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Big Trouble in River City: *American Crucifixion* and the Defaming of Joseph Smith

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BIG TROUBLE IN RIVER CITY: AMERICAN CRUCIFIXION AND THE DEFAMING OF JOSEPH SMITH

Craig L. Foster and Brian C. Hales

Review of Alex Beam. *American Crucifixion: The Murder of Joseph Smith and the Fate of the Mormon Church*. PublicAffairs, 2014. 352 pp.

Abstract: On April 22, 2014, PublicAffairs, an imprint of a national publisher Persues Books Group, released American Crucifixion: The Murder of Joseph Smith and the Fate of the Mormon Church, authored by Alex Beam. Beam, who openly declared he entered the project without personal biases against Joseph Smith or the Latter-day Saints, spent a couple of years researching his work, which he declares to be “popular non-fiction” and therefore historically accurate. This article challenges both of these assertions, showing that Beam was highly prejudiced against the Church prior to investigating and writing about events leading up to the martyrdom. In addition, Beam’s lack of training as an historian is clearly manifested in gross lapses in methodology, documentation, and synthesis of his interpretation. Several key sections of his book are so poorly constructed from an evidentiary standpoint that the book cannot be considered useful except, perhaps, as well-composed historical fiction.

In the opening scene of *The Music Man*, several salesmen complain about a questionable salesman named Harold Hill:

SALESMAN 5:

What's the fellow's line?

SALESMAN 4:

What's his line?

CHARLIE:

He's a fake and he doesn't know the territory ...

SALESMAN 2:

No, the fellow sells bands, boys' bands. I don't know how he does it but he lives like a king and he dallies and he gathers and he plucks and shines and when the man dances, certainly boys, what else? The piper pays him! ...

CHARLIE:

But he doesn't know the territory!¹

While Alex Beam is certainly not a fraud, and he doesn't sell musical instruments to boys' bands, perhaps the same could be said about him and his recent foray into Mormon history with *American Crucifixion: The Murder of Joseph Smith and the Fate of the Mormon Church*. He doesn't know the territory. He has a readable style and excellent sense of how to write an exciting story, but ultimately — when it comes to Mormon history — he just doesn't know the territory. This fact became painfully obvious as we read Beam's book.

American Crucifixion is not Alex Beam's first treatment of Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He has touched upon the subject in the course of his work as a news reporter and columnist. Beam has had an impressive career in journalism, working for *Newsweek* and *BusinessWeek*, where he served for a time as Moscow bureau chief before finally joining *The Boston Globe*, where he has

1 Special thanks to Gregory L. Smith for his insight and advice. "Music Man Lyrics—Rock Island Lyrics," *MetroLyrics*, accessed June 26, 2014, <http://www.metrolyrics.com/rock-island-lyrics-music-man.html>

remained for more than a quarter century. Furthermore, he has authored two novels set in Russia and two works of non-fiction, *Gracefully Insane: Life and Death in America's Premier Mental Hospital* (2002) and *A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books* (2008).²

Some reviewers of these books described “Beam of ‘having an eye for definitive and damning details,’” but also objected to his “flippant, glib, and arrogant dismissal of weighty ideas.” The books did not seem to be “fully researched.”³ It seems that in spite of not knowing the territory adequately, he rushed headlong into each book with confidence and strongly-held opinions.

This appears to have been the case with Beam’s writings regarding Joseph Smith and Mormonism. In 1993, as Mitt Romney was gearing up for his failed senate campaign against Ted Kennedy, Beam described him as not only a successful businessman but “also a devoted father and church leader.” He then went on to write, “No one has anything uncharitable to say about him, so naturally I am suspicious. Too smooth, I say. I can’t get a grip on the man.”⁴

In the ensuing years, Beam’s suspicions apparently turned to dislike, and his column repeatedly indulged in needling personal shots at Romney. For example, while writing an

2 Wikipedia, s.v. “Alex Beam,” accessed July 7, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alex_Beam.

3 Julie J. Nichols, “Beam, ‘American Crucifixion: The Murder of Joseph Smith and the Fate of the Mormon Church,’” Association of Mormon Letters Discussion Board, Saturday, January 18, 2014, accessed June 10, 2014, http://forums.mormonletters.org/yaf_postst1624_Beam-American-Crucifixion-The-Murder-of-Joseph-Smith-and-the-Fate-of-the-Mormon-Church-reviewed-by-Julie-J-Nicho.aspx. Nichols’s well-written review noted the “responses to Beam’s earlier books” tended “to emphasize the entertaining, mildly sensationalist but not fully satisfying nature of the voice he brings to bear on his subjects.”

4 Alex Beam, “The Gifted Amateurs,” *The Boston Globe*, November 17, 1993, accessed June 27, 2014, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/boston/doc/294815772.html>.

article which criticized Bain & Co. as the “KGB of management consulting,” Beam wrote that it was “a visage that no amount of Mitt Romney-esque Mormon do-goodery or smiley-faced female CEO-dom will ever wipe clean.”⁵ Elsewhere, while reporting on a 2009 Massachusetts Republican meeting at which Romney spoke, Beam described him as the “Hair Club for Men lifetime president.”⁶

Whether Alex Beam had an interest in Mormonism before encountering Romney’s political ambitions or whether it developed as a result of this encounter is not known. What is known is that Beam appears to have a good opinion of Mormons in general. In 2005, for instance, while discussing a potential Romney presidential run, he wrote:

So what can Romney expect now, as he dips his toe into the presidential waters? No one is going to trash his religion unless they have to, meaning unless his candidacy shows signs of success. But I’ve already been pitched on a quirky column item about the funny garments Mormons wear while worshipping. How tasteful. Maybe I can make fun of Hasidic Jews’ curly forelocks and the pope’s curious headgear while I’m at it.⁷

Beam’s opinion of Mormonism, however, is not as positive. In a 2007 article, “A Mormon President? I Don’t Think So,” he mentioned Mormon “doctrines and practices that most

5 Alex Beam, “Worshipping the Worthy, But in Secret,” *The Boston Globe*, August 27, 1997, accessed June 27, 2014, <http://secure.pqarchiver.com/boston/doc/403878132>.

6 Alex Beam, “Partying with the State’s Other Party,” *The Boston Globe*, October 30, 2009, accessed June 27, 2014, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/boston/doc/405191113.html>.

7 Alex Beam, “Are We Ready for a Mormon President?,” *The Boston Globe*, July 21, 2005, as reprinted in *Worldwide Religious News*, accessed June 28, 2014, <http://wwrn.org/articles/17957/>.

Americans would view as strange,” and then he discussed the PBS special called *The Mormons*, which covered difficult subjects, including what he identified as “the ultimate red herring, ‘celestial marriage,’ Joseph Smith’s term for polygamy.” Although he mentioned how “the church has gone to great pains to promulgate prophet Wilford Woodruff’s 1890 declaration condemning polygamy,” he also referred to HBO’s *Big Love* and that *The Mormons* reported, “30,000 to 60,000 fundamentalist believers practice polygamy.” Beam ended the column by mentioning that PBS claimed 75 million viewers a week and commenting cynically that if one-twentieth of the audience watched *The Mormons*, “That’s almost four million men and women who will know more about the Mormon faith than Romney might wish them to know. It’s bad math for the Mittster.”⁸

Alex Beam’s political reporting demonstrates what can only be described as a fixation on polygamy and a deep dislike of Joseph Smith. In an article titled “A Big Win for the Mormon Church,” he spent almost the entire article discussing potentially embarrassing and challenging aspects of Mormon history: “For understandable reasons, Romney’s campaign literature failed to mention that he hails from a distinguished band of American outlaws.” Beam

8 Alex Beam, “A Mormon President? I Don’t Think So,” *The Boston Globe*, accessed June 17, 2014, <http://www.boston.com/ae/media/articles/2007/03/05/a-mormon-president-i-dont-think-so/>. Jim Geraghty, (“Battlefront 2008,” *National Review Online*, July 6, 2007, accessed June 17, 2014, <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/221511/battlefield-2008/jim-geraghty>) took Beam to task for blurring the distinction between modern Mormon fundamentalism and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He was not alone. Lowell Brown of *Article VI Blog*, in a post titled “Boy, the Boston Globe Thinks We Are Stupid,” March 5, 2007, accessed June 17, 2014, <http://www.article6blog.com/2007/03/05/boy-the-boston-globe-thinks-we-are-stupid/>, complained about Beam’s blurring the lines and suggested that “Beam is such a lazy journalist that he did not even go to the trouble of investigating the LDS Church’s position on polygamy.” Ironically, in another column Beam authored in 2011, he mentioned that “many Americans mistakenly believe that mainstream Mormons still practice polygamy. See Beam, “For the Love of Mormons,” *The Boston Globe*, October 7, 2011, accessed June 28, 2014, http://www.boston.com/lifestyle/articles/2011/10/07/for_the_love_of_mormons/.

then explained how Romney's ancestors had moved to Mexico to avoid prosecution for practicing polygamy. He further wrote, "Around the turn of the 20th century, the Prophets and Revelators who lead the Mormon church grew weary of defending their extremely peculiar institution — polygamy — against federal power. They experienced a revelation, if you will: If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."⁹

But Beam's strongest language regarding Joseph Smith and plural marriage is found in a review of John G. Turner's *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* for *The New York Times*. After introducing the subject, he then discussed bad history vs. good history and concluded Turner was "on the side of good history." His example of bad history was revealing:

For over a century, the church cleaved to 'faith-promoting' histories about heroic Joseph and Brigham, and the evil Gentiles who persecuted them. As recently as 19 years ago, Salt Lake's guardians of the Saintly flame excommunicated several prominent writers and historians for what the old-line Soviets¹⁰ would have called 'deviationist' points of view.¹¹

9 Alex Beam, "A Big Win for the Mormon Church," *The Boston Globe*, November 14, 2012, accessed June 17, 2014, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2012/11/14/the-great-mormon-etch-sketch/0pFVAp7Reis7fQyoM2QIJK/story.html>. Demonstrating Beam's continued disdain for Mitt Romney and his family, his opinion piece claimed: "If ever there was a gathering of latter-day Beaver Cleavers, it would be the squeaky-clean Mitt Romney clan, whom we briefly came to know over the last six months."

10 Beam's repeated invocation of the USSR — Romney's "KGB" group at Bain, or history as Soviet-era deviationism — smacks of rhetorical overkill. Does he *really* mean to compare Bain to the murderous thugs that ran Soviet intelligence or compare a church's right to separate itself from members violating its standards to the brutal bureaucratic bloodsport of the Soviet Communist Party? Does he think the two are on any kind of equivalent moral plane? We know far less about the USSR than he does, and we find the comparison offensive, since it trivializes one of the great moral evils of the last century.

11 Alex Beam, "Latter-day Patriarch," *The New York Times*, October 19, 2012, accessed June 18, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/>

After setting the stage by delineating Turner's good history vs. Soviet-style apologetic history, Beam then gently took Turner to task for not going far enough:

Can a biographer be too fair? Perhaps. Turner's judiciousness on the hot-button subject of polygamy is squishy in the extreme. He successfully explains the 'elaborate theological edifice surrounding plural marriage' but overreaches when he describes Joseph Smith's seduction of the teenage servant girl Fanny Alger as the prophet's 'first well-documented nonmonogamous relationship.' The business was more sordid than that. Their hasty coupling occurred in a barn on a haymow and was witnessed by Joseph's wife Emma Hale Smith through a crack in the door, according to Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, Emma Smith's biographers. Turner imbues their union with a dignity it doesn't deserve. More likely, it was a 'dirty, nasty, filthy affair,' as Joseph Smith's confidant Oliver Cowdery called it.¹²

By October 2012 Alex Beam had made his views known regarding both Joseph Smith and plural marriage. Whether he had read Don Bradley's excellent essay, "Mormon Polygamy before Nauvoo?: The Relationship of Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger," published almost two years before his Turner review, is not known. Bradley's essay reveals important new information regarding whether or not it was a plural marriage or a "dirty, nasty, filthy affair." But Beam either did not read or did not believe Bradley's findings.¹³ In what proves a foretaste of his

books/review/brigham-young-pioneer-prophet-by-john-g-turner.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

12 Beam, "Latter-day Patriarch."

13 Don Bradley, "Mormon Polygamy before Nauvoo? The Relationship of Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger," in *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy*, eds. Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster,

style regarding things Mormon, Beam invokes a late, second-hand, hostile witness (excommunicated apostle William McLellin) and then adds his own details (“hasty” coupling), which are nowhere in the documentary record. While this makes for vivid storytelling, it is not serious history — perhaps, dare we say it, it is even “bad history,” though not an infraction we’d compare to a Stalinist show trial.

This avoidance of anything that might alter Alex Beam’s pre-conceived notions of Joseph Smith, polygamy, and Mormon history illustrates his approach in *American Crucifixion*. Our review looks at the three areas of Beam’s book that seemed to be the most problematic:

Polygamy

Shortly after the book came out, Brian C. Hales wrote a detailed analysis of how plural marriage is handled in *American Crucifixion*, which is included in this review. Beam addresses Joseph Smith’s polygamy throughout the book, but particularly in Chapter 5: “Polygamy and Its Discontents.” From a scholarly standpoint, the chapter suffers from multiple weaknesses. Beam relies predominantly on secondary sources, quotes disputable evidence without seeming to have verified its reliability, and ignores historical data that contradicts his position. Further, he promotes narrow and often extreme interpretations of available documents, going beyond the evidence in formulating his conclusions.

While later chapters in *American Crucifixion* are generally historically accurate, this chapter is historically problematic. Beam presents Joseph Smith in Chapter 5 as an adulterer, hypocrite, and fraud. When Joseph is later killed in a firestorm

(Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 14–58. Brian C. Hales also addresses Smith’s relationship with Fanny Alger, demonstrating that it was a plural marriage. Brian C. Hales, “Fanny Alger and Joseph Smith’s Pre-Nauvoo Reputation,” *Journal of Mormon History* 35/4 (Fall 2009): 112–90.

at Carthage, the reader may lament the extra-judicial act but feel that Joseph got no less than he deserved because Beam has portrayed Joseph as a scoundrel who probably merited death, even if the legal niceties weren't observed.

Beam's version of Nauvoo plurality reads like nineteenth-century anti-Mormon historical fiction. It is peopled with one-dimensional comic book characters who often behave illogically and immorally. He classifies his book as "popular non-fiction" and affirms that non-fiction works should be accurate and truthful.¹⁴ Yet, in doing so Beam invokes a scholarly standard to which he simply doesn't measure up.

One of the greater weaknesses is Beam's tendency to repeat and rely upon secondary sources — Linda King Newell and Valeen Avery are quoted eight times; Richard Van Wagoner is quoted three times; and Richard Bushman, George D. Smith, Fawn Brodie,¹⁵ and Todd Compton twice each. In addition, he cites Michael Quinn, Andrew Ehat, Robert Flanders, Marvin Hill, and Connell "Rocky" O'Donovan. Admittedly, plural marriage is a complex topic and citing the opinions of authors who have written books and articles on the subject is to be expected. However, Beam appears to have taken this practice to the extreme, unworried about the apparent risks. He does not leaven these authors' agendas and perspectives with his own, independent review of the primary source material. This would be akin to a political reporter who interviewed a variety of sources about a hotly-contested bill but never bothered to check the actual text of the bill.

14 Alex Beam, interview between Alex and John Dehlin for *MormonStories* podcast, on June 9, 2014. Notes in possession of Brian C. Hales.

15 This count underestimates the influence of Brodie, however. As noted below (see footnote 51), Beam started his investigation of Joseph Smith by reading Brodie twice. It is small wonder, then, that he adopts her attitude and errors wholesale, ignoring more than a half century's worth of Mormon historiography in the process. George D. Smith's work likewise represents a reversion to Brodie's thesis and many of her errors.

What if the secondary sources are overly biased for or against Joseph Smith, or what if they misrepresent the reliability of some statement or conclusion? The secondary sources he quotes reflect just these sorts of weaknesses, which are only compounded when further filtered through Beam's storytelling. He becomes at best a tertiary source, which can tell us no more than the secondary sources upon which he uncritically and reflexively relies. One worries that he is simply finding in them what he already expects to find. Having located it, he looks and questions no further.

Unfortunately, the voice of plural marriage participants is almost entirely missing from Beam's reconstruction. The total number of primary sources referenced by Beam in Chapter 5 is nine,¹⁶ with only one being an actual Nauvoo polygamist (Helen Mar Kimball).¹⁷ The view of the Nauvoo polygamist is important, not only for balance but also for accuracy. At one point, Beam writes, "Smith's hypocrisy concerning polygamy was breathtaking" (102). Beam casually declares that Joseph Smith's hypocrisy was of "breathtaking" scope but does not tell us — if he knows — that Nauvoo polygamists could not detect it. Beam presents himself as an investigator possessing great discernment who, looking back more than 170 years, can detect "breathtaking hypocrisy" in Joseph's actions that apparently escaped Nauvooans such as Brigham Young, John Taylor, Eliza R. Snow, Zina Huntington, and other polygamy insiders. This reconstruction is less plausible because it is certain that most of those church members would not have stayed with

16 Primary sources include the *History of the Church* (4), *Times and Seasons* (4), Nauvoo City Council Minutes (3), William Clayton's journal (2), Helen Mar Kimball's *Why We Practice Plural Marriage* (1), Joseph Smith's journal (2), William Law's journal (2), Charlotte Haven's recollections (1), and a *Salt Lake Tribune* article (1).

17 The journals of Joseph Smith and William Clayton are quoted for historical events, but no discussion of the Prophet or Clayton's motives for entering plural marriage are included anywhere.

Joseph had they viewed him as Beam portrays. Even Fawn Brodie acknowledges: “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.”¹⁸ By ignoring the views of believing Nauvoo polygamists, Beam frees himself to reconstruct Joseph’s actions unhampered by the reality experienced by those men and women. But Beam does this at the risk of creating historical fiction.

Polygamy — Documentary Problems

There are many problems and lacunae in Beam’s approach to the primary sources, which address Nauvoo polygamy. We review only a few here.

1. Beam correctly writes that plural wife Mary Elizabeth Rollins reported that she was sealed to Joseph Smith for “time and eternity” (83).¹⁹ What is not mentioned is that her declaration occurred after the temple sealing ceremonial language had been standardized to use this expression. However, when directly asked about her supposed polyandrous relationship in 1905, she clarified: “My husband did not belong to the Church. I begged him and pled with him to join but he would not. He said he did not believe in it, though he thought a great deal of Joseph After he said this, I went forward and was sealed to

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

19 See, for example, Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, affidavit, March 23, 1877, in Scott G. Kenney Collection, MS 587, Box 11, Folder 14, Marriott Library (photocopy of manuscript); Mary E. Lightner to A. M. Chase, April 20, 1904, quoted in J. D. Stead, *Doctrines and Dogmas of Brighamism Exposed*, ([Lamoni, Iowa]: RLDS Church, 1911), 218–19.

Joseph *for eternity*” (emphasis added).²⁰ Several other evidences from Mary argue that this was a non-sexual, “eternity only” sealing.²¹ However, this information is not provided, and Beam later asserts that “time and eternity” sealings included sexuality, so readers might conclude that Joseph and Mary had conjugal relations and that Joseph practiced sexual polyandry. To date, however, no unambiguous evidence in support of this claim has been provided by authors who argue that the Prophet engaged in polyandrous sexuality. Neither have any such advocates addressed the important contradictory evidences.²²

2. When referring to the Joseph Smith–Fanny Alger union, Beam writes:

Joseph had been confiding his thoughts about plural marriage to his most trusted confederates throughout the 1830s. It seems that Joseph was practicing polygamy without benefit of clergy during that time. (85)

By ignoring important evidence of a marriage ceremony between Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger by mid-1835,²³ Beam portrays Joseph as an adulterer, not a polygamist, in the 1830s.

20 Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Remarks” at Brigham Young University, April 14, 1905, copy of original signed typescript, MSS 363, fd 6, HBLL, BYU, 7.

21 See Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner to John Henry Smith, January 25, 1892, in George A. Smith Family Papers, MS 36, Box 7, Folder 12 (John Henry Smith, incoming correspondence); Marriott Library; see also Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: History and Theology*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 1:421–37.

22 See Brian C. Hales, “Sexual Polyandry,” Joseph Smith’s Polygamy (website), accessed June 14, 2014, <http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/faq/sexual-polyandry/>.

23 Levi Ward Hancock, autobiography with additions in 1896 by Mosiah Hancock, 63, CHL; cited portion written by Mosiah, MS 570, microfilm. Andrew Jensen Papers [ca. 1871–1942], MS 17956; CHL, Box 49, Folder 16, Documents 1–2.

However, the evidences of a marriage are significant and deserve consideration by any serious scholar.²⁴

3. Beam treats Benjamin Winchester's 1889 account accusing Joseph Smith of immorality as reliable (85). Benjamin did not reside in Nauvoo and was not a polygamy insider. He was a difficult personality and had a stormy relationship with Joseph Smith and the Quorum of the Twelve. Joseph once accused him of telling "one of the most damnable lies" about him.²⁵ He was reprimanded several times and eventually excommunicated.²⁶ These observations do not mean Winchester was inevitably unreliable, but his interactions with Joseph were limited, and it can be shown he had significant biases. As a primary witness against the Prophet, Winchester's believability would be greatly strengthened with additional supportive testimony, which Beam does not provide and which does not seem to exist.

4. Beam reports that Joseph's practice of polygamy was a poorly kept secret in the mid-1830s. He writes:

In 1835, rumors of Mormon polygamy were so intense that the Saints' general assembly issued a statement asserting, "Inasmuch as this church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy, we declare that we believe, that one man should have one wife; and one woman but one husband." (85)

Beam falls into the antagonist's trap here because he cannot find any private or public complaints of polygamy against Joseph Smith or the Church in 1835 (or the years previous), so he

24 See Todd Compton, "Fanny Alger Smith Custer: Mormonism's First Plural Wife?" *Journal of Mormon History* 22/1 (Spring 1996): 174–207.

25 "Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: Minutes of Meetings" on *New Mormon Studies: A Comprehensive Resource Library*, CD-ROM (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1998).

26 Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 381.

must quote a denial issued by Church authorities as evidence.²⁷ Oliver Cowdery wrote in the *Messenger and Advocate* in 1836: “It would be a Herculean task to point out the innumerable falsehoods and misrepresentations, sent out detrimental to this society. The tales of those days in which Witches were burnt, and the ridiculous inconsistencies of those who directed the building of the funeral pyre, could be no more absurd than the every-day tales, relative to the conduct and professions of the ‘Mormons.’”²⁸ We would challenge Beam to find any published or private accusation of polygamy against Joseph Smith or the Church during that period. The statement “rumors of Mormon polygamy were so intense” goes far beyond the evidence — it manufactures evidence where none exists. (And, by ignoring this fact, Beam — like the earlier sources he apparently follows — fails to consider what else may have actuated the statement made by the general assembly.)

5. Beam intimates that Joseph’s practice of polygamy was well-known across the nation. He writes:

Nonetheless, defectors and apostates were reporting Joseph’s scandalous views to the world. “Old Joe’s Mormon seraglio” quickly became a stock phrase in the nation’s newspapers, despite the Saints’ heated denials. (86)

By positioning this quote next to discussions from 1835 and 1838, Beam implies such claims were common during that era. However, this statement was first made by the notorious John C. Bennett in July of 1842. If Beam wants to defend Bennett as reliable, we would be happy to be respondents.²⁹ The eastern newspapers may have picked up Bennett’s line (proof that gullible reporters eager for a salacious story are nothing

27 See Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:173–77.

28 Oliver Cowdery, editorial, *Messenger and Advocate* 3/1 (Oct 1836): 395.

29 See the extended discussion in Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 515–74.

new), but they were also incredulous regarding Bennett's overall claims (while Beam's credulity proves that matters do not always improve with time).

6. Beam repeats a familiar but flawed story regarding Emma and one of Joseph's plural wives:

In a famous incident, Emma is supposed to have surprised Joseph and another mansion lodger, the raven-haired poetess Eliza Snow, kissing on a second-floor landing. With her children begging her not to harm "aunt Eliza," Emma grabbed Snow by the hair, then threw her down the stairs and out into the street. (89)

Here Beam's scholarship approaches irresponsibility. He quotes Brodie and Newell and Avery but with less reservation than they expressed.³⁰ Importantly, he ignores several more recent analyses including Hales's, which shows that available documents are contradictory and describe impossible details.³¹ For example, Beam states the alleged altercation occurred in the "mansion," but Eliza never lived in the Mansion House, and the physical description of the Homestead (where she did live for a time) stairwell demonstrates it could not have occurred there. Also, there is no evidence Eliza was ever pregnant.³² Beam

30 Newell and Avery write elsewhere, in material ignored by Beam, "Faced with a folk legend, with genuine documents that tell no tales, and dubious ones that contradict themselves and the contemporary accounts, perhaps it is best for us to respond as we must to many paradoxes of our history: consider thoughtfully and then place all the evidence carefully on the shelf, awaiting further documentation" Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Linda King Newell, and Valeen Tippetts Avery, "Emma and Eliza and the Stairs," *Brigham Young University Studies* 22/1 (Fall 1982): 96.

31 See Brian C. Hales, "Emma Smith, Eliza R. Snow, and the Reported Incident on the Stairs," *Mormon Historical Studies* 10/2 (Fall 2009): 63–75.

32 Newell and Avery argue strongly against pregnancy in Eliza (compare footnote 30). Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1984), 136. Lorenzo Snow later stated, "My sister Eliza R. Snow, I believe, was just as good

addresses none of these issues, instead repeating secondary sources of dubious accuracy while ignoring the contrary data that even his flawed sources contain, apparently because it doesn't match the titillating and scandalous story he seems determined to tell.

7. Beam writes that Eliza admitted she had been “the Prophet’s wife and lover” (89). He provides no documentation and obviously missed Eliza’s 1877 letter to RLDS missionary Daniel Munns where she flatly denied having ever been Joseph Smith’s “carnal” wife but freely acknowledged that there were “several ladies now living in Utah who accepted the pure and sacred doctrine of plural marriage, and were the bona fide wives of Pres. Joseph Smith.”³³ During a June 9 interview with *MormonStories* podcaster John Dehlin, Laura Hales, wife of Brian Hales, addressed this lack of evidence for this statement during the question and answer period. Beam appeared nonplussed by the fuss regarding his use of the term “lover,” which he admitted was an ill-chosen word to describe Eliza’s relationship with Joseph. This speaks of his willingness to infuse dramatic prose into his text without regard to *documentary evidence*.

8. Beam also cites a “gentile visitor from Carthage” who asked Emma Smith her opinion regarding spiritual wives:

“Mrs. Smith, where does your church get the doctrine of spiritual wives?” Emma’s face flushed scarlet, the

a woman as any Latter-day Saint woman that ever lived, and she lived in an unmarried state until she was beyond the condition of raising a family. She was sealed to Joseph Smith, the Prophet; but she had no children to bear her name among the children of men (emphasis added).” Lorenzo Snow, “Discourse, May 8, 1899 by President Lorenzo Snow,” *Millennial Star* 61/35 (August 31, 1899): 548. See also Note that Snow and his audience would have regarded such a child as a great blessing and a source of prestige rather than as something shameful to be hidden.

33 Eliza R. Snow to Daniel Munns, May 30, 1877, Community of Christ Archives; emphasis in original.

guest reported, and her eyes blazed with fury. “Straight from hell, madam.” (89)

Evidently, this is a favorite phrase because Beam quoted it in his talk at the annual Mormon History Association Meeting in June. Unfortunately, the quotation is questionable. It is from a 1916 periodical *The Bellman* in an article written by Eudocia Baldwin Marsh. There Ms. Marsh quotes her sister word-for-word in a conversation that allegedly occurred over 70 years earlier in the Nauvoo Mansion.³⁴ It is doubtful because the Smiths did not move into the Mansion House until August 31, 1843.³⁵ At that time, the plural marriages were kept very secret. The quote is very late and secondhand, and the likelihood that Emma would have admitted to the clandestine religious practice and condemned it as described is even less plausible. This report probably better reflects what later non-Mormons, like Eudocia, thought of the practice, but the chronology and described openness of the drama are implausible in many respects.

9. Beam quotes Don Carlos Smith as saying: “Any man who will teach and practice the doctrine of spiritual wifery will go to hell: I don’t care if it is my brother Joseph” (89). The quote is from an 1890 recollection from apostate Ebenezer Robinson³⁶ and contradicts an account from Mary Ann West, who lived with Don Carlos’ wife Agnes after his August 7, 1841, death in Nauvoo. West recalled in 1892: “She [Agnes] told me herself she was [married to Joseph Smith].... She said it was the wish of her husband Don Carlos that she should marry him

34 Quoted in Eudocia Baldwin Marsh, “When the Mormons Dwelt Among Us,” in *The Bellman*, April 1, 1916, 375.

35 Joseph Smith’s diary entry for August 31, 1843 reads: “About these days was moving into the new house on the Diagonal corner....” (Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 411-12.)

36 Ebenezer Robinson, *The Return* 2/7 (July 1890): 302; see also 2/6 (June 1890): 287.

[Joseph].”³⁷ Either Beam’s research was inadequate to uncover this additional credible and pertinent evidence, or he knew of it and his biases prompted him to not include it. Regardless, “spiritual wifery” was not a term Joseph used to refer to plural marriage.

10. Beam cites a popular notion that cannot be reliably traced to Joseph Smith or any subsequent leader: “The larger the family that gathered to greet the Second Coming, Joseph taught, the greater the heavenly exaltation of all concerned” (91). Joseph never encouraged men to marry as many wives as possible in the hope that each wife would bring “greater heavenly exaltation.” This is speculation presented as a documented teaching.

11. Beam incorrectly states that Joseph Smith married Sylvia Session in early February 1842 (91–92). This interpretation portrays the Prophet as practicing sexual polyandry, but the timeline is not documentable and is contradicted by important evidences that had been published prior to Beam’s beginning his research for the book.³⁸

12. Beam states that Joseph Smith “did want to marry the Kimball’s fourteen-year-old daughter” Helen Mar Kimball (92). This is going beyond the evidence. Every known account states that Heber C. Kimball, Helen’s father, initiated the relationship. It is pure speculation to say Joseph “wanted” or otherwise sought to marry Helen.

13. One of Beam’s more inflammatory statements reads, “Apparently no one had prepared her [Helen Mar Kimball] for what Joseph would do to her when they were alone” (93). This insinuation of sinister and/or sexual behavior is pure fiction because there is no evidence Joseph and Helen were *ever* alone

37 Mary Ann West, deposition, Temple Lot transcript, respondent’s testimony (part 3), pages 521–22, questions 679, 687.

38 See Brian C. Hales, “The Joseph Smith–Sylvia Sessions Plural Sealings: Polyandry or Polygyny,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 9/1 (Spring 2008): 19–28.

and available documents strongly suggest that the marriage was never consummated.³⁹ These facts and perspective have been well-known for decades, and a responsible historian — or reporter — has a duty to let his audience know it.⁴⁰

14. Beam quotes Helen Kimball using a secondary source:

“I would never have been sealed to Joseph, had I known it was anything more than a ceremony,” Helen later told her mother. “I was young and they deceived me, by saying the salvation of our whole family depended on it.” (93)

Here Beam inaccurately reports that the conversation occurred between Helen and her mother Vilate Kimball. However, the actual source is Catherine Lewis, an anti-Mormon writer who was the first woman to describe the Nauvoo Temple ceremony in an 1848 exposé.⁴¹ The quotation is questionable on several levels. For example, it is implausible that Helen would ever have used accusatory language against her parents or Joseph Smith at that or any other time of her life.

15. Beam’s treatment of Joseph’s interactions with Sarah Pratt is remarkably one-sided (94). There is strong evidence that Sarah was sexually involved with John C. Bennett⁴² and that Joseph tried to intervene in order to help her and her

39 Hales, Joseph Smith’s Polygamy, 1:286–98.

40 In 1981, Stanley Kimball described the relationship as “unconsummated.” Stanley B. Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 9; see also Stanley B. Kimball, “Heber C. Kimball and Family, the Nauvoo Years,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 15/4 (Summer 1975): 466.

41 Catherine Lewis, *Narrative of Some of the Proceedings of the Mormons; Giving an Account of their Iniquities* (Lynn, Mass: by the author, 1848), 19.

42 See J. B. Backenstos, “Affidavit of J. B. Backenstos,” *Affidavits and Certificates, Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett’s Letters*, Nauvoo, Illinois, Aug. 31, 1842; Backenstos, *Affidavits and Certificates*, letter from Letter of Stephen H. Goddard to Orson Pratt, July 23, 1842.

husband Orson Pratt, an apostle who was serving a mission in England.⁴³ Beam ignores these details, and as a consequence, he fails to adequately portray the entirety of events. Instead, he opts to discuss a very narrow selection of available evidence in order to portray Joseph as immoral.

16. Beam's discussion of Joseph and the Laws, William and Jane, is even more precarious than that of Sarah Pratt. As Hales has exhaustively documented in *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: History and Theology*, five different scenarios regarding their interactions can be supported, depending upon the evidence an author chooses to cite. In that publication, Hales warns future writers like Beam: "Authors who choose to report on the relationship between the Prophet and the Laws are wise to not selectively quote any one set of historical data to the exclusion of the contradictory documents."⁴⁴ Obviously Beam was unaware of this warning, but it was issued precisely to authors like him who choose to selectively cite the historical record in order to concoct a story to their liking that is at best incomplete and at worst deceptive.

Beam begins his discussion of the Laws stating plainly: "Joseph tried to seduce the wife of his second counselor, William Law" (94). Is there evidence to support this? Yes, an entry in Law's journal: "He [Joseph] has lately endeavored to seduce my wife and has found her a virtuous woman."⁴⁵ Beam quotes this line, but in an unfortunate lapse of journalistic ethics and historical practice, he fails to inform his audience that the line is crossed out. What is the significance of the strikeout? We don't know, but good scholarship requires that he divulge this detail. Is there evidence to contradict the accusation? Yes,

43 See the statement of Mary Ettie V. Coray Smith in Nelson Winch Green, *Fifteen Years Among the Mormons: Being the Narrative of Mrs. Mary Ettie V. Smith* (New York: D.W. Evans, 1860), 31.

44 Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:221; see also 221–31.

45 Lyndon W. Cook, *William Law* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Co., 1994), 53. In the typescript, the entry is crossed out but apparently clearly legible.

a contemporaneous journal entry from Alexander Neibaur records that Jane approached Joseph.⁴⁶ In addition, Law's son said that if Joseph had tried to seduce Jane, his father would "have shot his head off. No man can be more delicate and conscientious about the relations of husband and wife and more apt to be terrible in such a case, than my father."⁴⁷

17. Beam alleges that by May of 1843: "Polygamy was rapidly becoming the worst-kept secret in Nauvoo" (98). To support his view, he quotes non-member Charlotte Haven who learned that George J. Adams had married a plural wife in England. She wrote, "I cannot believe Joseph will ever sanction such a doctrine." In fact, Adams was not a polygamy insider and his behavior had nothing to do with authorized polygamy secretly being practiced in Nauvoo at the time. While authors may choose to ignore the difference between authorized plural marriage and other unauthorized relationships, Joseph Smith taught unauthorized unions were not valid and were considered adulterous (see D&C 132:7, 18). Adams was promptly brought before the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve on May 27, 1843. There he apparently confessed the sin of adultery and was forgiven. Minutes from the meeting record Joseph Smith as saying, "Brother Adams ... has started anew, and let all present hold their tongues and only say that Elder Adams has started anew."⁴⁸ Importantly, Associate Church President Hyrum Smith did not learn about the principle of plural marriage until the day prior to George J. Adam's trial.⁴⁹ Similarly, Second Counselor William Law did not learn of it until the middle of 1843.⁵⁰ In other words, Beam alleges that "polygamy was rapidly

46 Alexander Neibaur, diary, May 24, 1844, CHL.

47 "The Law Interview," *The Daily Tribune*, Salt Lake City, July 31, 1887.

48 "Quorum of the Twelve Apostles," *New Mormon Studies*.

49 George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 106.

50 See William Law, affidavit dated July 17, 1885. Quoted in Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy* (Cincinnati: The Standard

becoming the worst-kept secret” in Nauvoo in May of 1843, yet Hyrum Smith and William Law were either unaware or had just barely learned of it. In light of their lofty Church callings and their closeness to the Prophet, one wonders how far the alleged rumors had actually spread. Nevertheless, a case of adultery that began in England is valueless as evidence for the spread of knowledge regarding Nauvoo polygamy. It is obvious from Beam’s own quote from Charlotte Haven that she was unaware in May of 1843 of the “worst-kept secret in Nauvoo,” because she then did not believe that Joseph Smith would “ever sanction such a doctrine” of polygamy.

18. Beam also includes an even more dubious claim regarding Joseph Smith and Robert D. Foster’s wife (100). He repeats a late anti-Mormon accusation but fails to reference all pertinent documents, including affidavits signed by Foster’s wife insisting that Joseph was not guilty of the charges or anything akin to them.⁵¹

Scholars (and members who believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet) would have desired a higher standard of writing and historical analysis for Chapter 5 — one that portrayed the historical record more accurately. Indeed, the prejudices and weaknesses manifested by Beam, particularly in the second half of the chapter, are so egregious that it is unlikely that even the most militant of anti-Mormon writers would be able to make any suggestions to strengthen the antagonistic message found within those pages. They will likely appreciate and perhaps even applaud the fact that Beam doesn’t seem to know the territory at all.

Joseph Smith

These are not the only problems with Alex Beam’s interpretation of Joseph Smith. A telling potential problem with Beam’s book

Publishing Co., 1914), 126.

51 Reproduced in *History of the Church*, 6:271.

is that he seems to be almost proud that he is not up to date with his sources, displaying an embarrassing lack of understanding of both the sources and the importance of historical research. For example, he states that “Smith had between thirty-three and forty-eight wives, depending on who was counting.”⁵² Incredibly, Beam actually included Fawn Brodie’s 42-year-old claims as legitimate, source-backed estimates. In fact, the most recent source cited by Beam is George D. Smith’s *Nauvoo Polygamy*: “... but we called it celestial marriage,” which was published six years ago, but he ignores Bringhurst and Foster’s *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy* and, even more bizarrely, he leaves unmentioned Brian Hales’s three-volume, extensively-researched *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, which gives the most up-to-date and documented count of 35 plural wives.⁵³

It isn’t surprising that Beam would focus on Brodie, Compton, and Smith because, as he stated in a podcast interview, he had gone first to Fawn M. Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* to try to understand Joseph

52 Alex Beam, *American Crucifixion: The Murder of Joseph Smith and the Fate of the Mormon Church* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), 5, 91. On page 91, Beam states, “Scholars disagree on the number of wives Joseph had. Todd Compton estimates thirty-three; George D. Smith says thirty-eight; Fawn Brodie lists forty-eight; D. Michael Quinn counts forty-six.” Beam later explained, “I have a joko-serious footnote that scholars disagree about the number ... that’s straight comedy when you have Fawn Brodie saying that Joseph has thirty-seven wives and Mike Quinn saying that Joseph has fifty-one wives.” Russell Stevenson, “Podcast #10: An Interview with Alex Beam, Author of *American Crucifixion*,” Mormon History Guy: Mormon History for the Masses, accessed June 30, 2014, <http://mormonhistoryguy.com/2014/06/13/podcast-10-interview-alex-beam-author-american-crucifixion/>.

53 Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster, eds., *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy* (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2010); Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 2:263–315; and Hales, “Biographies of Joseph’s Wives,” *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy* (website), accessed June 30, 2014, <http://josephsmithspolygamy.org/history-2/plural-wives-overview/>.

Smith, reading her book twice.⁵⁴ He explained, “I wonder if any non-Mormon comes to Joseph Smith other than through Fawn Brodie’s biography.” He continued on, perhaps a little naively, “Brodie is the nightmare from which Mormonism is trying to awake.” Beam later explained about his portrayal of Mormon polygamy, “I’m definitely leaning on George Smith’s work and Todd Compton’s work.”⁵⁵

54 Stevenson, “Podcast #10.” See also Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945). Virtually no claim of Brodie’s has gone uncontested, and to rely on her uncritically can only be called historical malpractice. For a sample of the nightmare from which those who wish to rely on Brodie must wake, see Hugh Nibley, *No Ma’am, That’s Not History: A Brief Review of Mrs. Brodie’s Reluctant Vindication of a Prophet She Seeks to Expose* (1946, reissued 1959); reprinted in Hugh Nibley, *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass: The Art of Telling Tales about Joseph Smith and Brigham Young*, ed. David J. Whittaker (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 3–45, esp. 33–35. Louis Midgley has written extensively on Brodie. See his “The Brodie Connection: Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Smith,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 20/1 (Fall 1979): 59–70; “F. M. Brodie ‘The Fasting Hermit and Very Saint of Ignorance’: A Biographer and Her Legend,” review of *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, by Fawn McKay Brodie,” *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 147–230; Louis Midgley, “The Legend and Legacy of Fawn Brodie,” review of *Fawn McKay Brodie: A Biographer’s Life* by Newell G. Bringhurst, *FARMS Review of Books* 13/1 (2001): 21–72; see also Glen J. Hettinger, “Comments on Critical Exchanges,” review of “A Hard Day for Professor Midgley: An Essay for Fawn McKay Brodie,” *FARMS Review of Books* 13/1 (2001), 91–126. Additional useful material is also available in Gary F. Novak, review of “Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History” by John Phillip Walker, *FARMS Review of Books* 8/1 (1996): 122–67. See also a much more informed, non-LDS historian’s take on Brodie in Charles L. Cohen, “No Man Knows My Psychology: Fawn Brodie, Joseph Smith, and Psychoanalysis,” *BYU Studies* 44/1 (2005): 55–78. A valuable volume on both the strengths and weaknesses of Brodie’s work is Newell G. Bringhurst, ed., *Reconsidering ‘No Man Knows My History’: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996).

55 Stevenson, “Podcast #10.” See Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1997) and Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*. To read about the serious flaws and problems of Smith’s *Nauvoo Polygamy*, see Craig L. Foster, “*Nauvoo Polygamy*: ‘... but we called it celestial marriage,’ A Review,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 11/1 (Spring 2010): 155–59 and Gregory L. Smith, “George D. Smith’s *Nauvoo Polygamy*,” *FARMS Review* 20/2 (2008): 37–123.

Plural marriage, particularly during the Nauvoo period, is a complex issue with many twists and turns. Even those who have studied the subject for years sometimes have difficulty navigating the difficulties of this subject. Therefore, it is not surprising that Alex Beam, either unaware of or unconcerned by the complexities and sometimes contradicting evidences, makes mistakes and demonstrates an open and unrepentant, unapologetic bias about the subject.

In an interview, Beam repeatedly complimented himself by proudly stating he “really tried to find a middle road,” and even though people had asked him why he just didn’t come right out and call Joseph Smith a sexual predator, he wanted to leave it to others to make up those kinds of names for Smith. He made sure to let the listeners know that he “stopped well short of using the term lecherous conduct” about Smith’s marriages and that he “stopped well short of calling Joseph Smith a dirty old man ... or whatever.”⁵⁶

Unfortunately, in spite of his declarations that he took the middle of the road and didn’t write his book in a voice that was derisive of Joseph Smith,⁵⁷ there were too many examples of the opposite. Perhaps one of the most inane statements in Beam’s book involved Joseph Smith and Jane Law: “Most likely he lusted after the beautiful Jane Law, and intended to exercise his *droit du seigneur*.”⁵⁸

This statement is irresponsible on several levels. Firstly, even suggesting that Joseph Smith wanted to exercise his *droit du seigneur* on Jane Law is, to say the least, ludicrous. The phrase “droit du seigneur,” also known as *prima nocta*, was a putative legal right allowing the lord of a medieval estate to

56 Stevenson, “Podcast #10.”

57 Stevenson, “Podcast #10.”

58 Beam, *American Crucifixion*, 97.

take the virginity of his serfs' maiden daughters."⁵⁹ The idea of Joseph Smith deflowering Jane Law, by then mother of between four and six children, before her wedding night is absurd and indicates either complete ignorance or simple intent to privilege a memorable phrase over historical or journalistic accuracy. Secondly, Beam's historical naïveté is highlighted by the fact that knowledgeable historians have long discounted the silly myth of a lord being able to deflower all of the virgins within his demesne before their wedding night.⁶⁰ Thirdly, Joseph Smith was not a medieval lord, and the Latter-day Saints were not his vassals. He could not, even if he desired, have exercised such a demand. Finally, there is no evidence that Joseph saw plural relationships in the kind of salacious light that Beam seems to favor.

But the sexual innuendo doesn't stop with the above instance. As an example of how fair he had been, Beam stated that he had used the word "priapic" only once.⁶¹ This purported example of authorial restraint is found in Chapter 13 where he writes, "At the same time, it was whispered that Rigdon wanted to put 1,000 miles between his attractive twenty-one-year-old daughter Nancy and the priapic Nauvoo polygamists."⁶² The

59 Wikipedia, s.v. "Droit du seigneur," accessed June 30, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Droit_du_seigneur.

60 See Alain Boureau, *The Lord's First Night: The Myth of the Droit de Cuissage*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998); H. L. B., "VARIÉTÉS: Le droit du seigneur," *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de France*, 2 Série, T. 1 (Jan. 1857–Dec. 1858): 117–27; and P. K., "The Jus Primæ Noctis," *Folklore* 9/4 (Dec., 1898): 366–68. Even Vern L. Bulough in "Jus primæ noctis or droit du seigneur," *The Journal of Sex Research* 28/1 (February 1991): 163–66, who argues that there were probably some cases of rape acknowledges but other researchers have found no evidences of laws allowing for such behavior. In fact, "the most exhaustive survey was made by Karl Schmidt (1881) who held that the whole idea was only a learned superstition" (p. 163). For more in-depth discussion of Karl Schmidt's analysis, see Karl J. Schmidt, *Jus Primæ Noctis: Eine Geschichtliche Untersuchung* (Freiburg: Harden, 1881).

61 Stevenson, "Podcast #10."

62 Beam, *American Crucifixion*, 237.

word priapic means “of or relating to male sexuality and sexual activity” and to “(of a male) have a persistently erect penis.”⁶³ Such a statement is not only offensive for its suggestiveness but is also overly sensationalistic given there were only 29 men and 50 women involved in polygamous unions out of a population estimated to be around 10,000 at the time of Joseph’s murder.⁶⁴

Continuing with the sexual innuendo, Beam claims of the young women who worked in the Mansion House that Joseph Smith “ended up marrying them all, and the opera bouffe opening and closing of doors bedroom doors tormented his long-suffering wife Emma.”⁶⁵

Furthermore, while Beam mentions that the minimum age of consent for females in Illinois was 10 years old, but 14 in Nauvoo, he still seems fixated on the ages of the young women. Beam uses such terms and phrases as “teenager Martha Brotherton,” “mansion girls,” “teenage women,” “Richards married two teenage girls,” “[Smith] urged Richards to marry two teenage girls,” and “[Smith] did want to marry the Kimball’s fourteen-year-old daughter.”⁶⁶ But even these leading phrases are outnumbered by at least 10 uses of “seduce,” “seduction,” or potential or actual plural marriages described in terms of sexual advance or innuendo.⁶⁷

Thus in spite of Beam offering information about the legal age of marriage and consent, he still lets his 21st century sensibilities color his analysis and portrayal of Joseph Smith’s and others’ marriages. This is not surprising given that he has no historical training and no apparent understanding of how social and marital customs have changed by time and place. His superficial command of the facts was apparent in an

63 Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “Priapic,” accessed July 1, 2014, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/priapic.

64 Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:3 and 2:165.

65 Beam, *American Crucifixion*, 49.

66 Beam, *American Crucifixion* 48, 49, 90, 91, and 92.

67 Beam, *American Crucifixion*, 48, 93, 94, 97, 100, 101, 104, and 117.

interview in which he commented, “When Joseph is coming on to the Partridge sisters or the Lawrence sisters who are fifteen or sixteen — at the very least I try to put that into historical context.” Admittedly, this comment is from an interview and the actual ages of the wives may have slipped his mind. Or, perhaps given his narrow view of Joseph Smith’s wives, he has lumped the majority of them into a “young teenager” category. He did not get the ages of either set of sisters correct. Emily Dow Partridge was 19 and Maria Eliza Partridge was 22; Sarah Lawrence was 17, and Maria Lawrence was 19. Thus both sets of sisters were beyond what would have been considered young for marriage in 1840s Illinois.⁶⁸ Like the salesman in *The Music Man*, he doesn’t know the territory, so he leads his audience astray.

Problems with Historical Sources and Method

Many of Beam’s mistakes are silly missteps that are not serious in themselves but reflect this lack of understanding “the territory.” For example, while discussing how Mormons viewed the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, he quotes from an article in the *Lamoni Chronicle* without noting (or perhaps even knowing) that the *Lamoni Chronicle* was from a town founded by and used as the headquarters of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. It did not, therefore, reflect the views of the Utah-based Church.

Some mistakes are more serious, such as repeating without question the accusation that Willard Richards ordered Hosea Stout to murder Samuel H. Smith in order to keep him from being a threat to the leadership of Brigham Young and the

68 Remembering the Wives of Joseph Smith (website), accessed July 2, 2014, <http://www.wivesofjosephsmith.org/> and Craig L. Foster, David Keller, and Gregory L. Smith, “The Age of Joseph Smith’s Plural Wives in Social and Demographic Context,” in *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy*, eds. Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster, eds., (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 152–83.

Twelve Apostles. Beam states that Smith's death "has gone down in Mormon history as an ambiguous event or an unsolved crime."⁶⁹ D. Michael Quinn discusses Samuel Smith's supposed murder in *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*. While Quinn certainly did his best to make Samuel Smith's death a fascinating "whodunit" with plot, counterplot, and skullduggery galore, ultimately, even Quinn admitted, "This troubling allegation should not be ignored but cannot be verified."⁷⁰

This is an understatement. Not only was there no contemporary evidence or primary documentation to hint at foul play but also the initial accusations from William Smith (brother of Samuel) and Mary B. Smith Norman (daughter of Samuel) were made over 50 years after the events of 1844. Even Quinn recognized how weak his theory was, repeating "evidence does not exist to prove" that Samuel Smith was murdered. Beam, however, portrays this dubious accusation as reality, perhaps because juicy speculation is more exciting than a complex reality.⁷¹

Conclusion

While his book has many other problems, it suffices to say that Alex Beam's *American Crucifixion* is a disappointment. His attempt to study and understand the martyrdom of Joseph Smith falls short on grounds of accuracy, balance, and

69 Beam, *American Crucifixion*, 235.

70 D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 152–54, 383–85.

71 Ironically, while Beam accepts the supposed murder of Samuel Smith without any apparent questions or research of his own, he rejects the stories of the transfiguration of Brigham Young to look and sound like Joseph Smith, in part because, according to him, the manifestation "appeared in no contemporary accounts of Brigham's talk." Beam, *American Crucifixion*, 241. This would seem to represent an ideological bias rather than a consistent approach to historical evidence.

completeness. It fails as serious scholarship and is merely a popularized repetition of inadequate work that has gone before. *The Music Man* concludes happily with Professor Harold Hill being saved by an inexperienced but dedicated musical band of little boys playing their hearts out to the joy of proud River City townsfolk. Alex Beam's creation, however, leaves readers with an inadequate and biased examination of Joseph Smith and Mormon history. Not only did Beam not know the territory, but he also chose not to learn it. We are left with little but what his pre-conceived biases expected the terrain to look like. We suspect that any editor faced with a reporter who told a story involving living people with Beam's lack of due diligence would urge — or order — their underling to find a new beat. Mormon history is not Beam's beat; he doesn't know the territory.

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