women sealed posthumously to Joseph Smith in the Nauvoo Temple)³⁷

Sarah Whitney, Jan. 12, 1846,
sealed to Heber C. Kimball for time, by BY³⁸

Eliza Partridge, Jan. 13, 1846,
sealed to Amasa Lyman for time, by BY

Louisa Beaman, Jan. 14, 1846,
sealed to Brigham Young for time, by HCK

Emily Partridge, Jan. 14, 1846,
sealed to Brigham Young for time, by HCK

Olive Andrews, Jan. 15, 1846,
sealed to Brigham Young for time, by HCK

Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), Jan. 15, 1846,
sealed to John Smith for time

Lucy Walker, Jan. 15, 1846,
sealed to Heber C. Kimball for time

Jane Tibbets, Jan. 17, 1846,
sealed to Elam Luddington for time, by HCK

Phebe Watrous, Jan. 17, 1846,
sealed to Lucian Woodworth for time, by BY

Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Jan. 17, 1846,
sealed to Brigham Young for time, by HCK

Elizabeth Davis (Durfee), Jan. 22, 1846,
sealed to Cornelius P. Lott for time, by BY

Lucinda Pendleton (Harris), Jan. 22, 1846,
sealed to George Washington Harris for time by BY

Maria Lawrence, Jan. 24, 1846,
sealed to Almon W. Babbitt for time, by HCK

Desdemona Fullmer, Jan. 26, 1846,
sealed to Ezra T. Benson for time, by BY

Martha McBride, Jan. 26, 1846,
sealed to Heber C. Kimball for time, by AL

Sylvia Sessions, Jan. 26, 1846,
sealed to Heber C. Kimball for time, by AL

Sarah Lawrence, Jan. 26, 1846,
sealed to Heber C. Kimball for time, by AL

³⁷A *Book of Proxy* contains the first 27 names on this list. The next four are found in *Book of Anointings*. The last name, Melissa Lott, is found in *Sealings and Adoptions*.

³⁸In this list, men who performed the sealings are identified by their initials. BY=Brigham Young, HCK=Heber C. Kimball, AL=Amasa Lyman, JT=John Taylor.

- Apphia Sanburn*, Jan. 27, 1846,
sealed to Gad Yale for time, by HCK
- Cordelia Morley*, Jan. 27, 1846,
sealed to Frederick W. Cox for time, by AL
- Rhoda Richards*, Jan. 31, 1846,
sealed to Brigham Young for time, by HCK
- Zina Huntington*, Feb. 2, 1846,
sealed to Brigham Young for time, by HCK
- Nancy Maria Winchester*, Feb. 3, 1846,
sealed to Heber C. Kimball for time, by BY
- Eliza R. Snow*, Feb. 3, 1846,
sealed to Brigham Young for time, by HCK
- Mary Huston*, Feb. 3, 1846,
sealed to Heber C. Kimball for time, by AL
- Elvira Cowles*, Feb. 3, 1846,
sealed to Jonathan H. Holmes for time, by BY
- Helen Mar Kimball*, Feb. 4, 1846,
sealed to Horace K. Whitney for time, by BY
- Presendia Huntington*, Feb. 4, 1846,
sealed to Heber C. Kimball for time, by AL
- **Augusta Adams*, Feb. 2, 1846,
anointed to Brigham Young for time, by JT³⁹
- **Amanda*, Feb. 2, 1846,
anointed to Brigham Young for time, by JT⁴⁰
- **Flora Woodworth*, no date or officiator⁴¹
- **Mary Ann Frost*, Feb. 6, 1846,
sealed to Parley P. Pratt for time, by HCK⁴²

³⁹*Book of Anointings*, 16-17, No 178. Augusta Adams's sealing to Joseph Smith is not in *A Book of Proxey*. However, she received her Second Anointing to Joseph Smith, with Brigham Young acting as proxy. "No 178: To By (for Time) and J Smith (for Eternity), Augusta, Zina Diantha, Amanda Young, 2F by Jt."

⁴⁰*Book of Anointings*, 16-17, No 178. Amanda's sealing to Joseph Smith is not in *A Book of Proxey*. However, she received her Second Anointing to Joseph Smith with Brigham Young acting as proxy (see previous footnote). She could be Amanda Barnes, who was sealed to Joseph Smith in January 1852 with Brigham Young acting as proxy.

⁴¹*Book of Anointings*, No 199. Flora Woodworth's sealing to Joseph Smith is not in *A Book of Proxey*. However, she received her Second Anointing to Joseph Smith. "No 199: To Joseph Smith (deceased), Flora Ann Woodworth: ["was anointed unto her husband (J Smith—deceased)"] was in the original record], no date and no officiator mentioned.

⁴²*Book of Anointings*, 19, No 215. Mary Ann Frost's sealing to Joseph Smith is not in *A Book of Proxey*. However, she received her Second Anointing to Joseph Smith. "No 215: To Joseph Smith, Mary Ann Pratt Smith, 7 F by Zebedee Coltrin."

*Melissa Lott, Feb. 8, 1846,
sealed to John M. Bernhisel for time, by BY⁴³

The reasoning behind the apparent resealing of women to Joseph Smith after his death, and the sealing to a proxy husband “for time” is not clear. The historical record provides evidence only that these ordinances were performed, not why they were carried out.⁴⁴ Women who entered these arrangements with prominent leaders were often provided with material support and social protection in the aftermath of Joseph Smith’s death.⁴⁵ They were integrated into the institutional memory of polygamy, their connections to Joseph Smith emphasized to reinforce the divine origins of the practice.⁴⁶

Zina Huntington (Jacobs)’ marriages serve as a microcosm of early Mormon polygamy, encapsulating several theological justifications present in the practice. Her sealing to Joseph Smith in October 1841⁴⁷ after she had been civilly married to Henry Jacobs reflects the disregard some Nauvoo Mormons had for marriages performed by the state and the idea that an eternal marriage could override such a union.⁴⁸ Zina’s subsequent sealing to Brigham

⁴³Melissa Lott’s sealing to Joseph Smith is not in *A Book of Proxey*. In *Sealings and Adoptions* she appears on p. 513 as sealed to Joseph Smith with John Milton Bernhisel as proxy on Feb. 8, 1846, by Brigham Young.

⁴⁴Many polygamous marriages that occurred in Nauvoo prior to 1846 were repeated in the completed temple, including sealings to living spouses as well as deceased spouses. The practice was not limited to Joseph Smith. Theodore Turley, for example, married two women plurally in April 1844. They were again sealed to him in January and February 1846 in the Nauvoo temple.

⁴⁵See, for example, Eliza M. P[artridge] Smith to Joseph F. Smith, May 23, 1883, MS 1325, CHL, *LINK*, where Eliza thanks Joseph F. Smith and Presidents Taylor and Cannon, for an “offering” they have given her. She signs the letter “your Aunt in the new and everlasting Covenant.”

⁴⁶See, for example, one of many firesides given throughout the Utah area where Lucy Walker was introduced as a plural wife of Joseph Smith and asked to give her testimony. “In Honor of Joseph Smith,” *Deseret News* 50, no. 30 (Dec. 25, 1899): 2, *LINK*.

⁴⁷40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, JFS-1, p. 5, *LINK*.

⁴⁸See John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled; or the Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop, John D. Lee; Written by Himself* (St. Louis: Bryan, Brand and Co., 1877), 146. In 1877, Lee recalled that around Winter 1842 the doctrine of eternal “sealing” was introduced, teaching that existing civil marriages were invalid because only priesthood authority could solemnize true unions. Couples were told they were merely bound by personal agreements and could separate and remarry if unhappy. This stood in tension with public Church teachings such as Doctrine and Covenants (1835), section 101 [1844 ed. section 109], “Of Marriage,” which affirms that legal contracts of marriage made before a person joined the Church “should be held sacred

Young in 1846, described as “for time only,” provided her with temporal protection and integrated her into the leadership hierarchy while maintaining her eternal connection to Joseph Smith. These teachings, still in their formative stages during the Nauvoo period, were later presented as essential to securing exaltation.⁴⁹ Zina was thoroughly committed to the principle of plural marriage, and a few years after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, she gave birth to Young’s daughter. “Her father named her \the babe/ Zina, there had been 3 other wives that he had named their first daughter for their Mothers, it is a pleasureble duty and is richly deserved.” Zina praised Young for being “thoughtful & kind” to all of his wives. For her part, she said, “This is loving our neighbor as our selves to say to a sister come enjoy my Husban[d] & home can there be a greater test of love to God and respect to his laws than this[?]”⁵⁰

As an icon of polygamous faithfulness, Zina’s later position in Relief Society leadership placed her prominently within the Church as both defender and symbol of the principle of plural marriage.⁵¹ Her leadership roles gave her a platform to articulate the theological and practical significance of polygamy, shaping its public perception within the Church. Zina’s life story demonstrates how polygamy was presented as both personal sacrifice and divine mandate.

Like Zina, Eliza R. Snow’s marriage to Brigham Young “for time only” ensured her centrality in Church leadership and legacy. Her literary and spiritual contributions made her a key figure in shaping Utah Mormonism, and she consistently emphasized her sealing to Joseph Smith in Nauvoo as part of her religious authority. The Bullock/Kimball list’s inclusion of Huntington

and fulfilled;” also Doctrine and Covenants 58:21, 98:4–7, 134:5, and the Twelfth Article of Faith (1842), all of which emphasize obedience to civil law. Despite these stated principles, Joseph Smith performed an illegal marriage on Nov. 24, 1835, between Newel Knight and Lydia G. Bailey, who was still legally married to a non-Mormon who had deserted her. Knight recorded Smith saying he acted by priesthood authority beyond the reach of “Gentile” law. Newel Knight, Autobiographical Sketch, MS 767, CHL, *LINK*. For more details on this marriage, see William G. Hartley, “Newel and Lydia Bailey Knight’s Kirtland Love Story and Historic Wedding,” *BYU Studies* 39, no. 4 (2000): 6-22, *LINK*.

⁴⁹See, for example, Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” *Journal of Discourses* 1:54, *LINK*. “we will show you that it [plurality of wives] is incorporated as a part of our religion, and necessary for our exaltation to the fullness of the Lord’s glory in the eternal world.”

⁵⁰Zina D. Young Autobiographical Sketch 2, undated, 14-15, MS 4780, CHL, *LINK*.

⁵¹Zina became the third General Relief Society President from 1888 until her death. She also served as vice-president of the Utah chapter of the National Council of Women.

and Snow illustrates that plural marriages involving women who remained publicly engaged in Church life were more likely to be remembered and documented in later historical accounts.

One might expect that as Thomas Bullock, Heber C. Kimball, and the Church historians began to formulate a list of Joseph Smith's wives, they would have duplicated the record of Nauvoo temple sealings. But this does not seem to be the case. Although there are twenty-two matches between the two lists, the Bullock/Kimball document does not include Amanda [Barnes], Augusta Adams, Olive Andrews, Mary Ann Frost, Mary Huston, Jane Tibbets, Lucinda Pendleton (Harris), Rhoda Richards, Nancy Maria Winchester, and Aphia Sanburn. Conversely, the document does include women who were not sealed to Joseph Smith posthumously in the Nauvoo temple: Hannah Ells, Olive Frost, Mary Heron,⁵² Almera Johnson, Eveline Knight, Jane Silverthorn (Law), Ruth Vose (Sayers), Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Delcena Johnson, Emma Hale (Smith), and Emeline Hibbard.

Possibly the Church historians did not have easy access to the Nauvoo sealing records or did not think to consult them. But another explanation is that Bullock and Kimball did not consider that the group of women sealed to Joseph in the Nauvoo Temple were all his wives during his lifetime. The temple sealing record has been a disputed source over the years, with some researchers postulating that women sealed to the deceased Joseph in the temple were wives during his lifetime, and others disagreeing.⁵³ At least one

⁵²Hannah Ells, Olive Frost, and Mary Heron had all died before Nauvoo temple ordinances were available, so their exclusion is readily explainable.

⁵³Fawn Brodie wrote that thirty women were posthumously sealed to Joseph in the Nauvoo Temple, and that according to other sources twenty-two of these women had been married to him while he was alive. Thus, she concluded, "it can be assumed that the remaining eight had also been." Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 434. Gary Bergera wrote that sealing and anointing to Joseph Smith by proxy in the Nauvoo Temple was "a privilege suggesting a plural marriage during Smith's lifetime." Gary James Bergera, "Identifying the Earliest Mormon Polygamists, 1841-44," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 3 (2005): 1-74, [LINK](#). Brian Hales disagreed, stating that twenty-two of the women sealed to Joseph by proxy in the Nauvoo Temple "had been sealed to Joseph during his lifetime; but the remaining seven had not." Brian C. Hales, "Identifying Joseph Smith's Plural Wives," *Journal of Mormon History* 40, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 157, [LINK](#); Todd Compton identified eight of the women as "early posthumous marriages to Joseph Smith" and remarked that "there is no evidence that they married Joseph Smith during his lifetime." Todd Compton, "A Trajectory of Plurality: An Overview of Joseph Smith's Thirty-three Plural Wives," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, [LINK](#).

woman sealed to Joseph posthumously, Cordelia Morley, later wrote that she had refused Joseph Smith's request through her parents to be his plural wife. After his death, she was visited by friends, who urged her "to except [accept] his wishes for now he was gone & could \do/ no more for himself." Movingly, Cordelia told her children that on January 27, 1846, "I was married to your father [Frederick Cox] in the Nauvoo Temple. While still kneeling upon the alter (sic) my hand clasped in his, and now his wife, he gave his consent and I was sealed to Joseph Smith for eternity."⁵⁴ Cordelia's account was written at least thirty years after her inclusion on the Bullock/Kimball list, and the originators of the list did not seem to be aware of her personal story.

In some instances, women who were sealed "for time" in the Nauvoo Temple to less prominent men, or whose later lives distanced them from the Utah Church, are absent from the Bullock/Kimball list. For example, Lucinda Pendleton was sealed "for time" to her husband, George W. Harris. She did not move to Utah but separated from George and went to live in the home of her daughter in Tennessee, where she died in 1856. She does not appear on the Bullock/Kimball list.

On the other hand, Mary Houston, sealed to Heber C. Kimball for time, is absent despite her clear connection to prominent leadership and her integration into Salt Lake City society. The same is true for Nancy Maria Winchester. Rhoda Richards, sister of Willard Richards, was sealed to Brigham Young for time and relocated to Utah where she died in 1879. Despite her close proximity to Church leadership—not to mention her 1869 affidavit affirming her sealing to Joseph Smith during his lifetime, she is not included on the Bullock/Kimball list.

The similarities and differences between Nauvoo temple sealings and the Bullock/Kimball list simply do not cohere under any consistent rule. Whatever logic governed each list remains opaque.

Institutional Histories and Related Sources

From the mid-nineteenth century to the dawn of the twentieth, Church historians and leaders grappled with the delicate task of

⁵⁴Cordelia M. Cox journal entry, 1890 September 12, MS 21091, CHL, *LINK*. Compare: *A Book of Proxy*, No. 98, p. 29.

documenting Joseph Smith's plural marriages. Each new list or affidavit added to this evolving record was a piece of a much larger puzzle, part of the Church's effort to defend its origins. The process began quietly, with the Bullock/Kimball list in 1854, and grew into a complex tapestry of testimonies and recollections, some contested, others incomplete. As the years passed, what started as a simple effort to preserve the past became a carefully curated story, reflecting not only Joseph Smith's legacy but also the Church's changing needs in a rapidly modernizing world.

6. Bullock/Kimball 1854-1866 List (33 names)⁵⁵

This list begins here in the chronology, but has already been addressed fully above.

Names in the lists described below are given in the notes, continuing to standardize spelling and to italicize those not present on the Bullock/Kimball list.

7. Wilford Woodruff, 1866 (4 names)⁵⁶

In a thirty-page record titled, "Historian's Private Journal. 1858," following an entry dated July 1, 1866, Wilford Woodruff, as Assistant Church Historian, penned the names of four women, their sealing dates to Joseph Smith and officiators of the marriages.⁵⁷ This is the first of the lists that attempt to date Joseph Smith's plural marriages, though the dates in 1840 that Woodruff assigns the first three marriages are a year earlier than the now-accepted dates for these marriages.⁵⁸ Intended for internal use, the list omits women's perspectives.

⁵⁵Names of Relief Society Members circa 1854.

⁵⁶Wilford Woodruff, "Historian's Private Journal," 1858, CHL. For the history and dating of this entry, see Gary James Bergera, "Memory as Evidence: Dating Joseph Smith's Plural Marriages to Louisa Beaman, Zina Jacobs, and Presendia Buell," *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 4 (October 2015): 95-131, *LINK*.

⁵⁷These were: Louisa Beaman, May 1840, by Joseph B. Noble; Zina Huntington, Oct. 27, 1840, by Dimick B. Huntington; Presendia Huntington, Dec. 11, 1840, by Dimick B. Huntington; *Rhoda Richards, June 12, 1843, by Willard Richards.*

⁵⁸Bergera, "Memory as Evidence," 95, 130.

8. Joseph F. Smith Affidavits, 1869-74 (18 names)⁵⁹

The 1869-74 affidavits collected by Joseph F. Smith were a deliberate effort to create an institutional memory of Joseph Smith's involvement in plural marriage. The affidavits followed a standardized template, with each woman affirming her marriage or sealing to Joseph Smith, often including the date and location. Their uniformity in tone and detail suggests a highly curated process aimed at presenting a cohesive and authoritative narrative. However, this uniformity also obscures the individuality and lived experiences of the women who participated in plural marriage. The affidavits offer little insight into the emotional, spiritual, or social dimensions of their experiences, reducing their statements to mere affirmations that they were "married or sealed" to the Prophet.

Fifteen of the eighteen women mentioned in the affidavits also appear on the Bullock/Kimball list, making it possible that the latter was used as a source. The selection process excluded certain women, including those who denied their involvement, such as Sarah Lawrence and Jane Law; non-member Emeline Hibbard (White); or those who had passed away, like Hannah Ells, Maria Lawrence, Olive Frost, Flora Woodworth, Sarah Kingsley, Mary Heron, and Delcena Johnson. Eight women on the Bullock/Kimball list are missing affidavits for no discernible reason.⁶⁰ These omissions prevent this body of documents from presenting a complete historical account.

Three women who do not appear on the Bullock/Kimball list are mentioned in the affidavits. An affidavit is drawn up for Vienna Jacques, but it is unfinished, unsigned, and crossed out.⁶¹ Rhoda Richards, sister of Apostle Willard Richards, participated in a proxy marriage to Joseph Smith in the Nauvoo Temple and provided a

⁵⁹Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, Internet Archive, *LINK*. Presendia Huntington, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Emily Partridge, Marinda Nancy Johnson, *Rhoda Richards*, Zina Huntington, Melissa Lott, Eliza R. Snow, Desdemona Fullmer, Sarah Whitney, Lucy Walker, Elvira Cowles, Eliza Partridge, Martha McBride. I include in this list the two women named by Joseph F. but who did not sign their affidavit: Sylvia Sessions (unsigned), and *Vienna Jacques* (unfinished and unsigned). I also include *Fanny Young* (attested in the affidavit of Harriet Cook) and Louisa Beaman (attested in the affidavit of Joseph B. Noble).

⁶⁰These are: Helen Mar Kimball, Eveline Knight, Cordelia Morley, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Elizabeth Davis (Durfee), Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Phebe Watrous (Woodworth), and Almera Johnson.

⁶¹Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, 56, *LINK*.

signed affidavit.⁶² Later in life, she told the story of a “first and only love,” who died when she was a young woman, causing her to pass “companionless through life,” until she was sealed to Joseph “according to the celestial law, by his own request.”⁶³

Brigham Young’s sister, Fanny, was named in both Harriet Cook and Augusta Adams’s affidavits as being “married or sealed” to Joseph on November 2, 1843, in a ceremony performed by Brigham and witnessed by three of his plural wives.⁶⁴ In 1872, Brigham recalled Fanny’s sentiments on plural marriage as follows:

[W]hen I get into the celestial kingdom, if I ever do get there, I shall request the privilege of being a ministering angel; that is the labor that I wish to perform. I don’t want any companion in that world; and if the Lord will make me a ministering angel, it is all I want.

Brigham quoted Joseph’s reply: “Sister, you talk very foolishly, you do not know what you will want,” directing Brigham to seal her to him then and there.⁶⁵ Modern readers familiar with debates about women’s autonomy may find this account disquieting. It certainly raises questions about women’s capacity for consent and agency within early Mormon conceptions of plural marriage.

Notably, the affidavits were not widely cited in later legal disputes, such as the Temple Lot Case⁶⁶ or the Smoot hearings,⁶⁷

⁶²Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, 17, *LINK*.

⁶³Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: n.p., 1877), 422.

⁶⁴These were Augusta Adams, Harriet Cook, and Mary Ann Angell. Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, 14, 52, *LINK*; and *LINK*.

⁶⁵Brigham Young, “Discourse by President Brigham Young,” *Journal of Discourses*, 16 (August 31, 1873): 166-67, *LINK*. Brigham specifies that this woman was his sister, but does not name Fanny in particular.

⁶⁶The Temple Lot Case (1891–1896) was a legal battle over ownership of the sacred Temple Lot in Independence, Missouri, involving the RLDS Church and the Church of Christ (Temple Lot). It became pivotal in the polygamy debate as RLDS leaders sought to disprove their church’s ties to polygamy, presenting affidavits and testimonies claiming Joseph Smith opposed the practice. In response, Utah-based LDS leaders submitted evidence asserting Smith’s involvement in polygamy. The case highlighted the deep divisions in Mormonism over Joseph Smith’s teachings and the struggle to define his legacy.

⁶⁷The Smoot Hearings (1904–1907) were U.S. Senate investigations into whether Reed Smoot, an apostle of the LDS Church and elected senator from Utah, should be allowed to take his seat. Central to the hearings was the LDS Church’s continued practice of polygamy after having officially renounced it with the 1890 Manifesto. Witnesses testified about post-Manifesto plural marriages and the Church’s influence on politics, raising questions about loyalty to U.S. laws. The hearings underscored

despite their combined value as a documentary record. This lack of use suggests that although they were produced in part as a public response to persistent RLDS accusations that Joseph Smith never practiced polygamy, they also served to codify a particular historical narrative for internal consumption, one that sought to reinforce the legitimacy of plural marriage.⁶⁸ This focus may explain the simplicity of the affidavits, which avoided delving into the complexities of the women's experiences in favor of a clear and repeatable institutional memory.

The exclusion of personal experiences from the affidavits contrasts sharply with later recollections and writings from some of these women. For instance, Zina Huntington⁶⁹ and Lucy Walker spoke elsewhere about the challenges and sacrifices associated with plural marriage, revealing the profound emotional and spiritual negotiations required of them. Lucy wrote, "I felt at this moment [when Joseph proposed plural marriage to her] that I was called to place myself upon the altar a liveing [sic] sacrifice, perhaps to brook the world in disgrace and incur the displeasure and contempt of my youthful companions; all my dreams of happiness blown to the four winds." But after praying, "I received a powerful and irr[es]istable testimony of the truth of the mar[r]iage covenant called 'celestial or plural mar[r]iage.' Which has been like \an/ anchor to the soul through all the temptations and trials of life."⁷⁰ Like the Bullock/Kimball list, the affidavits recorded the marriages but left the struggles, sacrifices, and humanity of the women themselves unwritten.

9. George A. Smith letter, Oct. 9, 1869 (9 names)⁷¹

national concerns about polygamy and the separation of church and state, pressuring the Church to abandon new plural marriages entirely.

⁶⁸See Bruno and Stone, "Crafting a Sacred Story." Selected affidavits were published in 1879. See Joseph F. Smith, "Joseph the Seer's Plural Marriages," *Deseret News* 28, no. 38 (Oct. 22, 1879): 12, [LINK](#). See also "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saint's Herald* 26, no. 19 (Oct. 1, 1879): 289, [LINK](#).

⁶⁹"A brief sketch of Zina D. H. Young Smith's life," April 17, 1881, in Zina D. H. Young jubilee box contributions, CR 11 325, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁷⁰Lucy W. Kimball Statement, undated, MS 741, CHL, [LINK](#); see typescript at [LINK](#).

⁷¹George A. Smith letter to Joseph Smith III, 9 Oct 1869, [LINK](#). Louisa Beaman, Eliza R. Snow, Melissa Lott, Lucy Walker, Emily Partridge, Eliza Partridge, *Rhoda Richards*, Desdemona Fullmer, *Fanny Young*.

In an 1869 letter to Joseph Smith III, George A. Smith, eighth official Church Historian and General Church Recorder from 1854 to 1871, named nine women as Joseph's plural wives, relying heavily on the affidavits gathered by Joseph F. Smith. Importantly, George also drew on personal experience. As a young man in Nauvoo, George was old enough to have been taught about polygamy by Joseph Smith himself, a claim he made in the same letter to his cousin, Joseph III.

The nine women George listed correspond directly to those who are referenced within Joseph F.'s affidavit collection. George relied on the dates and language from the affidavits, occasionally quoting directly from witnesses such as William Clayton and Lorenzo Snow. His alignment with the affidavits underscores their importance as a foundational source in constructing the narrative of Joseph Smith's plural marriages.

However, notable omissions complicate George's account. Some can be explained by timing, as affidavits for Elvira Cowles, Martha McBride, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Sylvia Sessions, and Vienna Jacques, had not yet been prepared by the time George wrote his letter on October 9, 1869. The absence of five others invites further scrutiny. Presendia Huntington, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Marinda Johnson, Zina Huntington, and Sarah Whitney all played significant roles in the history of plural marriage, making their exclusion difficult to dismiss as an oversight. These women were all publicly the wives of someone else in Nauvoo. George may have prioritized women whose marriages to Joseph were less controversial, reflecting his intent to craft a concise and persuasive response to Joseph Smith III.

10. William Clayton affidavit, Feb 16, 1874 (10 names)⁷²

William Clayton's affidavit of February 16, 1874, is a final addition to the group of affidavits collected by Joseph F. Smith.

⁷²William Clayton, Revelation on Celestial Marriage, 1874 February 16, MS 2673, CHL, *LINK*; (handwriting of Joseph F. Smith, pencil corrections by William Clayton). See also William Clayton, 1874 Affidavit, Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, MS 3423, CHL, *LINK* (handwriting of William Clayton, signed and sealed by John T. Caine, notary public). Eliza R. Snow, Louisa Beaman, Sylvia Sessions, Desdemona Fullmer, Lucy Walker, Eliza Partridge, Emily Partridge, Sarah Whitney, Helen Mar Kimball, Flora Woodworth.

Although it was drafted by Joseph F., Clayton's involvement by his light editing, signature, and copy in his own handwriting, make it a particularly valuable document.⁷³ It details his firsthand involvement in Nauvoo during the period when Joseph Smith was introducing and practicing plural marriage. As a close associate of Joseph Smith and as his personal scribe, Clayton was directly privy to many of the private discussions and actions related to the implementation of this practice. His list of ten specific plural wives is informed by his proximity to Joseph Smith and his role in recording sensitive information, including the July 12, 1843, revelation on celestial marriage.

Clayton's position meant he would have been a witness to the unfolding of polygamy in Nauvoo as well as a participant in its documentation and administration, including his own plural marriages which he claimed were under Joseph's direction. This close involvement adds weight to his naming of individuals, as it suggests that his knowledge was not based on hearsay but on direct observation and interaction. Because of this, Clayton's list of wives does not seem to depend on the Bullock/Kimball list, but all of his names do appear on that document.

11. Edward W. Tullidge, 1877 (4 names)⁷⁴

Written with the assistance of Eliza R. Snow, Edward Tullidge's *The Women of Mormondom* is framed as an epic celebration of women's spiritual authority rather than as a defense or exposition of marital systems. He explicitly disengages from questions of polygamy, urging readers to encounter Mormon women first as religious actors.⁷⁵ However, Tullidge does spend a few pages responding to those who denied that Joseph Smith was the revelator of plural marriage and ascribed its origin to Brigham Young. To do this, he cites Eliza Snow's testimony of "her marriage to the prophet Joseph, not by proxy, but personally, during his lifetime,"

⁷³For further details on this affidavit, see Bruno and Stone, "Crafting a Sacred Story."

⁷⁴Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: n.p., 1877), 367-69. [LINK](#).

⁷⁵Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom*, 2. "Let us forget, then, thus early in their story, all reference to polygamy or monogamy. Rather let us think of them as apostolic mediums of a new revelation."

Sarah Whitney, “the first woman given in plural marriage with the consent of both parents,” Eliza and Emily Partridge, “and others,” who “were also sealed to him in person, in the order of celestial marriage.”⁷⁶ All four appear on the Bullock/Kimball list.

Tullidge’s selection is narrow but strategic. He names women whose sealings functioned as evidentiary anchors in affidavit culture. The names serve as a legitimizing core, while preserving his aim of centering women’s prophetic roles.

12. Helen Mar Kimball [Whitney], 1882 (4 names)⁷⁷

A response to Joseph Smith III, Helen Mar Whitney’s pamphlet, *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith* mentions four women who she says Emma Smith gave to her husband as wives: Sarah and Maria Lawrence, and Eliza and Emily Partridge. Helen also mentions that there are “a dozen or more of his [Joseph Smith’s] wives still living and dwelling in Utah, who were sealed to him in Nauvoo.”⁷⁸ Here, Helen’s list is precise rather than exhaustive. She specifies women whose marriages were said to have occurred with Emma Smith’s knowledge or participation, countering RLDS denials at their most vulnerable point. In other writings, Helen does name additional women, such as Sarah Whitney, Lucy Walker, and Flora Woodworth (Gove) as wives of Joseph Smith.⁷⁹

13. Augusta Crocheron, 1884 (3 names)⁸⁰

In 1884, Augusta Crocheron published a book of biographical sketches of twenty-one women who played important roles in the development of Utah. Like Tullidge’s book, Crocheron’s is not intended to be a comprehensive list of plural wives of Joseph Smith,

⁷⁶Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom*, 367-69.

⁷⁷Helen Mar Whitney, *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), 14, *LINK*.

⁷⁸Helen Mar Whitney, *Plural Marriage*, 15.

⁷⁹See Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents at Winter Quarters,” *Woman’s Exponent* 14, no. 2 (Jun. 15, 1885): 11, *LINK*, for Sarah and Lucy; and Charles M. Hatch and Todd M. Compton, *A Widow’s Tale* (Utah State University Press, 2003), 246, *LINK*, for Flora.

⁸⁰Augusta Joyce Crocheron, *Representative Women of Deseret: A Book of Biographical Sketches* (Salt Lake City: J.C. Graham and Co., 1884), 2, 12, 30, *LINK*.

but does name three women as wives of the Prophet in Nauvoo: Eliza R. Snow, and Zina and Presendia Huntington. Additionally, Crocheron includes Sarah Granger Kimball's description of Joseph Smith's proposition of marriage and her refusal. She also includes a sketch of Helen Mar Kimball in which Joseph Smith teaches the principle of celestial marriage to both her father and to herself, but a marriage or sealing of Helen to the Prophet is not mentioned.⁸¹

In Crocheron's book, polygamy is treated as a formative but not defining feature of women's lives. Her list of wives is embedded within stories of agency, conscience, and religious development rather than marshaled as proof.

14. Edmund Cameron Brand, 1884 (20 names)⁸²

In 1883, Joseph Smith III, who did not believe his father had married plural wives, commissioned Edmund C. Brand to go to Utah and look for any of his (tongue-in-cheek) "respective step-mothers, and possible half brothers & sisters by the same."⁸³ Brand sent Joseph III a list of twenty names, including thirteen that were on the Bullock/Kimball list. Internal clues in Joseph III's letter of reply make it clear that Brand relied on some of the 1869 affidavits, perhaps those that were published in the Oct. 22, 1879, *Deseret News*.⁸⁴

Joseph III's spicy recollections are notable because of the richness they add to our knowledge of the women. He writes of Emily Partridge: "I remember her well. She was a lusty wench and bore children to Brigham Young (so I am informed)[;] why not to father?" He says that her sister Eliza was "less likely to bear

⁸¹Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 26, 110

⁸²Joseph Smith III to Bro E. C. Brand, Joseph Smith III Letter Press Book, P6, JSLB4, 63, Community of Christ Library and Archives. This letter responds to the list that Brother Brand has compiled, asking further questions about the women. They are: Eliza R. Snow, Emily Partridge, Eliza Partridge, Almira Johnson, Louisa Beaman, Maria Lawrence, Sarah Lawrence, Zina Huntington, Sylvia Sessions (Lyon), *Mary Ann Angell*, Jane Law, *Hannah Dubois (Dibble)*, *Fanny Young*, *Esther Reese*, [?] *Bust*, *Adeline Hamblin (Littlefield)*, *Lucy Havers*, Melissa Lott, Phoebe Woodworth, and Flora Woodworth.

⁸³Joseph Smith III to Bro. E. C. Brand.

⁸⁴Joseph III observed that Emily Partridge "was married, or sealed" to Joseph Smith (a convention characteristic of the affidavits). He also followed the dates that Louisa Beaman and Almira Johnson were sealed to the Prophet that were in the affidavits. All of this information was available in "Joseph the Seer's Plural Marriages," *Deseret News* 28, no. 38 (Oct. 22, 1879): 12, *LINK*.

children.” He writes that there was a scandal in Nauvoo about Sylvia Sessions (Lyon) that was “either fruitless of results; or was hushed up, whitewashed.” She was childless in Nauvoo, he (incorrectly) remembers— “mountain air and some vigorous proxy may have done for Joseph what he did not for himself—less the enjoyment of course.” Jane Law was “petite, handsome, full of snap, energy, and dash.” Mrs. Philo Dibble (Hannah Dubois) “was a large vigorous looking woman, and I guess wore the pants in family government.” Finally, “I knew Melissa [Lott] well, a bright, good girl. Am glad that she was only sealed for eternity, or adopted into the family. But she was plenty large and only one of the entire outfit named by you whom I would be inclined to believe if she should tell me herself that father did cohabit with her.”⁸⁵

Brand’s list is interesting because it is more evenly split than other lists between those who appear on the Bullock/Kimball list and those who do not. He also includes names of five women who do not appear on any of the other lists we have thus far considered: Mary Ann Angell, Esther Reese, a woman with the last name of “Bust,” Adeline Hamblin (Littlefield), and Lucy Havers. It is hard to know whether Brand is at a disadvantage in identifying plural wives of Joseph because he is an outsider, or whether his investigative skills were much better than any of the other list creators.

15. Wilhelm Wyl, 1886 (18 names)⁸⁶

Wilhelm von Wymetal (writing as W. Wyl) was a German journalist who spent extended periods in Utah between 1884 and 1886 collecting interviews and depositions for his book *Mormon Portraits*. Treated with caution by Latter-day Saint historians because of his openly anti-Mormon stance and his readiness to include hearsay, Wyl is often situated within the nineteenth-century

⁸⁵Joseph Smith III to Bro E. C. Brand.

⁸⁶Wilhelm Wyl, *Mormon Portraits, Vol. 1, Joseph Smith the Prophet, his Family and his Friends* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing Co., 1886), 54-58, 60, 62, 65, 67, 70, 72, 82, 85, 89, 90, 96, 154, 250, 300, 301, *LINK*. Eliza Partridge, Emily Partridge, Elizabeth Davis Durfee, Emeline Hibbard (White), *Mrs. Ford, Fanny Alger, Mrs Granger*, Eliza R. Snow, *Lucinda Pendleton (Harris)*, Louisa Beaman, Mrs. Edward Blossom (Desdemona Fullmer), Zina Huntington (Jacobs), Helen Mar Kimball, *Elizabeth Whitney*, Sarah Whitney, Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), Lucy Walker, Flora Woodworth.

exposé tradition. Nevertheless, his polygamy list appears to be the product of sustained investigative labor, drawing on repeated interviews with dozens of contemporary witnesses, many of whom had long experience within Mormon communities. As a core documentary scaffold, Wyl reproduces in full William Clayton's February 16, 1874 affidavit, which names ten of Joseph Smith's wives. Oddly, and unaccountably, however, Wyl omits the name of Sylvia Sessions.⁸⁷

The women Wyl includes overlap substantially with those appearing on the Bullock/Kimball list, especially its most frequently attested Nauvoo-era figures, including the Partridge sisters, Louisa Beaman, Eliza R. Snow, Zina Huntington Jacobs, Helen Mar Kimball, Lucy Walker, Flora Woodworth, Sarah Whitney, and Sarah Cleveland. At the same time, he retains names drawn from personal recollection and rumor, such as Fanny Alger, Lucinda Pendleton (Harris), Mrs. Ford, and non-Mormon Emeline Hibbard (White). The appearance of "Mrs. Granger" aligns Wyl's list with earlier strands of memory, echoing the similarly unidentified "Mrs. Granger" mentioned by Oliver Olney.

Wyl is the first to include "Mrs. Edward Blossom" in his list of polygamous wives. The claim comes from an informant who states that while Emma Smith was away purchasing supplies, Joseph spent nights with the young wife of Elder Edward Blossom, a "high councilor of Zion, (afterwards exalted to the apostleship by Brigham Young)."⁸⁸ This alleged wife was repeated on Stanley Ivins's and Fawn Brodie's lists, but no researcher has been able to discover an Edward Blossom who was a high councilor and a later apostle.⁸⁹ I believe we can identify this man as Ezra Benson, who fits this description, and who stood proxy for Joseph Smith in the Nauvoo Temple in an eternal marriage to Desdemona Fullmer, who he then married for time.⁹⁰

⁸⁷Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 94-96.

⁸⁸Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 64-66. Because Wyl is a late source, he mistakenly names Ezra Benson as Desdemona's husband, when she was not sealed to Benson until after Joseph's death.

⁸⁹Gary Bergera names two possibilities for Edward Blossom—Edward Sayers, who was a florist and the husband of Ruth Vose; and Lucinda Pendleton's husband George Harris, who was a high councillor but never an Apostle. However, Bergera notes that neither of these men fits the description exactly. Bergera, "Identifying the Earliest Mormon Polygamists," 33.

⁹⁰*A Book of Proxy*, 40

Wyl's list is best read as evidence of how word of Joseph Smith's polygamy circulated among critics and former insiders in the mid-1880s, preserving claims that should not be dismissed, but carefully corroborated.

16. Andrew Jenson List, 1887 (29 names)⁹¹

Andrew Jenson's effort to compile a comprehensive list of Joseph Smith's plural wives in 1887 was both ambitious and groundbreaking. Though built upon prior lists, such as the 1869-70 affidavits,⁹² it independently expanded and refined the scope of research into Joseph Smith's polygamy.⁹³ Jenson's work sought to document these marriages and to provide the Latter-day Saints a sense of appreciation for their polygamous heritage. By compiling names based on interviews, affidavits, and biographical sketches, Jenson produced a vital historical record that stood apart from earlier efforts.

Jenson's research on Joseph Smith's plural wives began in November 1886 with a visit to Melissa Lott when she gave him biographical information on herself and a list of twelve of Joseph's wives. He also spoke with Eliza R. Snow, Sarah Whitney, Desdemona Fullmer, Helen Mar Kimball; and he wrote letters to family members of Joseph's widows as part of his investigation. His collection relied on

⁹¹ Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," *The Historical Record* 6, nos. 3-5 (May 1887): 233-34, *LINK*. Louisa Beaman, *Fanny Alger, Lucinda Pendleton (Harris)*, Zina Huntington, Presendia Huntington, Eliza R. Snow, Sarah Whitney, Desdemona Fullmer, Helen Mar Kimball, Eliza Partridge, Emily Partridge, Lucy Walker, Almera Johnson, Malissa Lott, Maria Lawrence, Sarah Lawrence, Hannah Ells, Flora Woodworth, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Olive Frost, Sylvia Sessions, *Nancy Maria Winchester*, Elvira Cowles, Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland). Four more appear in his notes but were not published: Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Marinda Nancy Johnson, *Fanny Young, Rhoda Richards*.

⁹² Jenson had access to some of the Joseph F. Smith affidavits that had been published in the October 22, 1879 issue of the *Deseret News*.

⁹³ Both Don Bradley and Brian Hales believe that Jenson likely gathered information on Joseph Smith's plural marriages independently of Joseph F. Smith's 1869-70 collection of affidavits, other than those that were already published. Hales points out that a letter from Zina Huntington dated June 22, 1887, confirms Jenson interviewed her directly. He was not appointed Assistant Church Historian until 1892 and had limited access to Church records beforehand. Most documents he included in his *Historical Record* had already been published, and he excluded key affidavits like that of Martha McBride, possibly due to lack of access or incomplete knowledge. His journal shows no indication he consulted the affidavit books or met with Joseph F. Smith to review them. Brian Hales, "Dating Joseph Smith's First Nauvoo Sealings," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016): 6, *LINK*.

his own research and conversations with participants.⁹⁴ Differences in handwriting and writing implements on Jenson's drafts of his wives' list show that others contributed to his compilation over a period of time.⁹⁵ Furthermore, discrepancies in naming, spelling, ordering, and inclusion of women compared to the Bullock/Kimball list demonstrates that he did not rely on that earlier compilation.

However, it is notable that Jenson's final list is so similar to the Bullock/Kimball list, with twenty-two names matching directly. This convergence is significant, as it implies a strong underlying consistency in the historical memory of Joseph Smith's polygamy, despite the independent methodologies and sources used. The similarities between the lists bolster the credibility of these accounts and suggest a broad acknowledgment among contemporaries and later researchers of the scope and of the participants in Joseph Smith's plural marriages.

While the Bullock/Kimball list includes several unique entries, such as Eveline Knight and Emeline Hibbard, Andrew Jenson's research adds depth and breadth, incorporating additional names Fanny Alger, Lucinda Pendleton (Harris), Rhoda Richards, Nancy Maria Winchester, and Fanny Young. Jenson also provides context for these marriages, drawing on direct interviews with surviving participants and archival resources. Rather than keeping a list only, Jenson gives context of the women's lives and often uses their own words, as in the case of Emily Partridge: "I left Nauvoo, crossing the Mississippi River, and was again a wanderer without home or shelter, with a wilderness[s] full of Indians and wild beasts before me, and cruel and heartless beings behind me. The day after crossing the river I might have been seen sitting on a log in a blinding snow-storm, with a three-months-old babe in my arms."⁹⁶

Historian Don Bradley has pointed out that following Jenson's publication in his *Historical Record* of the biographies of several of Joseph Smith's wives, he was asked to desist by President Wilford Woodruff. Church leaders were concerned about legal repercussions

⁹⁴Don Bradley, *Interviews with Joseph Smith's Plural Wives: Analyzing Andrew Jenson's 1887 Research Notes*, forthcoming.

⁹⁵Andrew Jenson, Names and notes about women who have been identified as probable wives of Joseph Smith, Andrew Jenson collection, circa 1841-1942, MS 17956, CHL, *LINK*.

⁹⁶Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," *The Historical Record* 6, nos. 3-5 (May 1887): 240, *LINK*. The babe was Brigham Young's son, Edward Partridge Young, who died in 1852 at age seven.

or embarrassment of those polygamists or their families who were still living at the time. This reticence may even have caused the exclusion of some of the women in his research notes.⁹⁷

Together, the Bullock/Kimball list, the Joseph F. Smith affidavits, and the Andrew Jenson lists represent complementary steps in the preservation of a complex and often controversial aspect of Latter-day Saint history. By adding meticulous and independent research, Jenson helped ensure that the identities and experiences of Joseph Smith's plural wives were not lost to time.

17. Lorenzo Snow, 1899 (11 names)⁹⁸

In 1899, LDS President Lorenzo Snow directed Salt Lake Temple workers to address gaps in the recorded posthumous sealings of Joseph Smith, resulting in proxy sealings for eleven women. The temple record states: "The sealings of those named below were performed during the life of the Prophet Joseph but there is no record thereof. President Lorenzo Snow decided that they be repeated in order that a record might exist."⁹⁹

Ten of these women were by this point already publicly documented as plural wives by Joseph F. Smith or Andrew Jenson, but Sarah Bapson had not been mentioned since John C. Bennett's "Miss B*****." The addition reflects the evolving nature of these historical records. Joseph F. Smith's plural wife, temple worker Edna Lambson Smith, stood proxy for these women as their sealings were completed.

President Snow's effort to formalize and expand the list of Joseph Smith's wives through proxy ordinances must be understood within the context of the 1890 Manifesto, which formally announced a shift away from the public practice of plural marriage in the

⁹⁷For example, Jenson strikes Patty Sessions from his draft list and omits her from other lists and from the published version. His notes also mention Marinda Johnson, another name not in his published version. Bradley, "Interviews with Joseph Smith's Plural Wives," forthcoming; see Wilford Woodruff, Letter to Andrew Jenson, 6 August 1887, Wilford Woodruff papers, *LINK*.

⁹⁸*Fanny Alger, Lucinda Pendleton (Harris), Almera Johnson, Sarah Bapson, Flora Woodworth, Fanny Young, Hannah Ells, Olive Frost, Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), Sylvia Sessions, Ruth Vose (Sayers).*

⁹⁹Salt Lake Temple Sealing Records, Book D, 243, April 4, 1899, in Thomas Milton Tinney, *The Royal Family of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Junior: The First President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Tinney-Greene Family Organization, 1973), 41, see reproduction here: *LINK*.

Church. While the Manifesto represented a significant public change, Church leaders continued to affirm polygamy's theological importance and its place within Joseph Smith's prophetic mission. These proxy sealings in 1899 symbolized a doctrinal continuity even as the Church moved away from active polygamous practice. By preserving the legacy of plural marriage through these ordinances, Church leaders underscored the enduring spiritual significance of polygamy as a foundational principle, ensuring its place in the Church's evolving understanding of its history and theology.

18. Benjamin F. Johnson, before 1905 (12 names)¹⁰⁰

Benjamin F. Johnson's memoir, *My Life's Review*, was written before his death in 1905, then published in 1947. The manuscript provides a deeply personal account of Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage, along with the names of twelve wives, two of whom do not appear on the Bullock/Kimball list. In another source, a letter to assistant Church historian George Gibbs, Johnson also names Fanny Alger as a plural wife of Joseph Smith.¹⁰¹

Johnson's recollection of his sister Almera's marriage to Joseph Smith is especially valuable. In an affidavit written March 4, 1870, he recounts how, after initial discussions at their home in Macedonia, she was sealed to Joseph by William Clayton in Nauvoo, with another sister and Louisa Beaman present. He also describes Joseph's request that Almera stay in Room No. 10 at the Mansion House during her time in the city; and how Joseph later visited the Johnson home in Ramus, where he "occupied the same room and bed" with Almera. This narrative, while uncomfortably intimate, provides a rare view of the familial involvement in facilitating plural marriages and includes the lived experiences of participants.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰Benjamin F. Johnson, *My Life's Review* (Zion's Printing and Publishing Co., 1947), 93, *LINK*; see copy at *LINK*. Louisa Beaman, Eliza R. Snow, Maria Lawrence, Sarah Lawrence, Sylvia Sessions (Lyon), *Hannah Dubois (Dibble)*, [Eliza] Partridge, [Emily] Partridge, C. P. Lott's daughters [Melissa Lott], [Mary E. Lott], Almera Johnson, Delcina Johnson.

¹⁰¹Benjamin F. Johnson to George S. Gibbs, April 1903–October 1911, CHL, *LINK*. This letter was "written between April 1903 and the following October." George S. Gibbs, an assistant in the Church Historian's Office, asked Johnson "for a written statement of his personal knowledge of incidents and facts that came under his observation, from the almost earliest history of the Church."

¹⁰²Testimony of Benjamin F. Johnson, Affidavit Book 2, p. 3, *LINK*; see also Benjamin F. Johnson to George S. Gibbs.

Almera's own testimony corroborates her brother's account while offering critical insights into her experience. She recalls how Joseph taught her the principle of celestial marriage over a series of conversations and asked her to become his wife. Initially hesitant, Almera notes that Hyrum Smith personally reassured her, sharing his own journey from doubt to belief in the principle. She also describes moments of closeness with Joseph during her time in Nauvoo and later in Macedonia, where he visited her as his wife.¹⁰³ Her voice is essential in understanding this history. While Benjamin's account focuses on his role as a facilitator and observer, Almera's testimony reflects the internal struggles and decisions faced by women entering plural marriage. Her acknowledgment of doubt and her eventual acceptance offer a rare, candid perspective on the deeply personal process of embracing this controversial principle.

Individuals like Benjamin Johnson viewed themselves as active participants in shaping and sustaining these sacred practices. His list of plural wives corroborates institutional records and provides granular details often absent from official documentation.

19. Joseph Fielding Smith, 1905 (12 names)¹⁰⁴

The 1904 Second Manifesto, issued by Church President Joseph F. Smith, marked a turning point in the institutional approach to polygamy within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This declaration, delivered under intense federal scrutiny and pressure, unequivocally condemned plural marriage, enforcing a policy of excommunication for those who continued the practice. By this time, the Church faced existential threats due to its polygamous past, including the potential loss of property and legal status, and sought to demonstrate compliance with U.S. law. While the Second Manifesto represented the Church's most serious attempt to bring an end to new polygamous unions, the

¹⁰³Almera W. Johnson Affidavit, Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, MS 3423, CHL, [LINK](#).

¹⁰⁴Joseph F. Smith, Jr. and Richard C. Evans, *Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage, A Discussion* (Zion's Printing and Publishing Co., 1905). Lucy Walker, Emily Partridge, Eliza Partridge, Almira Johnson, Martha McBride, Melissa Lott, Sarah Whitney, *Rhoda Richards*, Louisa Beaman, Maria Lawrence, Sarah Lawrence, Eliza R. Snow.

theological underpinnings of plural marriage, understood to be rooted in Joseph Smith's teachings and practices, remained integral to Mormon identity and doctrine.

This tension is evident in a pamphlet written by Joseph F. Smith's son, Joseph Fielding Smith, in 1905. Titled "Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage," it was written in the immediate aftermath of the Second Manifesto. It names twelve of Joseph Smith's wives, declaring that polygamy was a historical reality and a doctrinal cornerstone of early Mormonism. This acknowledgment reflects the delicate balance Church leaders sought to maintain: publicly distancing themselves from contemporary polygamy while defending the foundational role of plural marriage in the Restoration.

The 1905 pamphlet relies heavily on the 1869 plural marriage affidavits of Martha McBride, Melissa Lott, Sarah Whitney, Rhoda Richards and others; it also mentions women named in the men's affidavits.¹⁰⁵

Modern Historians' Lists

After the Second Manifesto, the LDS Church apparently stopped creating lists of plural wives to be used institutionally. About forty years passed before independent historians began to work on this area of study again. Beginning in the 1940s, fifteen Mormon historians' lists are notable and largely agree with the early information given in the 1854-66 Bullock/Kimball list, Joseph F. Smith's 1869-70 affidavits, and Andrew Jenson's list in *The Historical Record*. From these historians' lists, each more fully covered below, I have compiled a core set of thirty-two women whom the twentieth- and twenty-first-century historians generally agree were Joseph Smith's wives. These are as follows. (Once again, the italicized names are those that are not found on the Bullock/Kimball list of 1854-66.)¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵Several of the women mentioned in the pamphlet are named in the affidavits of others such as William Clayton, Benjamin F. Johnson, Lorenzo Snow, etc.

¹⁰⁶Those on the Bullock/Kimball list that are not on the more modern core list are Eveline Knight, Cordelia Morley, Phebe Watrous, Mary Heron, Jane Law, and Emeline Hibbard.

Core Historians' List:

Fanny Alger
Patty Bartlett (Sessions)
Louisa Beaman
Elvira Cowles
Elizabeth Davis (Durfee)
Hannah Ells
Olive Frost
Desdemona Fullmer
Presendia Huntington
Zina Huntington
Almera Johnson
Delcena Johnson
Marinda Nancy Johnson
Helen Mar Kimball
Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland)
Maria Lawrence
Sarah Lawrence
Melissa Lott
Martha McBride
Eliza Partridge
Emily Partridge
Lucinda Pendleton (Harris)
Rhoda Richards
Mary Elizabeth Rollins
Sylvia Sessions
Eliza R. Snow
Ruth Vose (Sayers)
Lucy Walker
Sarah Whitney
Nancy Maria Winchester
Flora Woodworth
Fanny Young

The following fifteen lists, created by independent historians across eight decades, represent a monumental effort to uncover and preserve the historical record of early Mormon polygamy. Some of their lists of Joseph Smith's plural wives aim to include as many wives as possible, and some are more discriminating,

including only those for whom the historical record is strong. By investigating these lists, we can trace shifts in historiographical approaches, from reliance on oral histories and affidavits to the integration of more extensive archival research. They also reflect differing interpretations of what constitutes evidence strong enough to confirm a marital relationship. Examining these lists together not only highlights points of consensus but also reveals areas of continued debate and ambiguity, offering a valuable lens into how historical methodology and priorities have evolved in the study of Mormon polygamy. Below, I explore patterns, differences, and implications within these historians' efforts, as well as what these lists contribute to our understanding of Joseph Smith's relationships and their broader historical context.

20. Vesta Pierce Crawford, 1940s (36 names)¹⁰⁷

Vesta Crawford's historical work grew out of her research for an unpublished biography, *Emma Hale Smith, The Elect Lady*, co-authored with Fay Ollerton. This project, driven by a childhood fascination with Emma's life and her decision not to follow the Latter-day Saints to Utah, involved an extensive collection of historical documents, interviews, and correspondence. Crawford formulated a list of Joseph's plural wives, naming twenty-five of the thirty-three women on the Bullock/Kimball list, and twenty-nine of the thirty-two women on the core list. She also included two unconventional names absent from the lists of any of the other modern historians: Rachel Ivins and Martha Scott.

Rachel Ivins, who married Jedediah Grant and became the mother of Heber J. Grant, adds an unusual layer to the narrative of Joseph Smith's plural marriages. Though there is no direct evidence of a marital relationship between Ivins and Joseph Smith during

¹⁰⁷Vesta Pierce Crawford Papers, Box 1, Folder 10-11, Marriott Library Special Collections, Lists available online at Mormon Polygamy Documents website, [LINK](#). *Fanny Alger*, Patty Bartlett [Sessions], Louisa Beaman, Elvira Cowles, Hannah Ells, Olive Frost, Desdemona Fullmer, *Mary Houston*, Presendia Huntington, Zina Huntington, *Rachel Ivins*, *Vienna Jacques*, Almera Johnson, Delcena Johnson, Helen Mar Kimball, Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), Sarah Lawrence, Maria Lawrence, Melissa Lott, Martha McBride, Eliza Partridge, Emily Partridge, *Lucinda Pendleton (Harris)*, *Rhoda Richards*, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, *Martha Scott*, *Sarah Scott*, Sylvia Sessions, *Nancy Maria Smith*, Eliza R. Snow, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Lucy Walker, Sarah Whitney, *Nancy Maria Winchester*, Flora Woodworth, *Fanny Young*.

his lifetime, Brigham Young arranged for her to be sealed to the deceased Smith “for eternity” before her marriage to Grant “for time.” This decision was based on Young’s belief that Smith had claimed Ivins during his lifetime.¹⁰⁸

Far more enigmatic is Crawford’s inclusion of Martha Scott. No known documentary evidence links her to Joseph Smith and her name is not included in the historical record as a potential plural wife. Her appearance solely on Crawford’s list illustrates the difficulty of reconstructing Nauvoo polygamy from fragmentary and sometimes contradictory sources, and it shows that caution is needed when investigating contested historical claims.

21. Stanley S. Ivins (46 names with others sealed to Joseph Smith later, total 93)¹⁰⁹

An independent researcher on Mormon subjects, Ivins conducted research prolifically in the mid-1900s. Ivins names all thirty-two of the women on the core list, adding Olive Andrews, Miss B*****, Mrs. Edward Blossom, Mary Ann Frost, Sally Ann Fuller, Clarissa Reed Hancock, Mary Houston, Vienna Jacques, Cordelia Morley, Mrs. A**** S****, Sophia [Aphia] Sanburn, Sarah Scott, Sarah Shuler, Jane Tibbets, and Phebe Watrous. He names Elizabeth Durfee twice, once as Mrs. Durfee and once as Elizabeth Davis Lott. He also names Desdemona Fullmer twice, once as

¹⁰⁸Heber J. Grant, “The Testimony of President Heber J. Grant,” *Deseret News Weekly Church Section* (Oct. 10, 1942): 1, *LINK*. “I had always understood and know that my mother was sealed to the Prophet, and that Brigham Youn[g] had told my father that he could not marry my mother to him for eternity, because he had instructions from the Prophet that if anything happened to him before he was married to Rachel Ivins she must be sealed to him for eternity, that she belonged to him.” See also Susa Young Gates, “A Tribute to Rachel Ivins Grant,” *Young Women’s Journal* 21, no. 1 (Jan. 1910): 28-30, *LINK*.

¹⁰⁹Stanley S. Ivins, “Wives of Joseph Smith,” handwritten holograph and two typewritten lists, Stanley Snow Ivins Papers, box 12, folder 1, Utah State Historical Society, scan of typed list available here: *LINK*. *Fanny Alger, Olive Andrews, Miss B*****, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Louisa Beaman, Mrs. Edward Blossom (also named as Desdemona Fullmer), Mrs. A**** S****, Elvira Cowles, Elizabeth Davis (also named as Mrs. Durfee), Hannah Ells, Olive Frost, Mary Ann Frost, Sally Ann Fuller, Mary Houston, Presendia Huntington, Zina Huntington, Vienna Jacques, Almera Johnson, Delcena Johnson, Marinda Johnson, Helen Mar Kimball, Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), Sarah Lawrence, Maria Lawrence, Melissa Lott, Martha McBride, Cordelia Morley, Eliza Partridge, Emily Partridge, Lucinda Pendleton (Harris), Clarissa Reed (Hancock), Rhoda Richards, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Sophia [Aphia] Woodman, Sarah Scott, Sylvia Sessions, Sarah Shuler, Eliza R. Snow, Jane Tibbets, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Lucy Walker, Phebe Watrous, Sarah Whitney, Nancy Maria Winchester, Flora Woodworth, Fanny Young.*

Mrs. Edward Blossom. It appears that Ivins made a concerted effort to include all the women who were sealed to Joseph Smith posthumously in the Nauvoo Temple, as well as those on John C. Bennett's list, even if he wasn't quite sure how to interpret the coded names.

In Ivins' work, he also notes women who were sealed to Joseph later after the Saints moved to the Valley, whether or not they were even acquainted with Joseph in life. This brings his count up to ninety-three names.¹¹⁰

22. Fawn Brodie, 1945 (46/48 names)¹¹¹

Fawn Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*, was controversial and widely circulated; and her list of forty-eight names of women identified as his wives was a bold and controversial centerpiece of her work. Brodie approached her subject with the determination of a detective, piecing together a mosaic of sources that ranged from official church records, like the Nauvoo Temple Records, to outsider exposés, including John C. Bennett's sensational writings. She drew from Andrew Jenson's carefully compiled notes in his publication, *The Historical Record*,

¹¹⁰Ivins' handwritten list is numbered and goes to number eighty-four. However, his typewritten lists include additional possible wives. These add up to ninety-three; the above listed forty-six, plus the following: *Mary Vose, Lucia Foote, Amelia Brown, Lydia Partridge, Caroline Partridge, Charlotte Richmond, Sarah Granger (Kimball), Esther Jones, Magdalena Zundel, Esther Dutcher, Harriet Partridge, Amanda Barnes Smith, Sarah Hoby, Diantha Farr, Lydia Dibble, Ruth Giles, Mary Lott, Almira Lott, Jane Lott, Alzina Lott, Amanda Lott, Agnes Taylor, Betsy Jane Tenny, Mrs. Ford, Augusta Adams, Lucy Adams Cobb, Olive Adams Smith, Sarah Baldwin Smith, Elsa Johnson, Emily Johnson, Phebe Johnson, Elizabeth Mesurvey, Esther Seamon, Harriett Jacques, Louisiana Fullmer, Olivia Coburn Bartlett, Lovina Duston Bartlett, Nancy Johnson, Susan Johnson, Susan Sowers/Ivins/Ivers Smith, Melissa Scott Smith, Polly Miller Smith, Sarah Baldwin Smith, Anna Laubs, Louisa Sanger Smith, Elizabeth Ann Smith, Betsy Jane Tenney.*

¹¹¹Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, [LINK](#). *Fanny Alger, Lucinda Pendleton (Harris), Presendia Huntington, Nancy Marinda Johnson, Clarissa Reed (Hancock), Louisa Beaman, Zina Huntington, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Delcena Johnson, Sally Ann Fuller (Gulley), Mrs. A**** S****, Miss B**** (possibly Sarah Bapson), Eliza R. Snow, Sarah Whitney, Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), Elvira Cowles, Martha McBride, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Desdemona Fullmer (also named as Mrs. Edward Blossom), Emily Partridge, Eliza Partridge, Nancy Maria Smith, Almera Johnson, Lucy Walker, Helen Mar Kimball, Maria Lawrence, Sarah Lawrence, Flora Woodworth, Rhoda Richards, Hannah Ells, Melissa Lott, Fanny Young, Olive Frost, Mary Ann Frost, Olive Andrews, Elizabeth Davis (also named as Mrs. Durfee), Mary Huston, Vienna Jacques, Cordelia Morley, Sarah Scott, Sylvia Sessions, Jane Tibbets, Phebe Watrous, Nancy Maria Winchester, Sophia [Aphia] Woodman.*

Orson F. Whitney's biography of Heber C. Kimball,¹¹² and the testimonies from the Temple Lot case, along with less traditional sources like *Women of Mormondom*, Joseph Fielding Smith's *Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage*, and even Wilhelm Wyl's polemical *Mormon Portraits*. Brodie's synthesis of these disparate voices reflects her skill in weaving a narrative where others saw only fragments. Her list includes a short biography of each woman. Though her interpretations have been debated, her work challenged historians to confront the complexity of Smith's marital relationships and laid the groundwork for future investigations.

Brodie includes all thirty-two names on the core list and adds the same fourteen that Ivins did, plus Nancy Maria Smith. She repeats Elizabeth Davis, who is the same as Mrs. Durfee, and Desdemona Fullmer, who is probably Mrs. Edward Blossom, bringing her list of 48 names to 46.

It is interesting that both Ivins and Brodie included John C. Bennett's "A**** S****," without identifying her as Agnes Smith. Until 1994, Agnes was only mentioned by name on Oliver Olney's list, which had not been circulated.

23. Jerald Tanner, 1966 (84 names)¹¹³

Jerald Tanner's 1966 list of eighty-four women connected to Joseph Smith marks a significant, if dissonant, effort to expand public understanding of Smith's plural marriages. Tanner, known for his critical stance on Mormonism, follows Ivins's approach of including women sealed to Smith both during his lifetime and posthumously in the Nauvoo Temple, as well as the Salt Lake Endowment House and early Utah temples. As with Ivins, this broader scope introduces complexities by conflating different categories of marital and sealing relationships. Tanner uses the names from Ivins's handwritten list of eighty-four women, providing a short, five-to-ten-sentence biographical sketch of each. While less nuanced and driven by a deconstructive agenda, Tanner's approach contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding Joseph Smith's

¹¹²Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball, An Apostle* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1888).

¹¹³Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith and Polygamy: An Exposé of Modern Polygamy* (Modern Microfilm Co., 1966), LINK.

polygamy. His expansive compilation reflects both the growing availability of archival sources in the mid-twentieth century and the tensions between polemical and scholarly treatments of Mormon history.

24. Thomas Milton Tinney, 1973 (313 names)¹¹⁴

Thomas Milton Tinney's 1973 list of 313 women sealed to Joseph Smith is one of the most ambitious and unusual compilations in the history of Mormon polygamy research. Drawing from Andrew Jenson's *The Historical Record*, Nauvoo Temple records, Salt Lake Endowment House records, and the sealing records of the Salt Lake Endowment House and St. George Temples, Tinney pieces together an expansive roster of women, including figures as surprising as Madam Victor Hugo and Sainte Thérèse. His work reflects not only a dedication to tracing the complex web of sealings but also a theological agenda, as he argues that the children of these women and their other husbands will ultimately become the "eternal possession" of Joseph Smith. Tinney's compilation serves as a unique example of how theological perspectives have shaped attempts to document Joseph Smith's marital and sealing relationships. Tinney's effort underscores how lists like his can blur historical and doctrinal boundaries, expanding the scope of inquiry beyond earthly marriages to envision a celestial legacy that is as imaginative as it is provocative.

Tinney reproduces the names of twenty-eight of the women on the Bullock/Kimball list. He does not include Eveline Knight, Mary Heron (Snyder), Jane Silverthorn (Law), Delcena Johnson (Sherman), and Emeline Hibbard (White).

¹¹⁴Tinney, *The Royal Family of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Junior*.

25. Danel Bachman, 1975 (31 names)¹¹⁵

In his master's thesis, Bachman criticizes Ivins, Brodie, Tanner, and Tinney for mistakenly assuming that any woman sealed to Joseph Smith in an 1846 temple ceremony must have been his wife during his lifetime. To correct this, he introduces more rigorous criteria for determining Smith's plural marriages. His thesis identifies fifteen women who left affidavits affirming their marriages or sealings to Smith, three who made personal statements to the same effect, and two whose marriages were witnessed by others. He also includes eleven women whose relationships with Smith were attested by "well-informed and reliable persons."¹¹⁶ Bachman's approach emphasizes firsthand and strong secondhand testimony over assumptions based on later temple ordinances, setting a higher standard for compiling such lists. Still, he verifies twenty-five of the Bullock/Kimball names. Compared to the core list, Bachman does not include Elizabeth Davis (Durfee) or Olive Frost, but he does include Vienna Jacques.

Bachman's treatment of Helen Mar Kimball is a case study for how he brought higher, more professional historical standards of evidence to bear on identifying Joseph Smith's plural wives. Bachman requires substantial documentation to affirm that Helen was a wife of Joseph Smith. Her marriage to Joseph is supported by William Clayton's 1871 affidavit¹¹⁷ and her 1881 handwritten testimony, which Bachman is the first to use. In this letter, Helen affirms that she was sealed to Joseph Smith when she "had scarcely seen her fifteenth summer," emphasizing that the marriage was arranged at her father Heber C. Kimball's request. Poignantly, she writes how her father "taught me the principle of celestial marriage,

¹¹⁵Danel W. Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage before the Death of Joseph Smith." M.A. thesis, Purdue University, 1975, *LINK*. *Fanny Alger, Lucinda Pendleton (Harris)*, Prescinda Huntington, Nancy Marinda Johnson, Louisa Beaman, Zina Huntington, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Delcena Johnson, Eliza R. Snow, Sarah Whitney, Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), Elvira Cowles, Martha McBride, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Desdemona Fullmer, Emily Partridge, Eliza Partridge, Almera Johnson, Lucy Walker, Helen Mar Kimball, Maria Lawrence, Sarah Lawrence, Flora Woodworth, *Rhoda Richards*, Hannah Ells, Melissa Lott, *Fanny Young*, *Vienna Jacques*, Sylvia Sessions, *Nancy Maria Winchester*.

¹¹⁶Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage," 112.

¹¹⁷William Clayton, 1874 Affidavit, Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, MS 3423, CHL, *LINK* (handwriting of William Clayton, signed and sealed by John T. Caine, notary public).

& having a great desire to be connected with the Prophet Joseph, he offered me to him.” Her father asked her if she would be sealed to Joseph “who came next morning & with my parents I heard him teach & explain the principle of celestial marriage – after which he said to me, If you will take this step, it will ensure your eternal salvation & exaltation and that of your father’s household & all of your kindred.”¹¹⁸ Her accounts are particularly valuable because she directly addressed the secrecy surrounding plural marriage, the pressures she was under, and the personal challenges she faced in accepting it.¹¹⁹ Unlike cases based on retrospective ordinances, Helen Mar Kimball’s testimony aligns with Bachman’s rigorous criteria by providing firsthand confirmation of the marriage.

26. George D. Smith, 1994 (42 names)¹²⁰

George D. Smith’s 1994 article, “Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy,” offers a demographic study of plural marriage in Nauvoo, tracing its origins, scope, and controversies. The article stands out for its focus on the voices and experiences of many of the women, moving beyond mere lists of names or brief biographical sketches such as Brodie and Tanner provide.

While not as rigorous as Bachman in verifying each wife, Smith’s strength lies in his detailed exploration of their lives, relationships, and personal accounts. Smith posited that between 1841 and 1843, Joseph Smith married as many as forty-two women, many of whom later testified to their marriages. Twenty-eight of these are present on the Bullock/Kimball list. His differs from the

¹¹⁸Helen Mar Kimball Whitney Letter, March 30, 1881, MS 744, CHL, *LINK*.

¹¹⁹Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, “Scenes in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 5 (August 1, 1882): 39, *LINK*.

¹²⁰George D. Smith, “Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy,” 1–72, *LINK*. Louisa Beaman, Zina Huntington, Presendia Huntington, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Nancy Marinda Johnson, Delcena Johnson, Eliza R. Snow, Sarah Whitney, Martha McBride, *Sarah Bapson, Agnes Coolbrith (Smith)*, Elizabeth Davis (Durfee), *Sally Fuller*, Desdemona Fullmer, Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), *Lucinda Pendleton (Harris)*, Elvira Cowles, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Eliza Partridge, Almera Johnson, Lucy Walker, Emily Partridge, Sarah Lawrence, Maria Lawrence, Helen Mar Kimball, *Rhoda Richards*, Flora Woodworth, Melissa Lott, Olive Frost, Hannah Ells, *Mary Ann Frost, Fanny Young*, Sylvia Sessions, *Mary Houston, Nancy Maria Winchester, Sarah Scott, Olive Andrews, Jane Tibbets, Sophia/Aphia Sanburn*, Phoebe Watrous, *Vienna Jacques*.

core list by leaving out Fanny Alger, and adding eleven others.¹²¹ Smith examines how Nauvoo polygamist wives, including those attributed to Joseph Smith, were approached, and the promises of eternal marriage that persuaded them to accept polygamy. He also highlights difficulties they faced, secrecy surrounding their unions, how older wives instructed younger ones in the practice, and how many of Emma Smith's closest associates became her husband's wives.

Smith's article marks a pivotal shift in how Nauvoo polygamy was understood, adding depth to the historical narrative by focusing on emotional and social complexities.

27. D. Michael Quinn, 1994, (46 names)¹²²

The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power, D. Michael Quinn's 1994 volume on the development of ecclesiastical authority in Mormonism, presents an extensive list of Joseph Smith's plural wives, featuring forty-six names compiled for Smith's biographical sketch. Quinn mentioned some of the specific criteria he used for inclusion: evidence of a sealing ceremony, sexual cohabitation, or a formal divorce. However, Quinn did not supply the underlying evidence for each name, leaving his methodology open to scrutiny.

One of the more controversial aspects of Quinn's list is his claim to exclude "nominal marriages," which he defines as proxy sealings to deceased individuals. Despite this assertion, many names on his list—such as Jane Tibbets, Olive Andrews, Phebe Watrous, Cordelia Morley, Aphia Sanburn, Nancy Maria Winchester, Mary Huston, and Lydia Kenyon—appear to fall into this category.

¹²¹These are: *Olive Andrews*, *Sarah Bapson*, *Agnes Coolbrith (Smith)*, *Sally Fuller*, *Mary Ann Frost*, *Mary Houston*, *Vienna Jacques*, *Sarah Scott*, *Sophia [Aphia] Sanburn*, *Jane Tibbets*, and *Phoebe Watrous*.

¹²²D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Signature Books, in association with Smith Research Associates, 1994), 587-588. *Fanny Alger*, *Lucinda Pendleton (Harris)*, *Louisa Beaman*, *Zina Huntington*, *Presendia Huntington*, *Elizabeth Davis (Durfee)*, *Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland)*, *Sarah Bapson*, *Agnes Coolbrith (Smith)*, *Sylvia Sessions*, *Mary Elizabeth Rollins*, *Patty Bartlett (Sessions)*, *Marinda Nancy Johnson*, *Delcena Johnson*, *Eliza R. Snow*, *Sarah Whitney*, *Martha McBride*, *Desdemona Fullmer*, *Mary Heron*, *Sarah Scott*, *Hannah Dubois (Dibble)*, *Emily Partridge*, *Eliza Partridge*, *Lucy Walker*, *Helen Mar Kimball*, *Elvira Cowles*, *Flora Woodworth*, *Rhoda Richards*, *Olive Frost*, *Hannah Ells*, *Melissa Lott*, *Almera Johnson*, *Maria Lawrence*, *Sarah Lawrence*, *Fanny Young*, *Nancy Maria Winchester*, *Ruth Vose (Sayers)*, *Sally Fuller*, *Mary Houston*, *Sarah Schuyler*, *Olive Andrews*, *Jane Tibbets*, *Aphia Sanburn*, *Phebe Watrous*, *Vienna Jacques*, *Lydia Kenyon*.

This discrepancy raises questions about Quinn's consistency in distinguishing between historical plural marriages and posthumous sealings, which complicates his contribution to the debate over the nature and extent of Joseph Smith's plural unions.

Quinn's additions to the core list of Joseph Smith's wives, fourteen in total,¹²³ further highlight the evolving nature of research on Smith's polygamy. By expanding beyond previously recognized names, Quinn challenges the cautious historiographical framework that Bachman was attempting to establish, pushing scholars to consider broader and sometimes more speculative sources. However, the lack of direct citations or supporting documentation for each entry in his list means that his findings must be engaged with cautiously. This omission illustrates a recurring challenge in polygamy studies: the reliance on fragmentary, secondhand, or retrospective sources to reconstruct plural marriage practices that were deliberately kept secret.

28. Todd Compton, 1997 (33 names)¹²⁴

The significance of Todd Compton's work lies not only in his meticulous documentation but in his transformative approach to understanding Nauvoo polygamy. In his groundbreaking book, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, Compton shifts the focus from viewing polygamy solely as an institutional practice to exploring it as a deeply personal experience. While George D. Smith contributed to this shift, Compton went even further, making these women and their stories well-known to a

¹²³These additions to the core list are: *Sarah Bapson, Agnes Coolbrith (Smith), Mary Heron, Sarah Scott, Hannah Dubois (Dibble), Sally Fuller, Mary Houston, Sarah Schuyler, Olive Andrews, Jane Tibbetts, Aphia Sanburn, Phebe Watrous, Vienna Jacques, Lydia Kenyon.*

¹²⁴Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Signature Books, 1997), *LINK. Fanny Alger, Lucinda Pendleton (Harris), Louisa Beaman, Zina Huntington, Presendia Huntington, Agnes Coolbrith (Smith), Sylvia Sessions, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Marinda Nancy Johnson, Elizabeth Davis (Durfee), Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), Delcena Johnson, Eliza R. Snow, Sarah Whitney, Martha McBride, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Flora Woodworth, Emily Partridge, Eliza Partridge, Almera Johnson, Lucy Walker, Sarah Lawrence, Maria Lawrence, Helen Mar Kimball, Hannah Ells, Elvira Cowles, Rhoda Richards, Desdemona Fullmer, Olive Frost, Melissa Lott, Nancy Maria Winchester, Fanny Young.*

broader audience. By centering the voices of the wives, he reveals the emotional, social, and religious complexities they faced.¹²⁵

Compton's list, like many of the others, confirms twenty-seven of the Bullock/Kimball wives. It aligns well with the core group identified by other scholars, though deleting Lucinda Pendleton (Harris) and including Agnes Coolbrith (Smith), the widow of Joseph Smith's deceased brother Don Carlos. Historically, Agnes's status as a wife of Joseph Smith was considered unlikely. The earliest lists, compiled by John C. Bennett and Oliver Olney did include her,¹²⁶ but she was not considered as one of Joseph's plural wives again until the mid-1990s. George D. Smith reevaluated her role, leading to her consistent appearance in polygamy lists since that time. Compton's work solidified her inclusion, based in part on a coded entry in Brigham Young's journal.¹²⁷

The inclusion of Agnes Coolbrith in these lists has meaningful implications for the study of Mormon polygamy. Some researchers have suggested that if Joseph married Agnes, it may have reflected elements of Levirate marriage: a biblical tradition in which a man marries his deceased brother's widow to provide for her and preserve the family line.¹²⁸ Since Agnes never wrote about a sealing to Joseph, and contemporary evidence is limited, her

¹²⁵In their review of Compton's book, Anderson and Faulring argue that evidence is not adequate for the following four marriages to the Prophet: Lucinda Pendleton (Harris), Elizabeth Davis (Durfee), Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), and Nancy Maria Winchester. Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring, "The Prophet Joseph Smith and His Plural Wives," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011* 10, no. 2 (1998): 73, *LINK*. Richard Bushman accepts Compton's list with the exception of Lucinda, giving Anderson and Faulring's exclusion of her as his reason. He does not say why he includes the other three. (Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Vintage Books, 2005), 644, note 1.

¹²⁶Bennett's list named the coded "Mrs. A**** S****."

¹²⁷On May 21, 1991, Arturo DeHoyos deciphered a Masonic code in Brigham Young's journal under the date of January 6, 1842. The deciphered code reads "I WAS TAKEN INTO T[H]E LODGE J SMITH WAS AGNE[SS]." The most recent and thorough treatment of this document is found at "Brigham's Masonic Cipher," 132 Problems: Revisiting Mormon Polygamy podcast, *LINK*.

¹²⁸There are some important differences and similarities between biblical Levirate marriage and nineteenth-century Mormon understanding of the practice. See Franklin D. Richards, "Scriptural Items" Notebook, CHL, Aug. 12, 1843; Mercy Thompson affidavit, Jan 31, 1886, in "An Important Testimony," *Deseret News* 35, no. 5 (Feb 17, 1886): 79, *LINK*; Grant, "The Testimony of President Heber J. Grant, *LINK*. Heber J. Grant quoted Joseph F. Smith as saying: " 'If a man die his brother shall marry his widow and raise up seed to the dead man, and I need to take only two steps from where I am standing now to place my hand on the shoulder of a man who is one of the Twelve Apostles of the Church, who is a son of the Prophet Joseph,' and he pointed directly at me." See also Samuel Morris Brown, "Joseph Smith, Polygamy, and

case demonstrates the ambiguous nature of early plural marriage. Still, the possibility suggests that familial duty and traditional biblical customs may have influenced Joseph's actions alongside his evolving theological framework.

29. Lyndon W. Cook, 2004 (37/7/28 names)¹²⁹

Within Lyndon Cook's *Nauvoo Marriages Proxy Sealings, 1843-1846*, he includes a list of women sealed to Joseph Smith in three categories: those married to him during his lifetime,¹³⁰ those sealed to him posthumously in the Nauvoo Temple,¹³¹ and those sealed to him later in Winter Quarters, the Endowment House, and the St. George Temple.¹³² The result is an impressive but methodologically opaque collection of seventy-two women that blends direct Nauvoo relationships with retrospective extensions of Joseph's sealing network.

Unlike earlier compilers who lacked access to restricted sources, Cook drew from Nauvoo Temple sealing registers, private diaries, and other archival material; however, he takes certain liberties with the records. For example, he reframes marriages or sealings mentioned in many records "with language identical to that employed in the Nauvoo Temple Proxy Record." As a result, his list, though grounded in documentary evidence, is difficult to evaluate.

the Levirate Widow," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 49-51, [LINK](#).

¹²⁹Lyndon W. Cook, *Nauvoo Marriages Proxy Sealings 1843-1846* (Grandin Book Company, 2004), 12-15.

¹³⁰Louisa Beaman, Zina Huntington, Presendia Huntington, *Lucinda Pendleton (Harris)*, *Lydia Kenyon*, *Sarah Bapson*, *Agnes Coolbrith (Smith)*, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Sylvia Sessions, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Elizabeth Davis (Durfee), Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), Marinda Nancy Johnson, Eliza R. Snow, Delcena Johnson, Desdemona Fullmer, Sarah Whitney, Martha McBride, *Sarah Scott*, *Nancy Maria Winchester*, *Hannah Dubois (Dibble)*, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Flora Woodworth, Hannah Ells, Emily Partridge, Eliza Partridge, Almera Johnson, Lucy Walker, Maria Lawrence, Sarah Lawrence, Helen Mar Whitney, Elvira Cowles, *Rhoda Richards*, Olive Frost, *Mary Ann Frost*, Melissa Lott, *Fanny Young*.

¹³¹Additional wives sealed in the Nauvoo Temple: *Olive Andrews*, *Jane Tibbets*, Phebe Watrous, *Elvira Teeples (Wheeler)*, Cordelia Morley, *Aphia Sanburn*, *Mary Huston*.

¹³²Additional wives sealed after 1846: *Sally Ann Fuller*, *Esther Dutcher*, *Lydia Dibble*, *Amanda Barnes*, *Rachel Ivins*, *Mary Vose*, *Vienna Jaques*, *Lucia Foote*, *Amelia Brown*, *Lydia Partridge*, *Sarah Hoby*, *Miriam Clark*, *Caroline Partridge*, *Charlotte Brockmand*, *Ane Madsen*, *Esther Jones*, *Magdalena Zundel*, *Sarah Granger*, *Dionitia Walker*, *Margaret Vance*, *Catherine Goddard*, *Elizabeth Tyler*, *Anne Nielsen*, *Agnes Taylor*, *Betsy Tenny*, *Elizabeth Stout*, *Martha Cragun*, *Henrietta Cox*.

His conflation of distinct sealing contexts creates duplication and obscures the boundaries between relationships Joseph personally contracted and those retroactively assigned to him.

Cook confirms all but three of the women on the Bullock/Kimball list: Eveline Knight, Jane Law, and Emeline Hibbard.

30. Gary Bergera, 2005 (36 names)¹³³

In his 2005 article, "Identifying the Earliest Mormon Polygamists," Bergera undertakes to document Nauvoo-era polygamists, using "diaries, letters, autobiographies, reminiscences, affidavits, statements, and family histories." He concedes, however, that these must be "coupled with reasonable inferences and educated guesses" in order to produce a compelling identification. While Bergera largely follows Todd Compton's earlier list of Joseph Smith's wives, he expands it by including several women who were sealed to Smith posthumously in the Nauvoo Temple. He argues that such posthumous sealings and anointings to Joseph Smith suggest the possibility of plural marriage during his lifetime, though he does not assume this was always the case. Notably, Bergera only includes three of the seven women who fit this category—Mary Houston, Mary Ann Frost, and Phebe Watrous—demonstrating his cautious approach to inference. His 2005 article marks the last instance, as of this writing, in which historians have included women on the basis of posthumous Nauvoo Temple sealings alone, signaling a shift in scholarly methodology toward requiring more direct evidence of plural unions during Smith's life.

One intriguing addition to Bergera's list is Sarah Scott. Although she appears on some of the lists compiled by the fifteen historians I examine, she is not included by all of them and

¹³³Bergera, "Identifying the Earliest Mormon Polygamists," *LINK*. *Fanny Alger*, *Lucinda Pendleton (Harris)*, Louisa Beaman, Zina Huntington, Presendia Huntington, *Agnes Coolbrith (Smith)*, Sylvia Sessions, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Marinda Nancy Johnson, Elizabeth Davis (Durfee), Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), Delcena Johnson, Eliza R. Snow, Sarah Whitney, Martha McBride, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Flora Woodworth, Emily Partridge, Eliza Partridge, Almera Johnson, Lucy Walker, Sarah Lawrence, Maria Lawrence, Helen Mar Kimball, Hannah Ells, Elvira Cowles, *Rhoda Richards*, Desdemona Fullmer, Olive Frost, Melissa Lott, *Nancy Maria Winchester*, *Fanny Young*, *Mary Houston*, *Sarah Scott*, *Mary Ann Frost*, Phebe Watrous.

therefore does not appear on my “core list.” The evidence for her marriage to Joseph Smith is scant, resting primarily on a Nauvoo Temple sealing record that suggests, but does not prove, a marital relationship during his lifetime. Sarah Scott is the only woman said to have married Joseph Smith “for time” and another man for eternity. She married James Mulholland civilly on February 8, 1838, and they had at least one child before Mulholland’s death on November 3, 1839. In the early 1840s, she was sealed for eternity to the deceased Mulholland, with proxy Joseph Smith, who then married her “for time.”¹³⁴ On October 25, 1843, she entered into a civil marriage with Alexander Mullinder, which some researchers have interpreted as a possible cover for her plural marriage to Joseph.¹³⁵ On February 3, 1846, in the Nauvoo Temple, Sarah was sealed for time and eternity to James Mulholland (via proxy by Heber C. Kimball), reaffirming her connection to her first husband; in the same ceremony, she was also sealed for time to Heber C. Kimball, though she later divorced him.¹³⁶ The key detail fueling speculation is that her name appears as “Sarah Smith” when she was sealed to Mulholland, suggesting to some that she had been Joseph’s plural wife.¹³⁷ Later, Orson Whitney, in his biography of Kimball, identified Sarah as among Joseph Smith’s plural wives who subsequently married Kimball “for time,” likely drawing on the same Nauvoo Temple record.¹³⁸ The inclusion of Sarah Scott reiterates the complexities of identifying Joseph Smith’s plural wives, as temple records can imply relationships without conclusively establishing them during his lifetime.

31. H. Michael Marquardt, 2005, (26 names)¹³⁹

¹³⁴Cook, *Nauvoo Marriages Proxy Sealings*, 191 fn 4, 5.

¹³⁵George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "...but we called it celestial marriage"* (Signature Books, 2008), 218.

¹³⁶*A Book of Proxies*, 68

¹³⁷Cook, *Nauvoo Marriages Proxy Sealings*, 15, 190-191.

¹³⁸Orson Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 431.

¹³⁹H. Michael Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism, 1816-1844*, Web Version (n.p.: H. Michael Marquardt, 2020), 382-84, *LINK*. Louisa Beaman, Eliza R. Snow, Sarah Whitney, Desdemona Fullmer, Emily Partridge, Eliza Partridge, Flora Woodworth, Lucy Walker, Maria Lawrence, Sarah Lawrence, *Rhoda Richards*, Helen Mar Kimball, Almera Johnson, Melissa Lott, Hannah Ells, Zina Huntington, Presendia Huntington, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Sylvia Sessions, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Marinda Johnson, Elvira Cowles, Ruth Vose (Sayers), *Agnes Coolbrith (Smith)*, Martha McBride, *Fanny Young*.

In his 2005 book, *The Rise of Mormonism* (updated in 2020), H. Michael Marquardt takes a cautious approach in identifying Joseph Smith's plural wives, ultimately listing just twenty-six women. Twenty-three of these are on the Bullock/Kimball list. Marquardt omits Fanny Alger, Elizabeth Davis (Durfee), Olive Frost, Delcena Johnson, Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), Lucinda Pendleton (Harris), and Nancy Maria Winchester from the core group. While Marquardt acknowledges the longstanding debate over Fanny Alger's relationship with Smith, he ultimately concludes that she was involved in a sexual encounter with him but does not categorize her as a plural wife.¹⁴⁰ His approach reflects a careful parsing of historical evidence, distinguishing between marriage and other forms of relationships, and sets his work apart from studies that more readily include Alger and others in their lists of Smith's wives.

32. Newell Bringhurst and Craig Foster, 2010 (33 names)¹⁴¹

In *The Persistence of Polygamy*, Newell Bringhurst and Craig Foster list thirty-three women as Joseph Smith's plural wives, matching Todd Compton's earlier identifications.¹⁴² Their contribution stands out by categorizing the motivations for these marriages into four distinct themes: assistance, dynastic, friendship, and proximity. Some wives were widows or unmarried, seeking spiritual support through sealing to a priesthood holder, while others, married to non-members, may have pursued spiritual reinforcement. Dynastic marriages aimed to forge alliances with families closely connected to Smith through friendship, ecclesiastical roles, or community prominence. Long-standing personal relationships between the Smiths and the women's families influenced some marriages. Additionally, physical closeness played a role, with several wives living in Smith's home as maids or residing in places he visited.

A prime example of this framework is Marinda Nancy Johnson, who fits several of its classifications. Marinda was married to Orson Hyde, an early Church leader, but their marriage faced significant strain due to Orson's extended missions abroad.

¹⁴⁰Marquardt, 312.

¹⁴²Bringhurst and Foster, *The Persistence of Polygamy*, 290, fn 4.

During these times, Marinda was left to manage on her own, and a sealing to Joseph Smith may have provided both spiritual support and communal stability in her husband's absence. Additionally, Marinda had known Joseph Smith since 1831, and their families maintained a close relationship, illustrating the "friendship" component of Bringhurst and Foster's framework. Her marriage to Joseph also fits the "dynastic" category, as Orson Hyde held a prominent ecclesiastical position within the Church. Marinda's situation includes a complex interplay of marital dynamics, spiritual considerations, and familial connections, displaying the multifaceted reasons behind plural marriage that Bringhurst and Foster highlight in their analysis.

33. Lisle G. Brown, 2006 (44 names) ¹⁴³

Brown's compilation, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings* is an extensive alphabetized collection of all Nauvoo Temple ritual data. In his treatment of women sealed to Joseph Smith (pp. 281–86), Brown identifies thirty-two sealings reflected in Nauvoo Temple records and includes Nancy Marinda Johnson as a probable sealing, inferred from a later notation in the Book of Anointings.¹⁴⁴ He further appends eleven additional names of women said to have been sealed to Smith before his death and outside the temple, drawing on the work of Lyndon W. Cook and Gary Bergera. Rather than presenting new archival discoveries, Brown's contribution lies in the scope and organization of his compilation—bringing together dispersed temple records and historiographical claims into a single reference framework. As such, his work functions less as an interpretive intervention and more as

¹⁴³Lisle G. Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings* (Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2006), 281-86, *LINK*. Sarah Whitney, Eliza Partridge, Louisa Beaman, Emily Partridge, *Olive Andrews*, Lucy Walker, Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland), *Jane Tibbetts*, Phebe Watrous (Woodworth), Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Elizabeth Davis (Durfee), *Lucinda Pendleton*, Maria Lawrence, Desdemona Fullmer, Martha McBride, Sylvia Sessions, Sarah Lawrence, *Apia Woodman (Sanburn)*, Cordelia Morley, *Rhoda Richards*, *Augusta Adams*, Zina Huntington, *Nancy Maria Winchester*, Eliza R. Snow, *Mary Huston*, Elvira Cowles, Helen Mar Kimball, Presendia Huntington, *Mary Ann Frost*, Melissa Lott, *Agnes Coolbrith (Smith)*, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Marinda Nancy Johnson, Delcena Johnson, *Hannah Dubois*, Flora Woodworth, *Fanny Young*, *Sarah Bapson*, *Lydia Kenyon*, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Almera Johnson, Hannah Ells, Olive Frost, *Sarah Scott*. Lisle Brown's list represents 31 of the core historians' list, omitting only Fanny Alger.

¹⁴⁴See Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings*, 285 fn 323.

a comprehensive consolidation of existing scholarship, valuable for its breadth and accessibility while still reflecting the strengths and limitations of the earlier sources on which it depends.

34. Brian Hales, 2013 (35 names)¹⁴⁵

Brian Hales, known for his extensive work on early Mormon polygamy, prioritizes documentary evidence and firsthand testimony, often favoring affidavits collected in the late nineteenth century as key sources. His approach reflects an effort to establish a definitive and defensible narrative of Joseph Smith's polygamy, carefully vetting each claim based on available historical records. Hales' work has become a reference point in ongoing discussions about Joseph Smith's polygamy, as it strives to balance historical documentation with an apologetic perspective that often defends the legitimacy of Smith's practice.

Hales adds Agnes Coolbrith (Smith), Mary Heron, and a new name—Esther Dutcher—to the core list. His decision to include Esther on his list of Joseph Smith's plural wives is somewhat unusual, given his general caution about only including women where the evidence is strong. The sole basis for listing Esther is an 1888 letter from Daniel H. Wells, written more than forty years after Nauvoo, stating that she had been “sealed to Joseph the Prophet in the days of Nauvoo, though she still remained his [Albert Smith's] wife.”¹⁴⁶ The only author to list Esther as a plural wife of Joseph Smith before Hales was polygamy researcher Stanley Ivins, who references a later temple sealing on October 10, 1851, her husband standing as proxy for the Prophet.¹⁴⁷ Other historians have been more cautious, excluding Esther due to the lack of corroborating evidence. Typically, Hales requires multiple sources or firsthand

¹⁴⁵Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: History and Theology* (3 vols.) (Greg Kofford Books, 2013). *Fanny Alger*, Louisa Beaman, Zina Huntington, Presendia Huntington, *Agnes Coolbrith (Smith)*, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Patty Bartlett (Sessions), Marinda Nancy Johnson, Elvira Cowles, Eliza R. Snow, Delcena Johnson, Sarah Whitney, Martha McBride, Ruth Vose (Sayers), Eliza Partridge, Emily Partridge, Almera Johnson, Helen Mar Kimball, Maria Lawrence, Sarah Lawrence, Lucy Walker, Sylvia Sessions, *Rhoda Richards*, Desdemona Fullmer, Flora Woodworth, Malissa Lott, Hannah Ells, Olive Frost, *Fanny Young*, Elizabeth Davis (Durfee), *Esther Dutcher*, *Lucinda Pendleton (Harris)*, Mary Heron, *Nancy Maria Winchester*, Sarah Kingsley (Cleveland).

¹⁴⁶Daniel H. Wells, Letter to Joseph F. Smith, June 25, 1888, MS 1325, CHL, *LINK*.

¹⁴⁷Ivins, “Wives of Joseph Smith.”

testimony before adding a name to his list, making his acceptance of Esther's case notable. It may suggest that he was influenced by the way the account aligns with patterns of eternity-only sealings.

Hales does not include five women who appear on Bullock and Kimball's list: Eveline Knight, Cordelia Morley, Phebe Woodworth, Jane Law, and Emeline Hibbard. Some of these women, such as Eveline Knight and Emeline Hibbard White, are relatively obscure in the historical record, with little surviving documentation of their very existence beyond their inclusion on the Bullock/Kimball list. Others, like Jane Law, are problematic due to the controversy surrounding her and husband William's public opposition to Smith and the ambiguous nature of the allegations regarding her involvement. The fading of figures like Cordelia Morley and Phebe Woodworth may have to do with the difficulty of verifying the limited documentation available about their marriages. These omissions highlight the challenges of reconstructing Joseph Smith's plural marriages and demonstrate how institutional memory has been shaped by gaps in the historical record as well as by active selection.

Conclusion

The Bullock/Kimball compilation was not necessarily the most extensive organizational attempt to catalogue Joseph Smith's wives, but it does appear to be the first. That raises a basic historical question. Why did no one try to assemble such a list in the decade after Smith's death? Secrecy, legal risk, and uncertainty among participants all could have come into play. Early plural relationships were conducted under conditions that discouraged public disclosure. Bennett's exposé offered a sensational narrative but no verifiable details. Olney's notes were private jottings. Even those who approved of the practice did not seem to view it as something that should be codified. The impulse to make lists required not only retrospective distance but also a shift from participation to preservation.

The Bullock/Kimball list represented a new phase in polygamy's afterlife. It transformed plural marriage from lived experience into administrative record. Even though the list never entered public circulation, its existence marks an emerging belief

that Joseph Smith's marriages were to be remembered and also to be managed. The list functioned as groundwork, preparing the way for later doctrinal defenses.

Bullock and Kimball were followed by a succession of internal efforts meant to stabilize the documentation of Joseph Smith's marriages. Wilford Woodruff's fragmentary notes first explored chronology. Joseph F. Smith's affidavit program brought memory into sworn testimony. Andrew Jenson's archival compilation aspired for comprehensiveness but was quietly curtailed before it was fully realized. Each effort brought a vague, shadowy practice more fully into public knowledge. The act of listing shifted authority away from lived memory and toward clerical control. These compilations functioned as tools for defining orthodoxy, defending the faith, and determining which women would be acknowledged as wives of the prophet.

After the Second Manifesto the institutional effort to enumerate Joseph Smith's wives vanished. For nearly four decades, the Church ceased attempts to create an accounting, and Joseph F. Smith's affidavit books were tucked away. When plural marriage was outlawed, then abandoned, Joseph Smith's plural marriages, the theological foundation for sealing doctrine, became a political liability. Silence became strategy. It was not until the 1940s, when legal danger had passed and archival records began to open to private curiosity, that independent historians cautiously began assembling lists again.

Once the work resumed, the results were wide-ranging. Across fifteen lists from 1940 to 2013, compilers pursued different definitions of what counted as a "wife": legal, ceremonial, spiritual, levirate, proxy, rumored, posthumous, dynastic, or implied. Some, like Bachman, imposed strict evidentiary thresholds. Others, like Tinney, widened the category to include any woman ever linked to Joseph Smith in sealing records, however distantly. What emerges is not a single stable roster but a set of overlapping taxonomies that reveal how definitions of marriage, evidence, and even relationship itself have shifted across generations.

Rather than clarifying Joseph Smith's marital system, the lists collectively expose its fluidity. The question, "Was she his wife?" turns out to be less revealing than, "Why did a given historian decide she was or wasn't his wife?"

By tracing which names persisted, which were discarded, and which resurfaced, we gain a clearer view of how polygamy has been remembered. These lists reflect the compilers' concerns rather than Joseph Smith's intentions. Whether designed to defend, expose, systematize, or simply comprehend, each list makes a theological argument disguised as a roster.

Studying them side by side does not resolve Joseph Smith's marital history. It instead demonstrates why it cannot be reduced to a static list at all. What it offers is something more instructive: a genealogy of interpretation, showing how every generation has rebuilt Joseph Smith's plural marriages according to its own anxieties, evidentiary standards, and ideas of what the past should mean.

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Whiffing on Wifery: The Redefinition of “Spiritual Wives”

David Dangerfield

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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, p. 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 Saintly 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 rule or 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 apostasy, 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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“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 scribble & I long
to please you and it would rejoice my soul to see you, & converse with you
and I have no doubt it would rejoice yours also, & 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 wish 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 virtue in the fruit tree than
even the fruits 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 good to us, which if we heard the reasons thereof, and the
order of God would appear right, though they 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? or Richards, will
not this comfort you 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.

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Reviews

Lauer, Rob. *Three Plays for Latter-day Saints*.

Nauvoo House Books, 2024. 361 pp. \$16.96.

ISBN: 979-8-218-49654-8.

Reviewed by Lincoln Stone, Orlando, Florida.

Rob. Lauer’s new collection, *Three Plays for Latter-day Saints*, attempts what few playwrights in the Mormon canon have achieved: creating LDS drama that is truly, actually, for everyone. Through the three plays—*Digger*, *The Beehive State*, and *The Blessings of Jacob*—Lauer seeks to depict characters ranging from non-Mormons in Salt Lake City to a turn-of-the-century polygamist family to a young Joseph Smith himself as nuanced, passionate, contradictory, and, crucially, human. He largely succeeds in this endeavor.

Despite drawing from one of the most unique origin stories in American history, Mormon theater—even Mormon storytelling in general—has long struggled to present the history or teachings of the faith as more than “faith-promoting” pageants intended for an audience of faithful members. Meanwhile, playwrights and performers outside of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints treat its story as little more than material for satire and surface-level parody. (For many theater-goers, the long-running Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* remains their primary exposure to Mormon culture and doctrine.)

Digger is the flagship production in this collection, and in some ways the most successful in bridging the divide between the satirical and the saccharine. Told with humor and care, it places the audience in the home of the Hale Family: Isaac, Elizabeth, and their quick-witted schoolteacher daughter Emma. The parents’ concerns over Emma’s unwedded state are quickly interrupted by the arrival of their elderly neighbor, Josiah Stowell, accompanied by three backcountry treasure diggers: Jesse, Esau, and a gallant, 19-year-old Joseph Smith. Joseph’s skills as a seer are put to the test as Josiah seeks to convince both the Hales and his cynical son Ahad that Joseph’s visions of a Spanish silver mine on his property are genuine. Emma’s skepticism at Joseph’s seeing routine—involving a small stone and a white top hat—eventually blossoms into romance.

This budding affection gradually moves her to defend him against her father and Ahad, who refuse to see him as anything more than a swindler.

Placing the audience into Emma's shoes is what makes this play so immediately and uniquely engaging. It invites the viewer to suspend their preconceptions about the boy prophet, and get to know him, along with Emma, on his own terms: an uneducated, fiery, and deeply sincere young man who is desperately trying to do what is right. His family's poverty—which drives him to hunt for buried treasure—weighs heavily on him, as does his calling from above, a calling that constantly urges him toward *something* more. The play's only potential flaw is that Emma's initial calloused cynicism feels exaggerated for her young age, which causes her transformation to Joseph's lover and defender to feel slightly abrupt. Ultimately, however, even this rapid change aids in what is perhaps the play's most impressive achievement: demonstrating the effect the young prophet had on those who encountered him. His charisma never reads as forced or overwrought, and the little miracles that follow him are arresting.

Lauer presents Joseph's treasure seeking, his faith, his relationship with Emma, and his ultimate trial for disturbing the peace and fraud with straightforward candor and authenticity. Events from Joseph and Emma's young lives that may seem contradictory and strange to our modern sensibilities are here shown simply as things that happened. For many readers, this book might be their first exposure to some of these occurrences, as the majority have rarely been written about or discussed—let alone portrayed onstage—apart from recent church essays. But for all the newness of the source material, it is Joseph's simple, straightforward account of his first vision that stops both Emma and the reader in their tracks. Every member of the Church is no doubt familiar with the details, but the manner of delivery—not as written in a book of scripture, nor as recited from memory by a missionary, but spoken with guileless conviction by a young man who knows heaven is watching him—will leave most with at least a modest tingling in their bosom.

The second play, *The Beehive State*, transports readers to one of the most enigmatic periods in the Church's history. Set in 1903 Provo, the Manifesto banning "The Principle" (polygamy) is

thirteen years old, but Talmage Cannon's life still revolves around his three wives: Evangeline (the first wife and matriarch), Beulah, and Reba (the youngest), their children, and, above all, his devout faith. Moroni—Talmage and Evangeline's oldest son—seeks their blessing to marry the daughter of the polygamy-repudiating Joseph and Helen Fly. Talmage's defense of "The Principle," and his desire for his son to continue living it, despite the stance the Church has taken against the shibboleth, is colored by his admission that he is actively pursuing a potential fourth wife. This revelation comes much to the chagrin, anger, and sorrow of the sister-wives and Moroni (and eventual threats of excommunication from his bishop).

The events of *Digger* may be unfamiliar to many readers of the play, as this period of Mormon (and Utah) history will be positively alien to most non-history buffs born after 1950. Casual discussions of multiple heavenly mothers (462 is Talmage's preferred estimate), children all named after increasingly esoteric scripture characters, and wives giving each other blessings by the laying on of hands are treated as normal and everyday, and may cause confusion in readers who aren't already acquainted with some of the more obscure details of turn-of-the-century Mormon life. Despite this—or perhaps because of it—Lauer's vivid depictions of the family's crises of faith feel all the more familiar. Modern-day readers will readily identify with the struggles of individuals striving to follow a gospel that promises so much good, yet can present so many apparent contradictions. The ending of this play is worthy of particular mention. Without giving away any secrets, it is the most thought-provoking conclusion to a piece of theater—Mormon or "Gentile"—that I have been exposed to in recent memory. Readers of this journal will find it, and the play as a whole, especially engaging.

The final play in the volume, *The Blessings of Jacob*, deals with the heaviest subject matter of the three, but struggles to reach the same heights as the previous two. Living in Salt Lake City during the early depression, 46-year-old Mattie (a deeply less-active member of the faith) lives with her expressly non-Mormon son Billy, his wife Theda, and their young son Mickey. Their lives are upended when Jacob, a devout member of the Church in town from California for the annual General Conference, stops by for purposes of his own,

which recontextualize and transform the family's struggle for peace and existence in post-polygamy Utah.

After the depth of *Digger* and *The Beehive State*, the characters in *The Blessings of Jacob* come off as disappointingly one-dimensional. This is primarily due to the sheer number of difficult subjects that Lauer makes his characters grapple with all at once: inherited generational trauma, domestic abuse, abandonment, loss of faith, and even a brief portrayal of racism. This is plentiful material for any full-length play, let alone a one-act that's well under half the page count of both *Digger* and *Beehive*. The tone of the play reflects the weight of its themes: there is significantly less comedy than Lauer's other two offerings, and some of the scenes do start to feel a bit like interminable shouting matches. Despite its faults, however, *The Blessings of Jacob* is a worthy addition to the volume, and it certainly feels the most modern in its message. Lauer's fascination with the parent-child relationship is stated in his introduction to *Blessings*, and it is evident throughout this and the other plays in the compilation. Exploring that relationship is perhaps where his writing shines the brightest, especially due to the central role it plays at the deepest levels of Mormon belief.

Overall, Lauer's plays are tremendous additions to the regrettably thin canon of Mormon theater. *Digger* is especially worthy of the praise given to it by the godfather of modern Mormon writers, Orson Scott Card, who called it "One of the few good Mormon plays" (p. 13). Lauer's depth of knowledge, both of history and human nature, make this book an enthralling read for dramatists of any faith, and disciples of (or without) any theatrical ability. *Three Plays for Latter-day Saints*, with its collected works and the accompanying prefaces, introductions, and reviews included by the author will be a worthwhile addition to any bookshelf, and will cause the reader to reflect on their own beliefs like vanishingly few other plays—Mormon or not—have managed to do.

Three Plays for Latter-day Saints can be purchased exclusively at mormonplays.blogspot.com.

