

The Practice of Rebaptism at Nauvoo

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Until recently, on the rare occasions when rebaptism has been mentioned in LDS histories, the central incident has been the rebaptism of Brigham Young and his fellow apostles in the Salt Lake Valley on 6 August 1847. All chroniclers of that event have left the impression that this was the first occasion in Mormonism where rebaptism for renewal of covenants was practiced.¹ The one author who acknowledges that the practice of rebaptism existed during the lifetime of Joseph Smith, also limited that practice to two functions: (1) those who were baptized for remission of sins prior to 1830 and who were rebaptized as members of the Church once it was organized on 6 April 1830, and (2) "some members of the Church who were in transgression were again baptized, without first having lost their membership by excommunication."²

On the other hand, a recent scholarly history of the LDS Church has noted:

For many years [in the nineteenth century] it had been common for members to rededicate themselves to building up the Kingdom through rebaptism. This practice was not considered essential to salvation but was a symbol of rededication. On other occasions the Saints were rebaptized as a symbolic gesture related to blessings for their health, entry into the United Order, preparation for marriage, and even for going to the temple if they had not been there for some time.³

As we study the records and journals we find this latter statement an accurate general description of rebaptism among the Latter-day

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¹William E. Berrett, *The Restored Church: A Brief History of the Origin, Growth and Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1936), p. 381; Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), p. 319; Carter E. Grant, *The Kingdom of God Restored* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955), p. 434; Preston Nibley, *Brigham Young: The Man and his Work* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1936), pp. 102-03; Russell F. Ralston, *Fundamental Differences between the Reorganized Church and the Church in Utah* (Independence, Missouri: Herald House, 1963), pp. 64-65; B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century I*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1930), 3:286-87; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History*, 27th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), p. 375; Orson F. Whitney, *History of Utah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1892-1904), 1:348-49; Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Kimball Family, 1888), p. 380.

²Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954-56), 2:332-37.

³James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), pp. 425-26.

Saints. Rebaptism was manifest during the lifetime of Joseph Smith, Jr. It was particularly prominent during the Nauvoo years and served many functions.

REBAPTISM FOR ENTERING A NEW ECCLESIASTICAL RELATIONSHIP

The earliest suggestion of rebaptism in LDS history was in the 1830 Book of Mormon description of the righteous Nephites being rebaptized at the command of the resurrected Christ when he visited them.⁴ Then, although Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had baptized themselves and others for remission of sins for nearly a year prior to the organization of the Church in 1830, the previously baptized followers of Joseph Smith were again baptized as members of the newly organized Church of Christ.⁵ These two examples have been described as necessary ordinances to introduce gospel followers into a new Church organization.⁶

Although the documents are fragmentary, there is evidence that during the Nauvoo period of the Church, previously baptized Latter-day Saints were baptized again when they moved from a distant branch of the Church to the Nauvoo area. Between 1841 and 1843, for example, ten members of the Church who moved to the Nashville, Iowa Branch were added to the branch by being rebaptized.⁷ The specific reason for this rebaptism is not indicated. It might have been an absence of records proving their prior baptism, or it might have been that the newly arrived Saints wished to demonstrate their rededication after making a long journey to the new branch.

REBAPTISM FOR REFORMATION AND REMISSION OF SINS

The earliest known case in which a person was rebaptized because he felt that he had faltered in his original baptismal commitments was on 7 May 1832. On that date David Johnson requested and received rebaptism because he "had lived unworthy of the communion of the Sacrament," and also because the man who had baptized him had been subsequently excommunicated. A year later in Kirtland, John Murdock's diary notes that he "rebaptized

⁴See 3 Nephi 12:1 and 3 Nephi 19:10-13.

⁵Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 1:76, note (hereafter cited as *HC*).

⁶Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957-1966), 3:205-06.

⁷Records of Nashville, Iowa Branch, after page 84 of Seventies Record A, CR3/3, Archives Division of the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. One of the 1843 entries for rebaptism was "Mary Willson colored woman."

Benjamin Bragg.”⁸ These may have been isolated cases in the 1830s, but during the Nauvoo years rebaptism for reformation and remission of sins was general among the Latter-day Saints.

William Clayton’s journal indicated that rebaptism for remission of sins was practiced at Nauvoo after Joseph Smith had remarked on the subject at April 1841 conference.⁹ However, the beginning of a general Nauvoo Reformation can be dated from the remarks of Hyrum Smith to the Nauvoo High Council on 18 January 1842, that “there was a general want of action in the Church—that he wanted every one to start anew.”¹⁰ During the afternoon meeting on Sunday, 1 May 1842, the authorities at Nauvoo expanded this into a call for a reformation within the Church.¹¹ By that time the Church at Nauvoo had become embroiled in rumors and disclosures about unauthorized sexual activities wherein men like John C. Bennett, Chauncey and Francis Higbee, William Smith, and others had exploited numerous women under the guise of “spiritual wifery.”¹² Although Bennett and others were disfellowshipped or excommunicated for this unauthorized conduct, the effect of the situation was such that many were urged to be rebaptized, as indicated when dissident Church member Oliver H. Olney wrote on 27 July 1842, “That when they do wrong They get rebaptized They then stand fair in the sight of God Altho they have done ever so bad This is the theme amongst those That are a wallowing in the mire.”¹³

Most of the Latter-day Saints who were rebaptized for remission of sins during the Nauvoo period were not receiving this ordinance for what was regarded as gross misconduct, but instead for a personal reformation and remission of those sins which the ancient apostle John said were part of the human condition.¹⁴ Surviving certificates of baptism from Nauvoo indicate that from

⁸Journal of Jared Carter, 1831–1833, p. 66, 7 May 1832, Church Archives; Diary of John Murdock, p. 25, 24 March 1833, Church Archives.

⁹James B. Allen and Thomas G. Alexander, eds., *Manchester Mormons: The Journal of William Clayton, 1840–1842* (Salt Lake City and Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1974), pp. 209, 212.

¹⁰Nauvoo High Council 1840–1842 Record, p. 35, 18 January 1842, Church Archives.

¹¹Oliver H. Olney Papers, 1 May 1842, Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

¹²*Affidavits and Certificates, Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett's Letters* (Nauvoo, Ill.; n.p., 31 August 1842); *Nauvoo Neighbor*, 15 May and 19 June 1844; *Latter-Day Saints' Millennial Star* 23 (12 October 1861):657–59; *HC*, 5:71–82 and 6:407; *Times and Seasons* 3 (1 August 1842):868–74 and 5 (15 March 1844):537–41; Daniel W. Bachman, “A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith,” (Master’s thesis, Purdue University, 1975), pp. 223–60. In the original affidavits before the Nauvoo High Council, William Smith and others were identified whose names were eliminated from the published affidavits.

¹³Olney Papers, 27 July 1842.

¹⁴See 1 John 1:8–10.

1843 to 1844 many members of the Church in good standing were rebaptized "for Remission of Sins."¹⁵ The general nature of this Nauvoo reformation is indicated in the enthusiastic letter of Jacob Scott from Nauvoo on 28 February 1843: "Nearly *All* the Church have been *Baptized again*, for the Remission of their *Sins*, since they joined the Church, I have also, by the hands of Br. Joseph (as he himself has been,) & I would advise Jan and you Mary, to attend to it as soon as you can have the opportunity of an Elder or Priest of the Church to administer it."¹⁶

RENEWAL OF COVENANTS THROUGH BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

Although baptism for the dead has traditionally been regarded as distinct from rebaptism, baptism for the dead at Nauvoo was also another form of rebaptism. Since 1840 sermons and revelations had provided authorization for already baptized members of the LDS Church to be baptized in behalf of their deceased friends and relatives.¹⁷ Among instances of this practice within the Joseph Smith family were Emma Smith being baptized for her father, Isaac Hale; Hyrum Smith for his brother Alvin; Lucy Mack Smith for her brother, uncle, and aunts; Don Carlos Smith for his "Friend" General George Washington; and Joseph Smith performing baptisms for the dead as late as 5 July 1843.¹⁸ Because each living proxy had already been baptized, the ordinance thus provided a rebaptism for the living proxy as well as a first baptism for the deceased, as indicated in a certificate dated 4 July 1841: "Catharine Fory renewed her covenant with the Lord, and was baptised in behalf of. . . ."¹⁹ Therefore, each person who was baptized in behalf of another person was simultaneously renewing his own or her own original covenants of baptism.

REBAPTISM FOR HEALTH

The frequent use of rebaptism at Nauvoo as a means of healing sickness may have derived from evidences of healing that occurred upon original baptism. For example, Rhoda Richards (sister

¹⁵Records of Baptisms at Nauvoo, CR 342/1, LDS Archives; Records of Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead, Book C, p. 2, Book D, 23 April 1844, Genealogical Society of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

¹⁶Jacob Scott to Mary Scott Warnock, 28 February 1843, Research Library and Archives of The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Auditorium, Independence, Missouri.

¹⁷HC, 4:231, 558, 568-69, 595; D&C 124, 128.

¹⁸Records of Baptisms at Nauvoo, CR 342/1; Records of Baptisms for Dead at Nauvoo, LDS Genealogical Society.

¹⁹Certificate in CR 342/1.

of Apostle Willard Richards and subsequently a plural wife of Joseph Smith) recorded in her journal that when she was baptized a member of the LDS Church on 2 June 1838: "In obeying the commands of the Lord I found great good. Health was improved, poison disappeared, the cake of ice was melted from my stomach. I found no need of Thomsonian medicine."²⁰ The first instructions concerning baptism for health were given by Joseph Smith when he dedicated the baptismal font of the Nauvoo Temple on 8 November 1841, as recorded in a journal of William Clayton:

Brother Samuel Rolfe being present, and being seriously afflicted with a felon on one hand president Joseph instructed him to wash in the font, and told him he would be healed, although the doctors had told him it would not be well before spring, and advised him to have it cut. He washed his hands in the font and in one week afterwards his hand was perfectly healed.

After this time baptism was continued in the font, and many realized great blessings both spiritually and bodily.²¹

Word of this use of the temple font was widely circulated and within a few months a Mormon in a distant branch of the Church wrote to the Prophet: "I have confidence that if I can be Baptized in the font I shall be healed of a hereditary disease I am, and ever have been laboring under. what is known by the name of sick head ache. I hope to be with the Saints soon."²² In time, baptisms for health were extended to the outlying branches of the Church, as indicated by the baptisms for health performed in October 1843 at Philadelphia by Jedediah M. Grant.²³

Although some were baptized for health purposes in the Nauvoo Temple font, still others resorted to the Mississippi River for this ordinance. The most notable example occurred when Joseph Smith baptized his wife Emma twice in the Mississippi River on 5 October 1842 because of her serious ill health, and then went with her on 1 November 1842, "to the temple [the font being the only part completed] for the benefit of her health."²⁴ The Prophet's anxiety for his wife to receive baptism for health was such that a non-Mormon businessman reported that Joseph Smith had interrupted a business interview because "Mrs Smith lay Dangerously ill at the time and they ware about to administer the

²⁰Journal of Rhoda Richards, 2 June 1838, Church Archives. Punctuation added.

²¹Journal of William Clayton, 1840-1845, p. 21, 8 November 1841, Church Archives.

²²Alphonso Young to Joseph Smith, 6 May 1842, Newell K. Whitney Family Papers, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

²³Philadelphia Branch Record, p. 99, RLDS Research Library.

²⁴HC, 5:167-68, 182.

Rights of Baptism to her.”²⁵ Apostle Willard Richards also baptized his wife frequently for her health.²⁶ Certainly one of the most extraordinary examples of baptism for health at Nauvoo occurred in December 1842, when Horace S. Eldredge cut holes in the frozen river seven mornings in a row for the purpose of baptizing John Bills for rheumatism and bleeding lungs.²⁷ For the Mormons of Nauvoo, baptism for health was both a priesthood ordinance and a dramatic demonstration of personal faith.

REBAPTISM IN CONNECTION WITH PLURAL MARRIAGE

Although the evidence is not as clear as with other forms of rebaptism at Nauvoo, it appears that members of the Church were also rebaptized as a preparation for, or a confirmation of, entering into plural marriage. Brigham Young recorded in his daily journal on 30 October 1843 that he baptized Sister Cobb and Harriet Cook, but the next entry for 1 November 1843 was obliterated in his journal.²⁸ Although it is regrettable historically, the obliteration may have been regarded as necessary during the troubled times of Nauvoo, for other records indicate that on this occasion Augusta Adams Cobb and Harriet Cook were sealed as plural wives to Brigham Young by Joseph Smith.²⁹ The association of rebaptism and plural marriage may also explain the following entry in the journal of Joseph Smith on 11 May 1843: “6 A.M. baptized [blank spaces] Sisters Snow, Louisa Bemen, Sarah Alley &c.”³⁰ According to later affidavits, Eliza R. Snow had become Joseph Smith’s plural wife on 29 June 1842, Louisa Beaman had become his plural wife on 5 April 1841, and Sarah Alley had been sealed as a plural wife to Joseph B. Noble on 5 April 1843.³¹ The blank space and “&c” of this 11 May 1843 entry in the Prophet’s journal may be explained by the affirmations of Emily and Eliza Partridge that they were sealed to Joseph Smith as plural wives on this date

²⁵John D. Gillett to Smith Tuttle, 5 November 1842, Gillett and Whittle Papers, Manuscript Section, Illinois State Historical Society, Springfield, Illinois.

²⁶Journal of Willard Richards, 15 April, 16 April, 27 April, 7 July 1843, Church Archives.

²⁷Journal of Horace S. Eldredge, December 1842, Church Archives.

²⁸Journal of Brigham Young, 1840–1844, 30 October, 1 November 1843, Church Archives.

²⁹Affidavit of Augusta Adams Young on 12 July 1869 and affidavit of Harriet Cook Young on 4 March 1870 in Plural Marriage Affidavit Books, Church Archives. They gave the date of the marriage as 2 November 1843.

³⁰Journal of Joseph Smith, Jr., 11 May 1843, Church Archives; HC, 5:385.

³¹Affidavit of Eliza R. Snow on 7 June 1869 and affidavit of Joseph B. Noble on 26 June 1869 in Plural Marriage Affidavit Books; Hazel Noble Boyack, *A Nobleman in Israel: A Biographical Sketch of Joseph Bates Noble, Pioneer to Utah in 1847* (Cheyenne, Wyo.: Pioneer Printing Co., 1962), p. 69.

in the presence of his wife Emma.³² These incidents may demonstrate that the frequent use of rebaptism in Utah during the nineteenth century as a preparation for endowment and sealing ordinances had its origin in Nauvoo practices.

THE HERITAGE OF NAUVOO REBAPTISM

As with nearly every public and private practice of Nauvoo during the lifetime of Joseph Smith, rebaptism was institutionalized by Brigham Young as he built the Kingdom of God throughout the Great Basin of the American West. A history of those practices of rebaptism after the departure of the majority of the Saints from Nauvoo is beyond the scope of this article, but as indicated by Allen and Leonard earlier, the practice of rebaptism for rededication, renewal, reformation, health, and preparation for temple ordinances continued throughout the nineteenth century. Although some rebaptism ordinances, such as for health and rededication, continued to be performed as late as 1913 in the temples, the LDS Presidency decided during the administration of Joseph F. Smith that since rebaptism ordinances had always been supplementary to such principles and ordinances as individual repentance, partaking of the Sacrament, and priesthood blessing of the sick, it would be wise to discontinue a practice that might tend to diminish the importance of the primary principles and ordinances upon which rebaptism was predicated. This has been done as Elder Bruce R. McConkie notes in *Mormon Doctrine*: "There is no need for and no ordinance of rebaptism in the Church."³³

³²Affidavit of Emily D. Young on 1 May 1869 and affidavit of Eliza Partridge Lyman on 1 July 1869 in Plural Marriage Affidavit Book, in *Deseret Evening News*, 18 October 1879, and in "Plural Marriage," *The Historical Record*, ed. Andrew Jenson, 6 (May 1887):233.

³³Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), s.v. "Baptism," p. 71.