

A New Look at the Alleged Little Known Discourse by Joseph Smith

KENNETH W. GODFREY*

Only in comparatively recent times have Mormon scholars taken a real interest in the authenticity of documents purportedly written by early apostles, prophets, and other leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One of the latest "forgeries," that can now be proved beyond reasonable doubt to be just that, is the so-called *Little Known Discourse by Joseph Smith*. Many thoughtful readers of this document have been troubled by its double standard of morality which speaks as an "unfamiliar spirit" when compared to the authentic writings of the prophet-founder of Mormonism. Supposedly given by the Prophet Joseph Smith at Nauvoo upon the subject of marriage, this sermon allegedly reflects the "law of God to Man."¹

The *Discourse* reads, "The Prostitution of the body after marriage constitutes adultery; but alienation of the mind or affection from her husband constitutes fornication in a married woman." And, "If the mind of the wife which is equally bound by the body to obey, and be in subjection in all things by the spiritual nature of that covenant [marriage], becomes alienated from her husband, she commits fornication against her husband; because the mind of the wife was bound to yield obedience and submission to her husband in all things, as well as the body, by the spiritual nature of that covenant." And again, "When a woman apostatizes in spirit from her husband she then commits fornication against the spiritual law of marriage, and in no other way can a married woman commit fornication." The *Discourse* declares that the wife is the property of the husband and should obey his will: "The wife has no right

*Dr. Godfrey, division coordinator of seminaries and institutes in Arizona and New Mexico, has published in *BYU Studies*, *Illinois Historical Quarterly*, *Dialogue*, *The Instructor*, and *The Improvement Era*. His special interest is Church history in Nauvoo.

¹Taken from *A Little Known Discourse by Joseph Smith*, copy in possession of the author.

to teach, admonish, reprove, rebuke, or to exercise any kind of dictation whatever. He is her head and she should be guided by the head. If the wife wants to know anything, let her ask her husband at home. She, therefore, has the right of petition, and this is a right that all who are governed should possess.”

Should a woman become alienated from her husband, he has the right and is justified by God in “putting her away,” meaning divorcing her; but she has no right to sue for divorcement should the husband be at fault. The printed *Discourse* further states:

When the Church rebels against her lawful husband and Master, Jesus Christ, and will not submit to him in all things, she then commits fornication against him, and this is the plain sense of the matter. So, in the case of the wife, when she refuses cheerfully to submit to her husband in all things When she ceases to revere her husband and believe in him, then she commits fornication against him, even as the false Church has against Christ and in no other possible way can she commit this act. It then becomes the right of her husband to write her a bill of divorcement according to the strict letter of the law of God, given by Moses, and to put her away, unless she repent.

Children born under the marriage covenant while the wife is in “rebellion” against her husband are not entitled nor qualified to enter into the congregation “of the Lord until the tenth generation.”

Rather strangely the *Discourse* is relatively silent regarding the responsibilities of the husband and it is awkwardly one-sided. Such statements as those quoted above have caused not a few Mormon wives to react negatively to this speech ascribed to the prophet-founder of the LDS Church. At least a few husbands have felt alienated by the spirit as well as the content of the *Discourse*. But before commenting further let us turn our attention to another document.

In the 1840's it was reported that because of opposition on the part of a number of members of the Church, Joseph Smith assigned Udney H. Jacobs the task of searching the scriptures for passages that would sanction polygamy. The resulting tract was printed in 1842 bearing the name of Joseph Smith's printing company and is called *An Extract, From a Manuscript Entitled The Peace Maker Or The Doctrine Of*

The Millennium. In commenting on this document John D. Lee wrote:

During the winter [1842] Joseph, the Prophet, set a man by the name of Sidney [sic] Hay Jacobs to select from the Old Bible scriptures as pertained to polygamy, or celestial marriage, to write it in pamphlet form, and to advocate that doctrine. This he did as a feeler among the people, to pave the way for celestial marriage.²

That the populace was aroused by the contents of the Jacobs tract is evidenced by the fact that Joseph Smith, in an article published in the *Times and Seasons*, December 1, 1842, denied that he was in any way responsible for the contents of the *Peace Maker*. The Mormon leader wrote:

There was a book printed at my office, a short time since, written by Udney H. Jacobs, on marriage, without my knowledge; and had I been apprised of it, I should not have printed it; not that I am opposed to any man enjoying his privileges; but I do not wish to have my name associated with the authors, in such an unmeaning rigamarole of nonsense, folly, and trash.

(signed)

Joseph Smith³

Knowing about the *Times and Seasons* article, and aware that Joseph Smith's disclaimer also appeared in the other Nauvoo newspaper *The Wasp*, John D. Lee said that Smith denied his connection with the pamphlet upon realizing that "the excitement among the people" threatened to break up the Church.⁴ And since that time at least a few people have believed that Joseph Smith's denial was purely for public consumption not unlike his denials that the Church was practicing plural marriage.⁵

This past winter (1967-1968) Thomas G. Truitt of the Church Historian's Library compared the *Peace Maker* with the *Little Known Discourse by Joseph Smith* and found that the *Discourse* was remarkably like Chapter 8 of the *Peace Maker* "On the Law of Marriage." In fact page after page is

²John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled: The Life and Confessions of John D. Lee*, ed. W. W. Bishop (St. Louis: n.p., 1879), p. 146. Research discloses that Sidney Hay Jacobs and Udney Hay Jacobs are the same person.

³*Times and Seasons*, December 1, 1842.

⁴Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled*, p. 146.

⁵Kenneth W. Godfrey, *Causes of Mormon, Non-Mormon Conflict in Hancock County, Illinois, 1839-1846* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1967), pp. 90-110.

almost word for word except for some slight changes in grammar and paragraphing. It would be almost impossible for someone to have penned one document without copying from the other and since, as will be shown later, Jacobs wrote first it would seem that some over-zealous Mormon copied large portions of his pamphlet and pawned it off on a gullible audience as the work of Joseph Smith. I have checked Truitt's work and find it accurate for the most part, and this leads me to conclude that, excluding the first page which probably comes from one version of the "White Horse Prophecy," the two documents are the product of one pen. Truitt concludes as do I, "There are a few variations from the original through errors of typing, through additions, and obvious changes; otherwise these are almost identical in wording."⁶

Because of Truitt's work it is now apparent that the *Peace Maker* and the *Little Known Discourse by Joseph Smith* are the same document or at least written by the same hand. Yet because of John D. Lee's statement involving the Prophet Joseph with the former work, the question must be asked, "Did Joseph Smith write the *Peace Maker*?" Certain documents have recently come to light that bear upon this subject.

It seems that the *Peace Maker* was written at least as early as March 19, 1840, and was "designed [not for the Mormons but] for the people of the United States." In a letter to President Martin Van Buren bearing the date March 19, 1840, Jacobs attempts to persuade the President that he had written a document that would save the United States and reelect Van Buren. Jacobs boasts that he is "thoroughly acquainted with the religious principles and minds of every sect and denomination of men in this land," and with characteristic humility continues, "And I now offer to place this almighty power for the time being at your disposal; merely by a publication of the book alluded to."⁷

It would appear that the book in reference was the *Peace Maker* when we look at an 1851 letter from Jacobs to Brigham Young:

I cannot imagine why you suspected me unless it was that *I wrote* a pamphlet some years since entitled the *Peace Maker*—you have certainly a wrong idea of that matter. I

⁶Copy of Thomas G. Truitt's comparison in possession of the author.

⁷Udney H. Jacobs to President Martin Van Buren, March 19, 1840, in the Illinois State Historical Society Library, Springfield, Illinois.

was not then a member of this Church, and that pamphlet was not written for this people but for the citizens of the United States who professed to believe the Bible. (*Italics mine.*)⁸

The wording in both letters is very similar.

In the Van Buren letter Jacobs also states:

These Mormons know but very little of me; but Sir, I know them—and I know them to be a deluded and dangerous set of fanatics, dangerous I say, as far as their influence goes. Smith has returned home and I am informed is determined to throw his weight with all his deluded followers into the scale against you . . . I do not pretend to say that every vote in the union shall be thus influenced, but I say this that by the means which I hold in my power if assisted seasonably by your aid, shall throw such weight into the right scale as shall bring the other infallibly to kick the beam.⁹

When Van Buren refused to assist him, it appears that Jacobs then contracted to have Joseph Smith's printing establishment publish his work, which was done in 1842. Though Joseph Smith disclaimed any knowledge of or association with the contents of the pamphlet, people generally have doubted his disclaimer. But in January of 1844, Udney H. Jacobs wrote the Prophet a personal letter which he begins by saying:

I hope you will not consider this letter an intrusion—I have not to be sure the pleasure of a personal acquaintance with you nor do I know that I am worthy of that favor; yet I believe that I am worth saving. . . .¹⁰

Now how could Jacobs be unacquainted with Joseph Smith in 1844 if he had written a book for the Prophet in 1842, as John D. Lee claimed?

From the above evidence it seems safe to conclude that Jacobs, not Joseph Smith, wrote the *Peace Maker* and the *Little Known Discourse by Joseph Smith*. Consequently, neither of these documents should be viewed as binding upon members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They were, in fact, written by a nonmember of the Church.

⁸Udney H. Jacobs to Honorable Brigham Young, March 5, 1851, found in the LDS Church Historian's Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁹Jacobs to Van Buren, March 19, 1840.

¹⁰Godfrey. Original located in the LDS Church Historian's Library.