

## **“Midrashic Fiction”: Meg Stout’s Reconstructions of Nauvoo Polygamy**

By Brian Hales

In an eyebrow-raising blog, “Give Brigham Young a Break,” posted on October 13, 2015,<sup>1</sup> Meg Stout portrays Joseph Smith as a monogamist hero swooping in to save the ruined reputations of the fair maidens of Nauvoo who have been caught in “spiritual wifery.” She theorizes that the Prophet’s brother, William Smith, with the help of John C. Bennett introduced “spiritual wifery” among Church members in Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1841–1842. Among their supposed dupes were Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball who reportedly engaged in spiritual wifery activities.

According to Stout, at the same time Bennett’s underground extra-marital activities were unfolding, Joseph Smith secretly began introducing non-sexual marriage covenant sealings including plural marriage covenants. Apparently, in the months after the martyrdom Brigham Young was forced to allow covenant marriages to include sexuality in order to “kill spiritual wifery.” This extraordinary tale preserve’s Stout’s long promoted allegation that Joseph Smith did not consummate his plural unions and that he consistently opposed the practice of polygamy that included sexual relations.

Writers like Meg are entitled to reconstruct history to their desires and perhaps to not inform their audiences of the literary license they have claimed. However, several of her accounts depict Church members and leaders inaccurately and negatively. As she besmirches the reputation of men like Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball and women like Eliza R. Snow and Sarah Noon in her stories, she qualifies her work for rebuttal if only to correct the historical record.

A fanciful version of Nauvoo polygamy may seem more palatable to observers like Meg, but they invariably skew documentable reality and do violence to transparency. The most useful reconstructions are those that account for all known evidences because “facts are stubborn things.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Background**

I first encountered Meg Stout’s research in 2011 in an online blog that discussed one of Joseph Smith’s plural relationships. Her findings concurred with mine, so I quoted a single

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<sup>1</sup> Meg Stout, “Give Brigham Young a Break,” The Millennial Star, accessed October 13, 2015, <http://www.millennialstar.org/give-brigham-young-a-break/comment-page-1/>; the blog has been edited for content since its initial posting.

<sup>2</sup> This pithy observation has been voiced by great orators such as John Adams, Tobias Smollett, and Alain-René Lesage, accessed October 19, 2015, <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/06/18/facts-stubborn/>.

paragraph from an online essay: “A Short History of Jonathan Holmes and Elvira Cowles”<sup>3</sup> in volume one of *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: History and Theology*.<sup>4</sup>

My first e-mail contact with Meg came two years later when she sent me a message explaining that she was working on “a midrashic fiction set in Nauvoo,” adding: “I am merely trying to assemble a plausible position for a fictional account.”<sup>5</sup> This e-mail mentions the word “midrash” (or its derivatives) ten times and the word “fiction” five times. I’m not exactly sure what she meant by “midrash,” but it was clear it was not designed to be a historically accurate reconstruction. I responded: “Good luck with your ‘midrashic retelling of the story.’ You write very intelligently and may be able to produce an historical fiction that counters the nonsense written by Sam Taylor and others.”<sup>6</sup> Sam Taylor wrote a highly entertaining fictional account of the Saints in Illinois entitled *Nightfall at Nauvoo*,<sup>7</sup> which portrays Joseph Smith and other leaders negatively.

Several e-mail exchanges ensued with Meg sharing long narratives that did not quite square with the historical evidences. I pointed out the weaknesses, but she did not change the texts or her approach. It appears her stories of “midrashic fiction,” have continued and even expanded. However, in the blogs she has posted, she does not provide the preface that she sent to me in a private e-mail identifying them as fictional. Consequently, her audiences may become confused, especially those with a limited knowledge of available documentation.

### **Polygamy: A Cover-up for Bennett’s Activities?**

Multiple problems can be identified with Stout’s accounting of the introduction of plural marriage among the Latter-day Saints. She notes: “Joseph initially received a revelation regarding the New and Everlasting Covenant just prior to March 7, 1831.” In fact, there is no documented revelation on the new and everlasting covenant in 1831. It appears Stout is referring to an 1861 letter from W. W. Phelps to Brigham Young where he recalled the “substance” of a revelation given July 17, 1831. It states in part: “For it is my will, that in time, ye should take unto you wives of the Lamanites and Nephites.”<sup>8</sup> Phelps ended his letter to President Young writing:



John C. Bennett

<sup>3</sup> See Meg Stout, “A Short History of Jonathan Holmes and Elvira Cowles,” *The Worlds of Meg Stout*, accessed September 19, 2011, <http://www.megstout.com/blog/2010/02/19/a-short-history-of-jonathan-holmes-and-elviracowles/>.

<sup>4</sup> Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: History and Theology*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 329.

<sup>5</sup> Meg Stout, e-mail to Brian Hales, August 29, 2013; copy in possession of author.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Hales, e-mail to Meg Stout, September 14, 2013; copy in possession of author.

<sup>7</sup> Sam Taylor, *Nightfall at Nauvoo* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> W. W. Phelps, letter to Brigham Young, August 12, 1861, Young Collection, CHL, copy of holograph in possession of the author. See Michael Marquardt, *The Joseph Smith Revelations: Text and Commentary* (Salt Lake

About three years after this was given, I asked brother Joseph [Smith, Jr.] privately, how “we,” that were mentioned in the revelation could take wives from the “natives”—as we were all married men? He replied instantly “In th[e] same manner that Abraham took Hagar and Katurah [Keturah]; and Jacob took Rachel Bilhah and Zilpah: by revelation—the saints of the Lord are always directed by revelation.”<sup>9</sup>

This is the earliest known reference to the possibility that plural marriage could be a divinely sanctioned principle. However, to assume that Joseph then received knowledge of the new and everlasting covenant of marriage (or even a portion thereof) at that time is simply not supported by any known document.

The earliest possible reference to marriage lasting beyond death is found in a May 1835 letter from W. W. Phelps to his wife: “A new idea, sally, If you and I continue faithful to the end, we are certain of being one in the Lord throughout eternity. This is one of the most glorious consolations we can have in the flesh. Do not forfeit your birth right.”<sup>10</sup> Phelps mentions that the idea was “new” to him in 1835, so he obviously was not introduced to an ordinance facilitating eternal marriage in 1831.

### Joseph’s “Right Hand Man”

Continuing with her timeline, Stout explains: “The highly capable Dr. John Bennett, who had risen to the position of Joseph’s right hand man during the absence of the apostles, had been discovered to be still married in March 1842.” Actually, by mid-February, 1841, the Prophet sent George Miller to McConnelsville, Ohio, to investigate Bennett’s past.<sup>11</sup> Four weeks later Miller reported back that Bennett was married that and “his poor, but confiding wife, followed him from place to place, with no suspicion of his unfaithfulness to her; at length however, he became so bold in his departures, that it was evident to all around that he was a sore offender, and his wife left him under satisfactory evidence of his adulterous connections; nor was this his only fault; he used her bad otherwise.”<sup>12</sup> His ex-wife accused him of sexual immorality and breaking

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City: Signature Books, 1999), 374.

<sup>9</sup> W. W. Phelps, letter to Brigham Young, August 12, 1861, Young Collection, CHL, copy of holograph in possession of the author. Reproduced in Fred C. Collier, *Unpublished Revelations of the Prophets and Presidents of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Collier’s Publishing Co., 1981), part 10, verse 4, page 58; see also Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism Like Watergate?: An Answer to Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm, 1974,) 6–8.

<sup>10</sup> W. W. Phelps, letter to Sally Phelps, May 26, 1835, LDS Journal History, photo reproduction of typescript in Richard E. Turley, Jr. *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2002), 2: DVD #1. See also Bruce Van Orden, “Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters (1835–1836),” *BYU Studies* 33, no. 3 (1993): 550; M. Guy Bishop, “Eternal Marriage in Early Mormon Marital Beliefs,” *The Historian* 53, no. 1 (Autumn 1990): 78.

<sup>11</sup> See Andrew C. Skinner, “John C. Bennett: For Prophet or Profit?” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Illinois*, ed. H. Dean Garrett (Provo, UT: BYU Department of Church History and Doctrine, 1995), 256–63. See specifically pp. 249–65.

<sup>12</sup> See Joseph Smith, “To the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and to all the Honorable Part of Community,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (July 1, 1842): 839–40.

up other married couples due to his immoral behaviors. Shortly before their divorce he seduced another married woman. Bennet’s estranged wife charged, “that if he succeeded in separating the pair . . . that it would be the seventh family that he had parted during their union.”<sup>13</sup>

Classifying Bennett as “Joseph’s right hand man” is an inaccuracy. Multiple evidences corroborate that the Prophet never taught Bennett of eternal plural marriage. Most importantly, Bennett himself admitted that eternal marriage was a concept different from “spiritual wifery.”<sup>14</sup> On April 8, 1841, Bennett was presented as an “assistant president, until Pres’t. Rigdon’s health should be restored.”<sup>15</sup> Some observers interpret this as evidence that Bennett was Joseph’s close



Sidney Rigdon

confidante. However, additional investigation shows that *this calling gave Bennett a title that was devoid of authority, responsibility, or privileged access to Joseph Smith’s private teachings*. There is no indication that Bennett replaced Rigdon in any official capacity and Sidney felt well enough to resume his ecclesiastical duties two months later in June 1841.<sup>16</sup>

Joseph Smith’s diary between December 13, 1841, and May 18, 1842, (when Bennett resigned as mayor) contains twenty-one references to Brigham Young, fifteen to Heber C. Kimball, thirteen to Willard Richards, eight to Hyrum Smith, seven to Sidney Rigdon, and five to William Law.<sup>17</sup> The context of these encounters varies from

Joseph teaching Brigham regarding the building of the temple on December 11, to a group meeting with Brigham, Heber C. Kimball, Willard Richards, and John Taylor on December 27 “instructing them in the principles of the kingdom.”<sup>18</sup> Another example is that on February 11, Brigham and Willard were told to write a letter to discipline a rebellious elder.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast, Bennett’s name appears only three times, twice in conjunction with public debates and once as assisting with publishing of an article in the *Times and Seasons*. Bennett’s biographer, Andrew F. Smith, concludes: “Despite the importance of his position, Bennett appears to have officiated at few public religious activities. He occasionally preached, and as mayor of Nauvoo he performed a few [civil] marriage ceremonies.”<sup>20</sup> Placing Bennett at the center of anything associated with Joseph and the Church in Nauvoo is not justified.

<sup>13</sup> Untitled notice beginning, “Dear Sir: On being requested. . .” *The Wasp* 1 (October 1, 1842): 24.

<sup>14</sup> See “John C. Bennett and Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: Addressing the Question of Reliability, *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 2 (April 2015): 131–81.

<sup>15</sup> “Minutes,” *Times and Seasons*, April 15, 1841, 387.

<sup>16</sup> Untitled notice, “We have to announce . . .” *Times and Seasons* 2 (June 1, 1841): 431; *History of the Church*, 4:364.

<sup>17</sup> Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Volume 2, Journal, 1832–1842* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 335–84. In addition, John Taylor was mentioned eight times, Wilford Woodruff six, Newel K. Whitney five, William Marks four, and Orson Pratt three.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew F. Smith, *The Sainly Scoundrel: The Life and Times of Dr. John Cook Bennett* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 62.

## Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball: Followers of John C. Bennett?

According to Stout's Bennett-centric chronology, "During the summer of 1841, Dr. Bennett began teaching that it was permissible for men and women to engage in sexual intercourse as long as the deed remained unknown." A more credible reconstruction is that shortly after becoming established among the Saints, Bennett simply continued his pre-Nauvoo adulterous behavior that, apparently for him, needed no theological justification and had nothing to do with Joseph's plural marriage teachings. Bennett's illicit behavior began months earlier than "the summer of 1841" and he exited Nauvoo by mid-1842.

Stout writes that, "It appears possible . . . that Brigham Young was initially taken in, along with Heber Kimball." That is, sometime after their July 1841 arrival from their missions in England Brigham and Heber were deceived by John C. Bennett into believing his story about extra-marital sex being okay if kept secret.

Many weaknesses can be identified in this interpretation. First, to assume that Bennett sought to instruct the apostles or that they would have listened to him is without any documentary support and is highly unlikely. Brigham related his feelings when eternal plural marriage was introduced to him by Joseph Smith: "My brethren know what my feelings were at the time Joseph revealed the doctrine; I was not desirous of shrinking from any duty, nor of failing in the least to do as I was commanded, but it was the first time in my life that I had desired the grave, and I could hardly get over it for a long time. And when I saw a funeral, I felt to envy the corpse its situation, and to regret that I was not in the coffin."<sup>21</sup>



Brigham Young

Critical author Fawn Brodie attested that Brigham Young was not capricious in his thinking, "The best evidence of the magnetism of the Mormon religion was that it could attract men with the quality of Brigham Young, whose tremendous energy and shrewd intelligence were not easily directed by any influence outside himself."<sup>22</sup> Heber C. Kimball's story of the Prophet's test when introduced to plural marriage is well known.<sup>23</sup> Neither man mentioned Bennett, positively or negatively, in conjunction with their initial introductions.

Between May 21 and 28, 1842, the Nauvoo High Council met several times to explore reports of adulteries instigated by Bennett and his followers. Among the women called to testify were Catherine Fuller Warren, Mary Hardman, Melinda Lewis, Caroline Butler, Matilda Nyman,

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<sup>21</sup> Brigham Young, July 14, 1855, *Journal of Discourses*, 3:266.

<sup>22</sup> Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York, 1971), 126–27. Joseph Johnson writing in 1885 disagreed: "He [Brigham Young] must have been an idiot, or thought he was addressing idiots." *The Great Mormon Fraud* (Manchester, Butterworth and Nodal, 1885), 17.

<sup>23</sup> See Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1945), 323–24.

Margaret Nyman, Polly Mecham, Polly Masheres, Melinda Lewis, and Maria Champlin.<sup>24</sup> Their testimonies incriminated others including Justus Morse, Mrs. Barriss, George W. Thatcher, William Smith, Lyman O. Littlefield, Joel S. Miles, Mrs. Alfred Brown, J. B. Backenstos, and Alexander McRay.<sup>25</sup> None of the witnesses referred to Brigham or Heber in any context and no evidence connects them in any way.

How are we to believe that Bennett's invitation to secret adulteries was not only enticing to but also accepted by Brigham and Heber? [Stout defended her interpretation thus: "We have two reasons to suspect Brigham Young was involved in at least an attempt to engage in extra-monogamous behavior in 1841/1842."](#) The first reason deals with Martha Brotherton, an English convert who arrived in America with her family in Joseph Fielding's company in November of 1841.<sup>26</sup> It is possible that she was the first woman in this dispensation to receive a plural marriage proposal from someone other than Joseph Smith. Multiple sources affirm that Brigham did approach her.<sup>27</sup>

In a July 13, 1842, affidavit written with the aid of John C. Bennett, Martha Brotherton described how she was approached by Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young shortly after settling at Nauvoo. They led her to Joseph Smith's office in the Red Brick Store where she was left alone with Brigham who proposed a plural marriage. She immediately declined, so Brigham beckoned Joseph Smith to join them. Reportedly he said: "It is lawful and right before God—I know it is. . . . I have the keys of the kingdom, and whatever I bind on earth is bound in heaven, and whatever I loose on earth is loosed in heaven, and if you will accept of Brigham, you shall be blessed—God shall bless you, and my blessing shall rest upon you; and if you will be led by him, you will do well; for I know Brigham will take care of you."<sup>28</sup> Unconvinced, Martha told her parents and together they disassociated themselves from the Church and moved to St. Louis within a few weeks.

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<sup>24</sup> Nauvoo High Council, Minutes, May 21–28, 1842, CHL; photocopy of holograph in Valeen Tippetts Avery Collection MSS 316, Box 24, fd. 14, Merrill-Cazier Library; also John S. Dinger, ed., *The Nauvoo City and High Council Minutes*, 413–19.

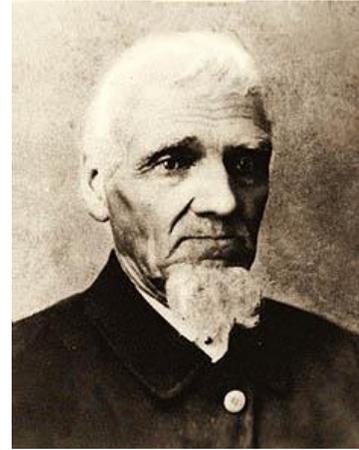
<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Andrew F. Ehat, "'They Might Have Known That He Was Not a Fallen Prophet': The Nauvoo Journal of Joseph Fielding." *BYU Studies* 19 (Winter 1979): 140. See Joseph Fielding's Letter," *Millennial Star* 3 (August, 1842): 75.

<sup>27</sup> See also Brigham Young's affidavit in "Affidavits and Certificates, Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett's Letters. Nauvoo[.] Aug. 31, 1842." *The Wasp Extra* for date.

<sup>28</sup> Martha H. Brotherton, Affidavit dated July 13, 1842, *Native American Bulletin*, 1 (July 16, 1842), St. Louis. It was also republished in the *Sangamo Journal* 10 (July 22, 1842), Springfield, Illinois; the *Warsaw Signal*, July 23, 1842; *New York Herald*, 8 (July 25, 27, 1842); *Louisville Daily Journal* 12 (July 25, 1842): 183 (extracts); *Alton Telegraph and Democratic Review* 7 (July 30, 1842), Alton, Illinois; *Quincy Whig* 5 (August 6, 1842): [2], Quincy, Illinois; and John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints: Or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), 236–40.

Stout alleges that Brigham and Heber’s involvement with Brotherton was a manifestation of their following Bennett’s teachings. She further affirms that Joseph Smith was *not* present and did not participate in any way. In order to remove the Prophet as a participant, Stout alleges that Brotherton “had never met Joseph Smith, making it possible that William Smith was the person she actually met.” So this reconstruction alleges that Brigham, Heber, and William Smith deceived Martha without getting caught as William impersonated the Prophet while sitting in Joseph’s office in Joseph’s Red Brick Store. It further assumes that Martha never came in contact with Joseph in the following days prior to leaving Nauvoo.



*William B. Smith*

This does not seem plausible for several reasons:

1. Joseph and William did not closely resemble each other. Joseph was roughly six feet tall and of stocky build while William was more slender and three inches taller.
2. Accounts of Brigham and Heber’s introduction to plural marriage do not include any involvement with William Law (or John C. Bennett).
3. Bennett’s teachings did not require a marriage ceremony in order to authorize sexual relations.
4. Brotherton’s account reports that a marriage ceremony was offered by Joseph and an enduring marriage relationship would have resulted. If William were duplicating Bennett’s approach, this would not have been framed as a marriage.
5. The remarkable deception alleged by Stout would have required significant planning and conspiracy, more than Bennett’s immoral escapades ever involved.

Stout proposes a second reason supporting Brigham’s involvement with Bennett. On June 23, 1843, William Clayton recorded a conversation with Joseph where the Prophet reportedly stated that “B[righam] Y[oung] had transgressed his covenant and he pled with the Lord to spare him this end and he did so, otherwise he would have died. B[righam] denied having transgressed.”<sup>29</sup> Since additional details are unavailable, it is impossible to discern precisely what happened. Nevertheless, Stout theorizes: “If Brigham had attempted to coerce Martha Brotherton to become his spiritual wife, he had transgressed.” In other words, if Brigham was duped by Bennett and freelanced his own sexual advance on Martha disguised as an eternal plural marriage proposal involving Heber and William Smith, Young would have “transgressed.”

An alternate interpretation is available. It appears that Joseph Smith utilized plural marriage to test the devotion of Church leaders. Heber C. Kimball’s test has already been alluded to. Apostle Franklin D. Richards recorded in 1896 comments from a discussion he had in a council

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<sup>29</sup> George D. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 108.

meeting with several priesthood authorities regarding “certain trials or tests to which Prests. B[righam]. Young & Jno. Taylor were put by Prest. Joseph the Prophet in Nauvoo, as the plurality & Eternity of the M[arriage]. Covenant was being revealed . . . and O[rson]. Hyde’s trial also.”<sup>30</sup> No additional particulars are shared, but John Taylor’s trial is documented elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> Clayton’s 1843 reference to Brigham’s transgressing could also have been referring to this test, which Joseph performed to assess their convictions regarding his prophetic role and apparently felt Brigham faltered even if Brigham felt he had not.

Stout’s timeline for the Martha Brotherton event is also challenging. While the exact arrival of the Brothertons in Nauvoo is not recorded, the family arrived in New Orleans in early November 1841.<sup>32</sup> They apparently settled outside of Nauvoo weeks later. It is possible that Martha’s interaction with Brigham and Heber occurred in very late 1841, but early 1842 seems more likely. Regardless, Stout affirms: “By January 6, 1842, Brigham appears to have fully regained Joseph’s confidence.” In fact, it is much more probable that the Young-Brotherton interactions occurred well after that. It is certain the event was over by the April 6 General Conference, when the Prophet “spoke in contradiction of a report in circulation about Elder Kimball, B. Young, himself, and others of the Twelve, alleging that a sister had been shut in a room for several days, and that they had endeavored to induce her to believe in having two wives.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Franklin D. Richards, diary, 1896 bk, June 25, 1896, CHL; also in *Minutes of the Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1894-1899*, Salt Lake City: Privately Published [Smith-Pettit Foundation], 2010, 116. Attending were President Wilford Woodruff, Counselor George Q. Cannon, and apostles Brigham Young, Jr., John H. Smith, and John W. Taylor. See Scott G. Kenny, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 1833–1898*, 9 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1983–85), 9:409; Jean Bickmore White, ed., *Church, State, and Politics: The Diaries of John Henry Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 352; Brigham Young, Jr., journals, CHL, for date, copy of transcription possession of the author. I have not consulted the journals of George Q. Cannon or John W. Taylor, if such journals are extant for that date.

<sup>31</sup> See John Mills Whitaker, *Autobiography and Journals, 1883–1960*, MS 1356, CHL, Reel 1, entry dated November 1, 1890, Whitaker’s typed version was apparently based on his shorthand original.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew F. Ehat, “‘They Might Have Known That He Was Not a Fallen Prophet’: The Nauvoo Journal of Joseph Fielding.” *BYU Studies* 19 (Winter 1979): 140. See also “Joseph Fielding’s Letter,” *Millennial Star* 3 (August, 1842): 75.

<sup>33</sup> “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (April 15, 1842): 763.



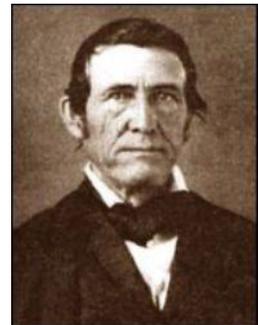
Heber C. Kimball

Since Martha Brotherton mentioned the participation of Heber C. Kimball, Stout alleges he was deceived by Bennett as well, which is apparently why he participated. Heber married his first plural wife (Sarah Peak Noon) in the first half of 1842.<sup>34</sup> She bore the first baby from a sealed polygamous marriage in late 1842 or early 1843, naming him Adelbert Kimball who lived less than a year.<sup>35</sup> Evidence shows that Sarah stayed with the Kimballs during her confinement. Concerning this relationship, Stout posits: “I think Sarah Peak Noon had been a victim of some other man persuaded of Bennett’s spiritual wifery heresy and therefore time Heber’s role in becoming Sarah’s protector as occurring in the summer of 1842.” “I suggest that Sarah Peak Noon had been a victim of the seducers, moving forward as commanded in 1831.” Again, there is nothing in the historical record to connect Bennett with Noon.

### Joseph Smith Plans to Abandon Polygamy but Brigham Young Keeps It Alive

To further bolster her non-polygamous Joseph Smith, Stout writes:

According to William Marks, still at the time Nauvoo Stake President, Joseph confided in Marks that polygamy or spiritual wifery would be the undoing of the Mormon people if it were not rooted out and prosecuted. Marks made his statement shortly after learning that both the Brighamites and Strangites had publicly announced they were practicing plural marriage. Given that Marks used the term spiritual wifery (implying illicit and coercive intercourse without benefit of any ceremony) rather than eternal marriage (technically illegal but associated with eternal covenants), I see no reason to doubt he was telling the truth.



Nauvoo Stake President  
William Marks

Here Meg Stout refers to popular statements from William Marks allegedly quoting the Prophet a few weeks before his death saying that polygamy was wrong and must be stopped.<sup>36</sup> I have written on this topic on several occasions. The plausibility of such a declaration is low based upon multiple evidences that Stout does not address.<sup>37</sup> Stout concludes: “In the summer of

<sup>34</sup> George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*: “... but we called it celestial marriage” (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 601.

<sup>35</sup> Stanely B. Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 311.

<sup>36</sup> See William Marks, “Epistle,” *Zions Harbinger and Baneemy’s Organ* 3 (July 1853): 52–54 (published in St. Louis, by C. B. Thompson); Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 2:733; John Hawley, “The Life of John Hawley,” P13, f317, Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri, 95–96.

<sup>37</sup> See Brian Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: History and Theology*, 3 vols., Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013, 2:247–56.

1845, Brigham appears to have given the go ahead for men to engender children with plural wives married in the New and Everlasting Covenant. . . . Brigham killed the heresy of spiritual wifery. He did this by tightly controlling marriage, openly promoting plural marriage, and making it so no woman was left in a vulnerable position that invited the possibility for spiritual wifery to regain a hold.”

Frankly, Meg’s reconstruction doesn’t make sense to me. She seems to pile one assumption upon another while repeatedly ignoring available historical data. From my perspective, Meg Stout’s essay “Give Brigham Young a Break” is probably best characterized as a continuation of her midrashic fiction.

### Sexuality in Joseph Smith’s Plural Marriages

A second claim promoted by Meg Stout that deserves a brief response was detailed in a January 15, 2015, blog entitled: “Why I am not Persuaded Joseph Smith had Sex with Plural Wives.”<sup>38</sup> It is understandable that observers including Church members might have trouble with sexuality in plural marriages. For others, it is challenging to conceive of the reverse. Joseph Smith’s nephew Church President Joseph F. Smith wrote in 1903: “It is difficult to convince the prejudiced mind that any but base intents and impure desires prompted the practice of plural marriage, but nevertheless it was entered into, God knows, with the highest religious and moral motives.”<sup>39</sup>



Emily Partridge

Sexuality and religion together are always controversial. Some unbelievers attribute libido rather than revelation as driving Joseph Smith to institute plural marriage in Nauvoo. A Bennett-driven hypothesis relies on the same premise. So as believers hear the doubters’ chorus ringing throughout the land, a few defenders attempt to say Joseph didn’t have sexual relations with his plural wives. The problem is that the evidence is strong that “multiply and replenish the earth” was at least part of the reason for polygamy. Alternative narratives are not likely to be helpful in the long run. Individuals who believe comforting falsehoods become vulnerable to later truths that can undermine their testimony.

Three of Joseph Smith’s wives were questioned in the Temple Lot trial in 1892. All declared under oath that they experienced sexual relations as Joseph’s plural wife. Undoubtedly, these Victorian women—raised in an age where uncovered ankles were considered provocative—were mortified to make their intimate relations with the Prophet public. Yet, when asked: “Did you ever have carnal intercourse with Joseph Smith?” Emily Partridge answered plainly, “Yes sir.”

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<sup>38</sup> See Meg Stout, “Why I Am Not Persuaded Joseph Smith Had Sex with Plural Wives,” *The Millennial Star*, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://www.millennialstar.org/why-i-am-not-persuaded-joseph-smith-had-sex-with-plural-wives/>.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph F. Smith, “The Mormonsim of To-day,” *The Arena* 29 (May, 1903) 5: 450.

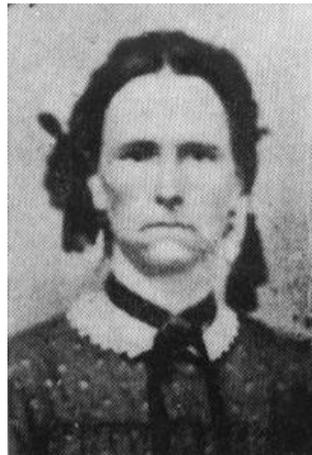
When the prodding follow-up question “How many nights?” was posed, she responded, “I could not tell you.”<sup>40</sup> Ostensibly, that would mean more than one.

Similarly, Malissa Lott was asked: “Did you ever room with Joseph Smith as his wife?” She responded, “Yes sir.” When the inquirer sought more specific information by asking, “Did you cohabit



Lucy Walker

with him as his wife?” the answer was the same: “Yes sir.”<sup>41</sup> Malissa reiterated her involvement in 1893 when questioned by Joseph Smith III. He inquired, “Were you married to my father?” She answered, “Yes.” Seeking more clarity, the Prophet’s son asked precisely: “Was you a wife in very deed?” The answer was affirmed.<sup>42</sup>



Malissa Lott

Lucy Walker’s response to the Temple Lot prosecutor’s question: “Did you live with Joseph Smith as his wife?” was a little more ambiguous. She responded, “He was my husband sir.”<sup>43</sup> But several other sources corroborate that Lucy had conjugal relations with Joseph.<sup>44</sup>

Evidence for sexuality in perhaps nine more cases can be found in the historical record.<sup>45</sup> While Stout has tried to discount these evidences in creative ways, the supportive historical data seems overwhelming. Readers are invited to consult the documents and decide for themselves. In addition, multiple manuscript evidences supporting that Joseph Smith did introduce the practice of plural marriage to “multiply and replenish the earth” (D&C 132:63) are available in an essay available on *The Interpreter* website.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Emily Dow Partridge Young, deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Part 3, pp. 371, 384, questions 480–84, 747, 751–62.

<sup>41</sup> Malissa Lott, deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Part 3, pp. 97, 105–6, questions 87–93, 224–60.

<sup>42</sup> Melissa Lott Willes, statement, August 4, 1893, CHL.

<sup>43</sup> Lucy Walker, deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent’s Testimony, Part 3, pp. 450–51, 468, 473, questions 29–30, 463–74, 586.

<sup>44</sup> See Angus Cannon, “Statement of an Interview with Joseph Smith III, 1905, Regarding Conversation on October 12, 1905.” MS 3166, CHL; D. H. Morris, untitled typed statement, June 12, 1930. Text begins: “The following was given by Judge D. H. Morris of St. George, Utah ...” Marriott Library, Vesta P. Crawford Papers, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, MS 125, Box 1, fd. 5.

<sup>45</sup> See <http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/faq/sexuality-2/>.

<sup>46</sup> See <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/a-response-to-denver-snuffers-essay-on-plural-marriage-adoption-and-the-supposed-falling-away-of-the-church-part-1-ignoring-inconvenient-evidence/>.

## Allegations that John C. Bennett Beguiled Eliza R. Snow

Another unfortunate allegation advanced by Meg Stout slanders the name of Eliza R. Snow. In an April 20, 2014, Millennial Star blog, she wrote that “Our regard for Eliza and her righteousness prevents most from easily accepting the possibility that Eliza could have fallen prey to Bennett. . . . Bennett wished her [Eliza] as a secret wife.” Stout writes that by mid-June 1842, “Eliza decided to remain in Nauvoo and moved into the home of Sarah Cleveland, one of Emma’s Relief Society counselors. I proposed that by this point she was already carrying Bennett’s child, possibly conceived mere days before Bennett’s exposure in the paper.” Alleging that Eliza R. Snow was pregnant with Bennett’s child depicts her as a salacious woman and a gullible victim.



Eliza R. Snow

In order to arrive at the conclusions she presents, Meg Stout connects the dots in an unconventional way. Her evidence includes Joseph Smith 1842 description of Bennett’s behavior the previous year.

He [John C. Bennett] had not been long in Nauvoo before he began to keep company with a young lady, one of our citizens; and she being ignorant of his having a wife living, gave way to his addresses, and became confident, from his behavior towards her, that he intended to marry her; and this he gave her to understand he would do. I, seeing the folly of such an acquaintance, persuaded him to desist; and, on account of his continuing his course, finally threatened to expose him if he did not desist. This, to outward appearance, had the desired effect, and the acquaintance between them was broken off.

But, like one of the most abominable and depraved beings which could possibly exist, he only broke off his publicly wicked actions, to sink deeper into iniquity and hypocrisy... He accomplished his wicked purposes; he seduced an innocent female by his lying, and subjected her character to public disgrace, should it ever be known.”<sup>47</sup>

The identity of the dishonored lady is not known, but Stout attests that it was Eliza R. Snow. Several problems can be identified:

1. The account refers to a “young lady,” and Eliza Snow (b. 1804) was older than Bennett by several months, being thirty-seven at the time.
2. Eliza’s known strong character makes it implausible that she would have been beguiled by Bennett’s flattery or enticements.
3. There is no persuasive evidence supporting that Eliza was ever pregnant at any time in her life.

Eliza Snow’s documented behavior during the winter–spring of 1842–43 is inconsistent with a gravid state that might have been discovered by Emma, provoking Eliza’s removal. On December 12, 1842, Eliza wrote: “This day commenced school-teaching in the Masonic Hall. . . . In undertaking the arduous business with my *delicate constitution*, at this inclement season of the

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<sup>47</sup> Joseph Smith, “To the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and to all the honorable Part of Community,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (July 1, 1842): 839–40.

year I was entirely governed by the wishes of Prest. and Mrs. Smith” (italics added).<sup>48</sup> Some authors observe that in the nineteenth century, the term “delicate condition” was a euphemism for pregnancy, suggesting that perhaps Eliza was then with child.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, Eliza wrote of her “delicate constitution,” not “delicate condition.” While testifying during a trial of Joseph Smith in 1843, Lyman Wight mentioned that Sidney Rigdon had a “delicate constitution,” illustrating that such descriptions were used with no relation to pregnancy.<sup>50</sup> On March 17, 1843, Eliza closed the school with a ceremony attended by her students and again the Prophet and Emma.<sup>51</sup> Eliza’s activities and her interactions with Emma and others during the nine months following December of 1842 are inconsistent with her being pregnant at that time.

4. A March 2, 1841, letter from the Prophet to Vilate Kimball, wife of Heber C. Kimball seems to refer to the same incident:

I can in some measure enter into your feelings respecting the occurrence which has lately taken place in the church which is indeed painful to every lover of Truth and Holiness, and probably to none more so than myself. I am indeed sorry that any thing should have caused such a stir in the Church, and bro't disgrace upon persons who are otherwise respectable. The course I have taken in the matter was such as I felt warranted to take from the testimony which was adduced. Whether they were guilty of crime or not I do not say, but this I must say that their imprudence was carried to an unwarranted extent.

I do not desire that you should turn the young woman out of doors, far be it from me to advise any such course I think it would be well for her to remain with you at least until Bro Kimball comes home, because I think that your advise [sic], may be a blessing to *her*, and your council and advise such as will tend to her future welfare and happiness. I have no doubt but you will act in wisdom in this matter I remain yours in the Gospel.<sup>52</sup>

This letter does not mention Bennett or Eliza but refers to a “young woman” (like the “young lady” mentioned above in Joseph’s account) who was involved with an unidentified man, but the chronology lines up perfectly. Importantly, the letter above states that the woman went to live with Vilate Kimball, not Sarah Cleveland.

5. In 1887 Eliza spoke with a newspaper reporter concerning the secrecy surrounding her sealing: “She lived in the same cottage with another lady [Sarah Cleveland] for two years after she had been sealed, but said not a word to her friend and neighbor. At last Joseph told her one day that she might talk with her neighbor on the subject, and then for

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<sup>48</sup> Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, ed., *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow* (Logan, Utah: USU Press, 2000), 64.

<sup>49</sup> See George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: “... but we called it celestial marriage”* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 131; Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Linda King Newell, and Valeen Tippetts Avery, “Emma and Eliza and the Stairs,” *BYU Studies* 22 (Winter 1982): 92.

<sup>50</sup> “Trial of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 4 (July 15, 1843): 267.

<sup>51</sup> Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, ed., *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow* (Logan, Utah: USU Press, 2000), 66.

<sup>52</sup> Joseph Smith, letter to Vilate Kimball, March 2, 1841, in Helen Vilate Bourne Fleming Papers, MS 9670, Box 1 (only box), Folder 25, CHL.

the first time she revealed her connection with plural-marriage. ‘We women kept secrets in those days,’ she added.”<sup>53</sup> The “for two years” is too long, but the idea that Sarah Cleveland was privy to Eliza’s sealing as Stout describes is problematic.

6. There is no evidence to connect Eliza with any of the women tricked by Bennett. During the Nauvoo High Council trials of May 1842, the high council sought names of anyone and everyone associated with Bennett. No one near the stature of Eliza was on the list; he sought easier prey.

From a documentary standpoint, it appears Meg Stout’s treatment of Eliza R. Snow is misrepresentative and insulting.

### “Even if Fiction”

In a January 4, 2015, interview with Ralph Hancock published online by Meridian Magazine, [Meg Stout seems to have described her historical narratives](#):

As I honed my writing abilities, a key skill was how one creates a believable world. Past writers who have talked about polygamy have neglected to do this, merely juxtaposing inferences from the documentation that does exist. One of my main principles was that my writing, even if fiction, needed to be absolutely consistent with all the documented history. However in fiction, I also needed to give a reader a plausible background for key events.

Creating a “believable world” is great for fiction writers, but it does not produce documented history. While I do not know many things, I do know the documentation associated with Joseph Smith and plural marriage (see [MormonPolygamyDocument.org](#)), which documentation is used, but also abused by Meg Stout. It appears that if she were to publish her version of the unfolding of Nauvoo polygamy, it would probably be best stocked in the historical fiction section of bookstores.

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<sup>53</sup> J. J. J., “Two Prophets’ Widows A Visit to the Relicts of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Thursday, August 18, 1887: pg. 6, col E. The dating is problematic in that Eliza lived with Sarah Cleveland at the time of the sealing until August 14, 1842 when she was invited by Emma to join the Prophet’s family in the Homestead where she stayed until February 11, 1843. That day Lucy Mack Smith moved in with Joseph and Emma, and Eliza moved to the Morley settlement.