

**Witnesses of the Book of Mormon — Insights Episode 13:
Plural Marriage - Part 1**

Oliver Cowdery: Can I have a word with you?

Joseph Smith: Of course.

Oliver: Alone?

Joseph: I'm sure there's nothing we have to talk about that Sydney can't hear.

Oliver: I'm pretty sure that there is. ALONE.

Joseph: Sidney, would you please give us a few minutes?

Sidney Rigdon: Of course, Joseph. Of course.

Joseph: What is troubling you?

Oliver: This has gone too far. I speak of Fanny Alger your housemaker. Or is she your wife?

Joseph: Oliver, I feel your outrage. I do. Please, sit down and we can talk this over. We were sealed by the power of God, and under His authority.

Oliver: So, God did it?

Joseph: As part of the Restoration of all things, in the same manner as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Oliver: Joseph! [shouting] My brother Joseph, don't you see?

Joseph: See what?

Oliver [shouting]: You are intoxicated by the power of leading a believing people! That power is a sacred trust, one that you cannot, must not betray! Or as God is my witness, you will be smitten!

[quietly] Joseph, my dear Joseph, I have heard God's voice flow through you like living water. I have stood in the presence of angels with you. But I fear you have been deceived. And if you are smitten, what will become of us?

Joseph: I am not deceived, Oliver. I will always maintain the true principle, even if I stand alone in it.

Camrey Bagley Fox: Welcome to our series about the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. My name is Camrey Bagley Fox. And we are joined today by Dr. Gerritt Dirkmaat. Thanks for being here.

Gerritt Dirkmaat: Thank you for having me.

CBF: So the three witnesses all left the Church for several different reasons. What part did plural marriage play in that?

GD: This is a really good question, because obviously when a modern Latter-day saint thinks about plural marriage, I think that it can be one of the more difficult aspects of their history to think about, to wrestle with, and obviously we personalize it, and we think, 'Well, I wouldn't be able to do that, or how would I?' So I think we relate really well if someone says, 'I've got a real problem with plural marriage,' You know, we're all raising our hands saying, 'Yes, actually.'

CBF: Right.

GD: Each witness has a different set of grievances that some of them are similar, but primarily, plural marriage enters into the equation with Oliver Cowdery. So, you could look at them a little bit as kind of drifting apart from Joseph a little bit in that late Ohio period. And there's lots of factors for that. The fact that David Whitmer's often in Missouri. There's tension between the Church in Kirtland and in Missouri. There's tension in Kirtland with the failure of the Kirtland Safety Society. So many people have so much tied in it, and if they don't have money, all their friends have money, it's just a spectacular collapse that's going to really draw some strain. And in Oliver Cowdery's explanation of some of his grievances against Joseph, one of the things that he references is Joseph Smith's affiliation with Fanny Alger.

Now, Fanny Alger is a woman, who for a time, was a servant in the Smith home there in Kirtland. It's actually difficult to figure out when that marriage would have taken place, in part because, neither Joseph nor Fanny never talk about their plural marriage to one another. And in fact, when Fanny Alger is asked directly about it she, later in life, she doesn't talk about it. And says, 'That's my business, not yours.' So that's not as helpful to a historian as it could be.

CBF: Right.

GD: This is something that becomes a much bigger deal in the aftermath of the accusation. I don't know what role the fact that Joseph Smith had begun to practice plural marriage has, in particular, with driving a wedge between Cowdery and Joseph, because Cowdery's only talking about it after the fact, and after he's already in this place of great contention. But I DO know that in the process of excommunication, it is one of the main points because, one of the accusations that's made against Oliver is that he is FALSELY accusing Joseph Smith of committing adultery, to which Oliver

Cowdery is responding, saying, 'Well I didn't actually say that.' To other people saying, 'Well I heard him say THIS.'

At the very least, Oliver Cowdery doesn't immediately, when the marriage would have happened, seem to have a problem with it. At least he doesn't say anything that we know of. It seems to be more of a discussion after the fact that's going on. So that's certainly an issue. It doesn't seem to be an issue that is insurmountable for Cowdery, given the fact that he will return to the Church when the Church is much more openly practicing plural marriage, in 1848. Cowdery, he knows how to read, he's a brilliant guy, so he can certainly read the multiple accusations of plural being practiced—it's all over in the press. It would seem like if that is the deciding factor for him, like, 'I cannot believe in ANY church in which plural marriage is practiced,' if that were the case, it makes his return far more unlikely, actually. And he does return.

GD cont'd: A lot of what we hear about Fanny Alger is essentially hearsay. We know from multiple sources that Joseph Smith learned at least 1831, but maybe as early as 1830, that at some point plural marriage was going to be practiced in the Church. Now of course, Joseph doesn't act on that, or teach about it, and the years go by. But many scholars think that his relationship with Fanny Alger was this first attempt to follow this coming commandment to practice plural marriage.

Whatever the case is, it ends up ending in failure, obviously. And that the tension surrounding that relationship is something that is certainly used by Oliver Cowdery as evidence that Joseph is not right with God in the time of the communication.

Now, Joseph actually is going to make an explanation of things to the High Council. Unfortunately, we don't have the record of what he actually said to them, which again, as a historian, I'm like, 'Well, why don't I have that?' And that the High Council rules that they're completely satisfied with his explanation.

CBF: So it seems like when it comes to plural marriage, personally Fanny Alger is one of the names that gets tossed around more than others. But it seems like we just don't have many primary sources on that.

GD: Yeah.

CBF: And there's just not a lot we actually know about Joseph's practice of plural marriage.

GD: Yeah, especially in this early period, we know almost nothing.

The reason why you hear about Fanny Alger so much is actually because of a different person who apostatizes from the Church, William McLellan. McLellan, in one of his efforts to try to discredit Joseph Smith, McLellan CLAIMS to have had a conversation with Emma, in which she told McLellan that she had caught Joseph Smith committing adultery with Fanny Alger, and that that's where the whole idea of plural marriage even

came from. The reason why you hear that one repeated the most, is that's the most salacious attack on Joseph Smith.

CBF: Right.

GD: As sources go, as a historian, you honestly can't GET a worse source. He's claiming that he had a conversation about something decades earlier, that occurred decades earlier, that he wasn't a witness to, that the other person involved in says didn't happen. And then, for the purpose of discrediting Joseph Smith the Third's church by saying, 'You're not the real leader, I am.'

Clearly there was some kind of relationship that may have been this earliest plural marriage that we don't know very much about. We don't know when that marriage took place, we don't know the nature of that marriage, we don't know how it functioned, we don't know how it came apart. We don't know anything about how they interacted with Emma, because the participants in that marriage don't talk about it.

CBF: Right.

GD: You do have other Latter-day Saints who will later talk about it. So one of the better sources that there actually was a marriage was actually her family. Her family will again, decades later, in the Utah period say, 'Oh yeah, Joseph Smith was married to Fanny Alger.' Again, that's evidence, but is it really GOOD evidence when it's so many years later, and it's in the midst of public attempts to try to connect Joseph to plural marriage in Utah because of all the criticism Utah is receiving for the practice of plural marriage? So it's a very complicated topic obviously, and I'm sure I have a knack for it, taking something simple and making it more complex. So, if people feel discomfited about the idea of plural marriage, I think it's important that they understand that that's normal.

CBF: Right.

GD: It's actually NOT normal, as an American anyway, to not feel uncomfortable about the fact that plural marriage was practiced. We have to trust, and rely, not only on the fact that Joseph Smith was a prophet, but also the men and women who were living during that era, who testify to the fact that they felt that God had commanded them to practice it.

I think it's important that we let people from the past speak for themselves. If we say well, 'I can't possibly believe, because Joseph Smith taught and practiced plural marriage.' Well, there are lots of women who knew Joseph Smith personally, who still knew he was a prophet of God, even after he taught and practiced plural marriage.

There's a lot of men, too, who resisted the idea, and said, 'No, this can't be right,' but then received a witness from God.

So hopefully that helps us give us some peace, but I think it's important to credit the men and women who practiced it with the fact that they felt from God that what they were doing was what God wanted them to do. And I can't determine that for them. That's something that only they know whether or not they've had that experience from God.

CBF: Thank you.

GD: You're welcome.