



1-1-1992

## Benjamin Franklin Johnson in Nauvoo: Friend, Confidant, and Defender of the Prophet

E. Dale LeBaron

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

LeBaron, E. Dale (1992) "Benjamin Franklin Johnson in Nauvoo: Friend, Confidant, and Defender of the Prophet," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 32 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol32/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# Benjamin Franklin Johnson in Nauvoo: Friend, Confidant, and Defender of the Prophet

E. Dale LeBaron

Benjamin Franklin Johnson, the tenth of sixteen children of Ezekiel and Julia Hills Johnson, was born on July 28, 1818, at Pomfret, Chataqua County, in New York's western tip. The Johnson family was God-fearing due to the deep faith of their mother. Even as a young boy, Benjamin had faith in God and realized the necessity of prayer. He learned to read and write from studying the Bible at Presbyterian meetings. As an eleven-year-old boy, in 1829, Benjamin read in the Pomfret newspaper about "some young man professing to have seen an angel, who had shown and delivered to him golden plates . . . from which he had translated a new Bible. . . . [Benjamin] could hardly refrain from wishing or hoping it might be so."<sup>1</sup>

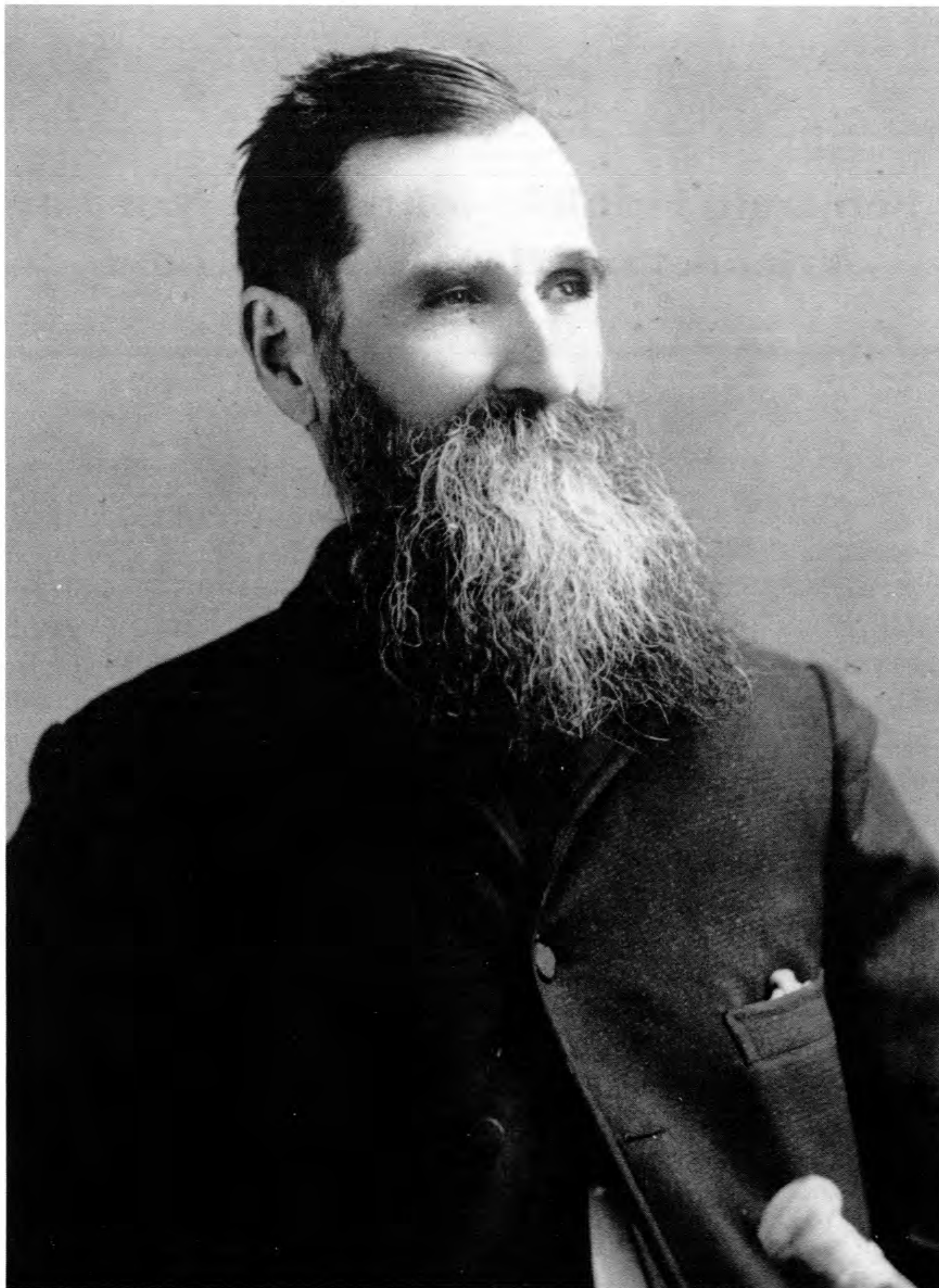
Benjamin first learned of the Church about the time of its organization in 1830 and, after studying its teachings, accepted the gospel the following year. He spent his impressionable teenage years experiencing the glorious and trying days of the Church in Ohio and Missouri. On August 1, 1839, Benjamin arrived in Commerce, Illinois, soon to become Nauvoo. There he observed and participated in many significant events: he rendered selfless service in times of sickness, served a mission to Canada, received important instructions from the Prophet Joseph Smith including the law of plural marriage, was called by Joseph as an original member of the Council of Fifty, and enjoyed a special witness of the mantle of Joseph falling upon Brigham Young. Benjamin was a loyal follower and defender of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and the next four Presidents of the Church.

---

E. Dale LeBaron is an assistant professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

*BYU Studies* 32, nos. 1, 2 (1992)





Benjamin F. Johnson (1818–1905),  
resident of Macedonia and confidant of Joseph Smith

(March 1887, Portrait Collection, Church Archives,  
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)



**Service in Time of Sickness**

Benjamin was ordained an elder by Apostle Heber C. Kimball on March 10, 1839, and was called to accompany the Twelve on their mission to England. Living in Springfield, Illinois, following the forced exodus from Missouri, Benjamin immediately began to save money for the mission. He left for Commerce on his twenty-first birthday, July 28, 1839.<sup>2</sup> He arrived at a time of general sickness and death among the Saints. Sickness and typhoid malarial fever were rampant.<sup>3</sup> Every house served as a hospital but lacked nurses for the sick. Hardly enough healthy people were left to bury the dead.<sup>4</sup> Benjamin had gained nursing experience during the march of the Kirtland Camp in 1838, so Joseph Smith immediately enlisted Benjamin's help. Benjamin later wrote:

I had come to Nauvoo, which it was then beginning to be called, on horse back and as houses of the Brethren were scattered for some distance up and down the river I kept my horses under the saddle and rode from house to house giving medacines [*sic*] . . . caring for and nursing the sick and for six weeks did not take off my boots or coat for one nights sleep.<sup>5</sup>

About this time the Prophet "had a violent attack of the prevailing sickness, and as Emma was in no degree able to care for him," he chose Benjamin as his constant nurse and companion. Regarding his care of the Prophet, Benjamin wrote: "It wholly devolved upon me & both day & night through a period of little less than two weeks, I was hardly absent from his room . . . and if any sleep came to me it was while lieing upon his bed or while sitting in my chair."<sup>6</sup>

Concerning Benjamin Johnson's service and the accounts of this time of general sickness in Nauvoo, Charles S. Sellers observed:

The Saints are generally well informed . . . but of the part which Brother Johnson took, none are apprised, a fact undoubtedly arising through Brother Johnson's modesty, and perhaps lack of friends, among those who write history. A more loyal man to duty than Elder Johnson was never known. Whenever duty called he never hesitated. He gave his time, all his life, and worked unceasingly for the good of his fellows. He was among the greatest men that our Church has known.<sup>7</sup>

Soon after the Prophet's recovery, Benjamin "came apparently nigh unto death through violent attack of the fever," and his "comfort was kindly looked after by the Prophet."<sup>8</sup> Near the first of October 1839, Benjamin received a letter from his family informing him that



his mother was very sick and advising him to come as soon as possible because it was doubtful that she would recover. Concerned for Benjamin's weakened condition, Joseph gave him a blessing prior to his departure from Nauvoo. Benjamin recalled the blessing in these words:

Placing his hands upon my head he seemed to pour out his Soul in Blessing me. He told the Lord I had been Faithful to care for others that I was now worn & Sick & that on my journey I would need his care and he asked that a Special Guardian might go with me from that day & Stay with me through all my Life.<sup>9</sup>

This incident strengthened the bond of love and friendship between the Prophet and Benjamin. Throughout his life Benjamin cherished this close association and friendship with Joseph Smith.

### **Missionary Service**

Despite great suffering, Benjamin arrived in Springfield, where his sickness continued for some weeks. On October 5, 1839, Apostles Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball came to Springfield on their way to England. Benjamin wrestled with the decision to join them on this mission. He later wrote:

When they saw how sick I was, and without money or suitable clothing they did not urge me to go but left it to my faith and desire. I much wished to go but was so diffident, had no missionary experience, and fearing they would feel me a burden I had not faith enough to start. They told me to take a mission east as soon as I was able and this I felt determined to do.<sup>10</sup>

From February 1840 to December 1841, Benjamin served alone as a missionary. Walking most of the way, he preached in Indiana, Ohio, Canada, and Pennsylvania. He experienced sickness, hardships, persecution, and some limited success—including seven baptisms and speaking in tongues to an Indian tribe. En route to Nauvoo at the end of his mission, Benjamin stayed with his brother-in-law, Almon W. Babbitt, in Kirtland, Ohio. Because Almon had remained in Kirtland to continue his business endeavors contrary to the counsel of the Church leaders, he was severely reprimanded in a revelation the Prophet received on January 19, 1841.<sup>11</sup> On October 2, 1841, Almon was disfellowshipped;<sup>12</sup> the rebuke upset him. Benjamin stayed in Kirtland temporarily to try to help his brother-in-law work through his problems. While there,



Benjamin met and courted Melissa Bloomfield, whom he married on December 25, 1841.

### **Return to Nauvoo**

On July 1, 1842, Benjamin and Melissa arrived at Nauvoo, where the Prophet warmly welcomed them. Benjamin discussed with him the business matters between Almon Babbitt and Joseph and expressed confidence that with the Prophet's arm around him Almon would remain true to the cause. This was the first time Benjamin had spoken to the Prophet about personal feelings and concerns of his own. Benjamin felt an increase of love from Joseph after Joseph expressed his love for and desire to help Almon. Joseph told Benjamin to bring Elder Babbitt to see him as soon as Almon arrived in Nauvoo.

Because of his integrity and respect for both men, Benjamin was able to be an intercessor in this problem: "When business matters were brought forward relating to notes bought from outsiders against him or the Church, Brother Joseph said to him, 'Now, Brother Almon, we will not disagree, for here is Brother Benjamin; you have all confidence in him and so have I; and now let us leave all our differences to him and stand by it, and be good friends forevermore,' to which Brother Babbitt agreed."<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin came to know Joseph Smith's personality quite well. Though the Prophet was "social and convivial at times," Benjamin recalled, "he would allow no arrogance or undue liberties and criticism Even by his associates was Rarely Acceptble & Contradition would Rouse in him the Lion at once For by no one of his Fellows would he be Superseded or disputed."<sup>14</sup>

Joseph trusted Benjamin enough to give him custody of legal documents, including those pertaining to Church properties in Kirtland. He asked Benjamin to remain in Ramus, Illinois, to serve as the agent for the Church there. Joseph gave Benjamin power of attorney, which he used until Joseph's death.<sup>15</sup> Benjamin's work in Ramus involved selling goods, keeping a boardinghouse, and supervising all the Church business for that town, which was second only to Nauvoo in size.<sup>16</sup> While Benjamin lived there, the friendship between him and the Prophet Joseph Smith became even more intimate, as Benjamin later explained:

The Prophet often came to our town, but after my arrival, he lodged in no house but mine, and I was proud of his partiality and took great



delight in his society and friendship. When with us, there was no lack of amusement; . . . and his fraternal feeling, in great degree did away with the disparity of age or greatness of his calling.

I can now see, as President George A. Smith afterwards said, that I was then really “the bosom friend and companion of the Prophet Joseph.” I was as welcome at the Mansion as at my own house, and on one occasion when at a full table of his family and chosen friends, he placed me at his right hand and introduced me as his “friend, Brother B. F. Johnson, at whose house he sat at a better table than his own.”<sup>17</sup>

Such favoritism aroused some jealousy among the local residents; the Johnsons were referred to as the “Royal family.” When Joseph learned of this epithet, he assured Benjamin that the title was appropriate; they were a royal family, as is every faithful family. Previously, Joseph had given a blessing to Benjamin’s mother, Julia, in which she was told “that not one of her children should ever leave the Church.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Instructions at the Hand of the Prophet**

Besides staying frequently in Benjamin’s home, the Prophet counseled and instructed him about many doctrines. In May 1843, Joseph Smith recorded in his journal: “Tuesday, 16 . . . went to Benjamin F. Johnson’s with William Clayton to sleep. Before retiring, I gave Brother and Sister Johnson some instructions on the priesthood.”<sup>19</sup> Included in these instructions were the teachings now contained in Doctrine and Covenants 131:1–6. Of these experiences, Benjamin wrote:

On April 2nd and May 16, 1843 the Prophet was at my house with Wm. Clayton as Scribe, at which time was written, in answer to questions asked, all of Sections 130 & 131 Doc. & Cov., and he then gave to us all keys of knowledge contained in Sec. 129 & 132 . . . before [they were] written.<sup>20</sup>

After visiting the Johnson home on Friday, October 20, 1843, Joseph wrote: “In the evening I gave instructions to Benjamin F. Johnson and others in relation to the blessings of the everlasting covenant and the sealings of the Priesthood.”<sup>21</sup> Benjamin later testified in an affidavit that on this date the Prophet “sealed my first wife to me for time and all eternity.”<sup>22</sup>

On another occasion, while Benjamin was “lighting him to bed one night,” Joseph showed Benjamin his holy garments and explained their meaning. He further gave some information regarding the



endowment and said that “Freemasonry, as at present, was the apostate endowments, as sectarian religion was the apostate religion.”<sup>23</sup>

### **A New Commandment**

In April 1843, the Prophet privately taught Benjamin a new doctrine that would greatly affect the rest of Benjamin’s life. After Joseph had stayed with the Johnsons overnight, he took his friend for a walk early Sunday morning. They stopped in an isolated wooded area. Benjamin recalled:

Here, as we sat down upon a log he began to tell me that the Lord had revealed to him that plural or patriarchal marriage was according to His law; and that the Lord had not only revealed it to him but had commanded him to obey it; that he was required to take other wives; and that he wanted my sister Almira for one of them, and wished me to see and talk to her upon the subject.<sup>24</sup>

Benjamin struggled between the shock of what he was hearing and his loyalty and faith in Joseph as a prophet. In describing his reaction to the Prophet’s message, Benjamin said:

If a thunderbolt had fallen at my feet I could hardly have been more shocked or amazed. He saw the struggle in my mind and went on to explain. But the shock was too great for me to comprehend anything, and in almost an agony of feeling I looked him squarely in the eye, and said, while my heart gushed up before him, “Brother Joseph, this is all new to me; it may all be true—you know, but I do not. To my education it is all wrong, but I am going, with the help of the Lord to do just what you say, with this promise to you—that if ever I know you do this to degrade my sister I will kill you, as the Lord lives.”<sup>25</sup>

Joseph smiled. He looked into Benjamin’s eyes and told him softly that he would never see that day. He promised that Benjamin would not only know of its truth, but would also fulfill the law and greatly rejoice in it. Benjamin then asked how he could teach his sister something he himself did not understand. Joseph told him that when he opened his mouth to talk to his sister, he would understand, light would come to him, and his mouth would be full and his tongue loosed.<sup>26</sup> In Benjamin’s words:

He also told me that he would preach a sermon that day for me which I would understand, while the rest of the congregation would not comprehend its meaning. His subject was the ten talents, “Unto him that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundantly, but from him that hath not (or will not receive), shall be taken away that which he hath (or might have had).” Plainly giving me to understand that the talents



represented wives and children, as the principle of enlargement throughout the great future to those who were heirs of salvation.<sup>27</sup>

In light of Benjamin's account of this instruction, it is interesting to note that the Prophet's history says that on Saturday, April 1, 1843, he traveled to Macedonia<sup>28</sup> and was "very joyfully received by Bro[ther] Benjamin F. Johnson."<sup>29</sup> Under the date of Sunday, April 2, 1843, Joseph "supped at Brother Johnson's" and later instructed the Saints. Among the subjects about which the Prophet preached, he discussed:

What is the meaning of the Parable of the scripture, "He that is faithful over a few things shall be made ruler over many? And he that is faithful over many [things] shall be made ruler over many more?"

What is the meaning of the Parable of the 10 talents?<sup>30</sup>

In contemplating speaking to his sister about this principle, Benjamin felt sick and filled with horror. However, to be true to his word, he arranged to speak to Almira privately:

I stood before her trembling, my knees shaking, but I opened my mouth and my heart opened to the light of the Lord, my tongue was loosened and I was filled with the Holy Ghost. I preached a sermon that forever converted me and her also to the principle, even though her heart was not yet won by the Prophet. And so I had great joy after my tribulation.<sup>31</sup>

That Benjamin and his sister could accept this doctrine, which so radically conflicted with their background, is evidence of the strong faith and confidence they had in their prophet. Joseph opened the scriptures to Benjamin so he understood that many of the great prophets of the Old Testament—including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses—lived the law of plural marriage. Benjamin testified: "With these teachings, accompanied by the spirit in which they were given, I was able to overcome my Puritanical ideas of Monogamic Marriage."<sup>32</sup> With Joseph's teachings, the subject that had seemed so dark to Benjamin now seemed most lucid and plain. Never again did he need evidence or argument to sustain this high and holy principle.<sup>33</sup>

Within a few days, Almira, at the request of the Prophet, accompanied Benjamin to their sister Delcena's home in Nauvoo. Delcena "had already been sealed to him [Joseph] by proxy."<sup>34</sup> Here they were met by the Prophet Joseph, Hyrum, and William Clayton. Of this meeting, Benjamin wrote:

Brother Hyrum at once took me in hand, apparently in fear I was not fully converted, and this was the manner of his talk to me: "Now



Benjamin, you must not be afraid of this new doctrine, for it is all right. You know Brother Hyrum don't get carried away by worldly things, and he fought this principle until the Lord showed him it was true. I know that Joseph was commanded to take more wives, and he waited until an angel with a drawn sword stood before him and declared that if he longer delayed fulfilling that command that he would slay him." This was the manner of Brother Hyrum's teaching to me, which I then did not need, as I was fully converted.<sup>35</sup>

After a little instruction, Almira stood by the Prophet's side and was sealed to him by Brother Clayton.

In seeking to provide a home for Almira, the Prophet entered into a business arrangement with Benjamin. As the legal business agent for Joseph, Benjamin was authorized to construct a large brick residence at Macedonia to be a mutual joint residence for Almira and for Benjamin's own family.<sup>36</sup>

Joseph also asked Benjamin for permission to marry his youngest sister, Esther, but when he was told that she was already promised in marriage, he dropped the matter. Benjamin suggested to the Prophet that Joseph might marry Mary Ann Hale, an orphan whom Benjamin's mother had raised and who was then living with the Johnson family. However, the Prophet replied, "No, but she is for you. You keep her and take her for your wife and you will be blessed."<sup>37</sup> Before leaving Nauvoo, Benjamin took Mary Ann Hale and Clarinda Gleason as plural wives. Throughout his life he was proud of having a wife who had been "given" to him by the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Benjamin's faith was firm in following his Church leaders. One long-time associate observed, "I never heard B. F. Johnson say anything that was contrary to the teachings of the authorities of the Church. He told me many times that if I always followed the leaders of the Church I would never go wrong."<sup>38</sup> Just prior to his death, Benjamin bore his final testimony to his family:

Children, listen to my last testimony. Joseph Smith was a Prophet of God, faithful and true to the end of his days. I know, I traveled with him, slept with him, lived with him. I was his Bodyguard, Private Secretary, and Business Manager for years. I have always loved and revered him and all his successors, as I know them all to be Prophets, Seers and Revelators. I was one of the first persons he mentioned plural marriages to and he asked for my sister, Almira. The Manifesto has been given by a Prophet, Seer and Revelator. It is just as binding on us as the first, for all the keys of the Priesthood are held by the President of this Church. May God bless you and help you to follow the leaders of the Church.<sup>39</sup>



Benjamin's testimony of the Manifesto in 1890, therefore, was as firm as his testimony of plural marriage in 1843.

Aware of what the public reaction would be if the doctrine of plural marriage were taught openly, Joseph sought to keep these teachings and practices secret and divulged them only to his most trusted friends. Benjamin later recalled that

“the Lord had Required him [Joseph] to take plural wives and that he had then thought to ask for some of my Sisters,”—The past with its conditions & influences began more fully to unfold to my mind the causes that must at least in part have led to the great Apostasy & disruption in Kirtland—Without doubt in my mind Fanny Alger was at Kirtland the Prophet's first plural wife, In which by Right of his Calling he was justified of the Lord see D. C. 132-59–60 While Oliver Cowdery, J. Carter, W. Parish or others were not justified of the Lord Either in their criticisms upon the doings of the Prophet or in their becoming a “Law unto themselves”—through which they lost the Light of their calling & were left in Darkness.<sup>40</sup>

Further, Benjamin reflected:

And we began now in a degree to understand the meaning of what he had so often publicly Said,=“that Should he teach & Practice the principles that the Lord had Revealed to him and now Required of him. “That those then nearest him in the Stands would become his Enemies & the first to Seek his life—” Which they Soon did just as he had foretold.<sup>41</sup>

As betrayal and persecution increased, Joseph manifested depression and weariness. On the Prophet's last visit to Macedonia, after a long day of preaching, he returned to Benjamin's home very tired. After blessing Benjamin's eldest child, Joseph collapsed into a chair and exclaimed:

“Oh! I am so tired—so tired that I often feel to long for my day of rest. For what has there been in this life but tribulation for me? From a boy I have been persecuted by my enemies, and now even my friends are beginning to join with them, to hate and persecute me! Why should I not wish for my time of rest?”

His words to me were ominous, and they brought a shadow as of death over my spirit, and I said, “Oh, Joseph! how could you think of leaving us? How as a people could we do without you?” He saw my feelings were sorrowful and said kindly, “Bennie, if I was on the other side of the veil I could do many times more for my friends than I can do while I am with them here.”<sup>42</sup>

[The Prophet continued:] “Benjamin I Should not be far away from you. And if on the other Side of the veil I Should Still be working with you and with a power greatly increased to Roll on this Kingdom.” And



Such was the tone Earnestness & Pathos of his words to me then that they can never be fully Recalled but with Emotion.<sup>43</sup>

As the Prophet feared, some of those who associated intimately with him in the leading councils of the Church could not accept the teaching of plural marriage and looked upon it as a corrupt doctrine of a fallen prophet. Having lost confidence in their leader, these men set out secretly to remove the Prophet and establish their own leadership. Benjamin observed that the “apostate spirits within were now joining with our enemies outside” and “the days of tribulation were now fast approaching.” Joseph could foresee this great danger, for Benjamin recalled, “as the Prophet so often told us, so it came to pass; and those he had called around him as a cordon of safety and strength were worse than a rope of sand, and were now forging his fetters.”<sup>44</sup>

I will Relate a Dream told to us in Council by the Prophet but a Short time before his death, which was as follows—“I dreamed that by the Laws,. Marks,. Higbys & Fosters, I was bound both hand & foot and Cast into a deep well. Soon after which I heard Screams of Terror and Cries of “Oh! Brother Joseph Save Save us.” This Cry Continued untill with my Elbows & Toes I had worked my way to the top. and looking out I Saw all of those who had bound me within the folds of a Terrible Serpent that was preparing to Swallow them. and I told them that as they had bound me I could render them no assistance.<sup>45</sup>

Reflecting upon the clarity with which the Prophet saw many things, Benjamin observed, “These, and many more great things were given by him, some of which, as with the ancient disciples, we could not comprehend until fulfilled.”<sup>46</sup> Benjamin had believed the Second Coming was near. Years later, in 1903, he explained that “over Seventy years ago [we] were taught by our leaders to believe that the coming of Christ & the Milinial rein was never nearer ther than we believe it to be now.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Called to the Council of Fifty**

During one of his visits to the Johnson home, Joseph stated to those present: “The way I know in whom to confide [is]—God tells me in whom I may place confidence.”<sup>48</sup> Joseph confided in Benjamin on many occasions and found in him a trustworthy friend. As time passed, the Prophet’s confidence in Benjamin increased until, as Benjamin said, “it did seem to me that he had few secrets to keep from me.”<sup>49</sup> One of the greatest evidences of trust occurred when



Joseph called Benjamin to serve on the select Council of Fifty in March 1844.<sup>50</sup> Benjamin described the council as

the embryo kingdom of God upon the earth—an organization distinct from the Church, a nucleus of popular government which will exist for all people, “When the heathen are given for an inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth as a possession to him whose right it is to reign,” a government formed of representatives from every nation, principality or tribe upon the earth; a government of God for the people and by the people, in which man will be taught to know his origin and to govern himself which will continue through the millennial period as the outer wall or government around the inner temple of priesthood, until all are come to the knowledge of God.<sup>51</sup>

Its Sittings were always Strictly Private. and all its Rules were carefully & promptly observed, and altho its meetings at times were oftener than monthly. and my home at Ramus over 20 miles distant—I was present at Every Session and being about the youngest member of that Council I was deeply impressed with all that transpired. or was Taught by the Prophet.<sup>52</sup>

In referring to those who made up the Council, Benjamin explained that it was a “select Circle of the Prophet’s most trusted friends including all the Twelve. But not all of the Constituted authorities of the Church.”<sup>53</sup>

Because of his membership in the Council of Fifty when it was first organized, Benjamin often sat in council with the presiding officers of the Church. Benjamin cherished this opportunity. Nearly forty years after the organization of this council, one member said, “Being called into the Council appears to me to be one of the greatest steps in my life.”<sup>54</sup> A short time before the Prophet’s death, Joseph made an unusual presentation to the Quorum of the Twelve and some of the Council of Fifty. It was one of Joseph’s last meetings with this council. Benjamin recorded that after “all had been completed and the keys of power committed” to the Twelve Apostles as a quorum, the Prophet rose,

and with great Feeling & animation he graphically Reviewed his Life of Persicution Labor & Sacrafice For the Church & Kingdom of God—Both of which he declared were now organized upon the Earth. The burden of which had become too great for him longer to carry. That he was weary & Tired with the weight he So long had borne and he then Said with great vehemence “And in the name of the Lord I now Shake from my Shoulders the Responsibilities of bearing off the Kingdom of God to all the world—and here & now I place that Responsibility with all the Keys Powers & privilege pertaining thertoo upon the Shoulders of you the Twelve Apostles in Connection with this



Council. And if you will accept this to do it God Shall bless you mightily and Shall open your way And if you do it not you will be Damned— I am henceforth free from this Responsibility and I now Shake my garments clear & Free from the Blood of this generation and of all men, and Shaking his Skirt with great vehemence he Raised himself from the floor While the Spirit that accompanied his words Thrilled Every heart as with a feeling that Boded bereavement & sorrow.<sup>55</sup>

By this time, those who had been secretly conspiring against the Prophet openly opposed him and “the full break had now come in Nauvoo. . . . All hell now seemed in commotion. . . . All conspired for the destruction of the Prophet, with his beautiful city and massive temple so fast nearing completion.”<sup>56</sup> On June 16, 1844, Benjamin and several other able-bodied men “travelled all night across the prairie through mud, rain and darkness” to be in Nauvoo, where they could help defend the Prophet.<sup>57</sup>

This was the last time that Benjamin saw Joseph alive. Eleven days later the news of the tragic murder of Joseph and Hyrum struck Benjamin with shock and grief. He wrote of his reactions to the terrible event as follows:

To attempt to delineate the feelings of woe and unutterable sorrow that swelled every heart too full for tears, I need not attempt. I stood up, dazed with grief, could groan but could not weep. The fountain of tears was dry! “Oh God! what will thy orphan church and people now do!” was the only feeling or thought, that now burst out in groans.

. . . the words of Brother Joseph began to come back to me, “I could do so much more for my friends if I were on the other side of the veil.” These words, “my friends”—oh, how glad that he was my friend. These thoughts gradually gained the empire of my heart, and I began to realize that in his martyrdom there was a great eternal purpose in the heavens. But we were not able, as yet, to comprehend such a necessity. I could begin now to feel just what he meant, and his words, “do for his friends,” to me, were like the promise of Jesus to provide mansions for his disciples that they might be with him always. These things now were my consolation, and when I could begin to rejoice in them, the fountains of my tears began to flow, and I grew in consolation from day to day.<sup>58</sup>

Soon after the Martyrdom, Benjamin realized that his own life was in danger:

Our enemies, who, on accomplishing the murder fled in fear of Mormon vengeance, now began to return in boldness, and a mob came and searched my new building for arms, and to take me on a writ, as they had obtained evidence that I was a refugee from Missouri justice and was one of the incendiaries in Daviess County. For days I was



hidden in the woods, where trusted friends brought me food and at all times bore me company.<sup>59</sup>

Gradually the “excitement and feeling for persecution” seemed to diminish, and the Saints began to hope for a brief period of peace. However, Benjamin “had no confidence now in anything here as a future home,” and although the house he was building was enclosed and material was ready for its completion, he had neither energy nor faith to invest more in it.

### **A Special Witness Is Given**

Immediately after the death of the Prophet, the question of the future leadership of the Church arose. This problem caused such dissension it appeared to threaten the future of the organization. On August 8, 1844, a conference was held in Nauvoo to settle the issue. Sidney Rigdon, the first to speak, presented his claims at length, but Benjamin felt that Sidney’s remarks were “void of all power or influence.” Brigham Young, President of the Twelve Apostles, then addressed the Saints. In describing President Young’s presentation, Benjamin wrote:

I was perhaps to a degree forgetful of what I knew to be the Rights & duties of the Apostleship and as he [Rigdon] Closed his address & sat down my Back was partly turned to the Seat occupied by Apostle Brigham Young & other Apostles. When Suddenly and as from Heaven I heard the Voice of the prophet Joseph that thrilled my whole being and quickly turning around I Saw in the Transfiguration of Brigham Young the Tall Straight & portly Form of the Prophet Joseph Smith Clothed in a Sheen of Light Covering him to his feet, and I heard the Real & perfect Voice of the Prophet Even to the whistle as in years past caused by the loss of a Tooth, Said to have been broken out by the mob at Hyrum—This view or vision altho but for seconds was to me as vivid & Real as the glare of Lightning or the voice of Thunder from the Heavens and So deeply was I impressed with what I saw & heard in this Transfiguration. That for years I dare not Publicly tell what was given me of the Lord to See=But when in later years I did publicly bear this Testimony I found that others Could testify to having Seen & heard the Same. But to what proportion of the Congregation who were present I could never know. But I do know that this my testimony is True.<sup>60</sup>

With his conviction strengthened by this spiritual manifestation, Benjamin became one of the foremost in testifying that Brigham Young was the true successor of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Benjamin declared:



I will again bear this as a Faithful Testimony that I do know and bear Record that upon the head of Brigham Young as Chief with the Apostleship in full was by the voice of the prophet Joseph in in [*sic*] my hearing Laid the full Responsibility of bearing off the Kingdom of God to all the world.<sup>61</sup>

Knowing that President Brigham Young was now the Lord's prophet, Benjamin found that "new confidence and joy continued to spring up within me, and the subject of our finding a new home in the wilderness of the great West was one that occupied much of my thoughts."<sup>62</sup>

### **Conflict and Exodus**

In the brief period of peace that followed the Martyrdom, great emphasis was placed on finishing the Temple and preparing to move from Nauvoo. Benjamin was called by the Council of Fifty to rent and keep open the Nauvoo Mansion, so he began making arrangements to leave Macedonia. He did not move to Nauvoo, however, until after February 1845.<sup>63</sup> By following the instructions of the Church leaders to move into Nauvoo and care for the Nauvoo Mansion, Benjamin suffered considerable financial loss.

The spirit of unrest had even caused financial problems for the Mansion House. In explaining, Benjamin said:

Public travel was now cut off and all business profits with it; yet our expenses were nearly the same, as the place must be kept open to receive county and state officials; as also people who came to inquire into the cause of our troubles.

Among these were Judge Stephen A. Douglas, James Arlington Bennett of New York, and others, together with military officers sent by the Governor from time to time. So, instead of being profitable we were at great expense with small returns.<sup>64</sup>

In the midst of these pressures, Benjamin was invited to bring his wives to the Nauvoo Temple to receive their fulness of the priesthood blessing. He recorded that he could not accept that invitation, however, because at the time General Arlington Bennett and his associates were guests of the city and were staying at the Mansion House and Benjamin felt it was his responsibility to see that they were properly entertained.<sup>65</sup>

As anti-Mormon agitation spread, the Saints hastened their preparations to leave Nauvoo. On October 11, 1845, President Young announced the captains of twenty-five companies. Benjamin was appointed one of the captains of hundreds.<sup>66</sup>



The exodus commenced from Nauvoo in February 1846. Because of threats of mob violence and because the Mansion House was suspected as being the scene of Mormon atrocities, Benjamin felt that for his family's protection he should immediately accompany the Church leaders in their departure from Nauvoo.<sup>67</sup>

At a meeting of the Council of Fifty, just prior to his leaving Nauvoo, Benjamin was assigned to visit with Emma Smith. Emma had turned down previous invitations to go West with the Saints, and now Benjamin and Bishop Newel K. Whitney were to try once more to persuade her to change her mind. That he was selected for this diplomatic mission is evidence of the confidence the leaders had in him as well as of the friendship that existed between him and the Prophet's family. Benjamin and Bishop Whitney labored with Emma all night, but she agreed to go only if "she could be the leading Spirit." Being unable to change her decision, they left without her.<sup>68</sup> This must have been a sad moment for Benjamin, who knew firsthand how much the Prophet had loved her. Almost sixty years later, Benjamin recalled Joseph's affection for Emma. The Sunday morning scene he had witnessed at the Smith home is reported in *I Knew the Prophets*:

"Two of Emmas childr[e]n Came to him as just from there Mother—all So nice bright & Sweet." Joseph turned to his guest. "Benjamin, look at these Children. How Could I help loving thire mother; If Necessary I would go to Hell for Such a woman." Johnson added, ". . . altho at the time he had in the Mansion other wives younger & apparently more Brilliant—Yet Emma the wife of his youth—to me apeared the Queen of his heart & of his home."<sup>69</sup>

In order to avoid arrest, Benjamin departed Nauvoo early in February with his family and little else:

One afternoon, I think the 6th of February, 1846, I learned of a posse being sent from Carthage to search the manure piles around the Mansion stables for dead bodies, with a warrant for my arrest and others employed about the premises. Tales of great horror had gone about the country, of murders committed at the Mansion. But I left before the arrival of the posse, and with Mary Ann and Clarinda, went to a friend's house near the river and crossed about midnight in a bitter-cold storm. The next day the river was closed with ice from bank to bank. The camp of the Presidency and many others was on Sugar Creek, and on our arrival there we were without even a bit of canvas to cover our heads, but were kindly received by those who had shelter.<sup>70</sup>



**Later Life**

Benjamin's experiences in Nauvoo, combined with his abilities, integrity, and courage, earned him the respect and admiration of Church leaders. In a meeting of the First Presidency and Council of Twelve Apostles on October 23, 1859, President Brigham Young asked the brethren for recommendations of men to fill a vacancy in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Erastus Snow recommended Benjamin F. Johnson, emphasizing that Benjamin had been well acquainted with Joseph. However, George Q. Cannon was the Apostle chosen to fill that vacancy.<sup>71</sup>

Benjamin lived to be eighty-seven years of age and throughout his life was frequently called on to share his experiences with and testimony of the Prophet Joseph. In the general conference on October 6, 1900, Benjamin was asked to be the concluding speaker of the afternoon session.<sup>72</sup> He testified of Joseph as God's prophet and of the restoration of the gospel. When General Authorities visited Meşa, Arizona, where Benjamin Johnson settled after coming West, they usually met with Benjamin, and he was often one of the main speakers at each stake conference.<sup>73</sup> Benjamin took every opportunity to tell of his association with the Prophet Joseph Smith and his successors and to testify of their divine appointment and of the validity of plural marriage. He felt that he fulfilled the prophetic promise given to him by the Prophet Joseph Smith that Benjamin would bear testimony, after he became hoary with age, of things Joseph had taught to his close associates.<sup>74</sup>

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Johnson, *My Life's Review* (Independence, Mo.: Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1947), 9. The original and a typescript copy of Johnson's four-volume diary are located at the Archives Division, Church Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives. Because *My Life's Review* is a more accessible version of these materials, it is cited throughout this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 57–60.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Franklin Johnson, A Life's Sketch, LDS Church Archives; and Joseph Smith, Jr., *The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 4:3–5; hereafter cited as *HC*.



<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Franklin Johnson, letter to the editor, *Deseret News*, January 15, 1893.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, *A Life's Sketch*.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Franklin Johnson to George S. Gibbs, Salt Lake City, 1903, LDS Church Archives, 9. This important letter is printed and discussed in Dean R. Zimmerman, *I Knew the Prophets, An Analysis of the Letter of Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, Reporting Doctrinal Views of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Charles S. Sellers, "A Last Witness," *Improvement Era* 14 (April 1911): 545.

<sup>8</sup> *Deseret Evening News*, October 16, 1897.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 64.

<sup>11</sup> See Doctrine and Covenants 124:84; and Milton V. Backman, Jr., *The Heavens Rescued: A History of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio, 1830–1838* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 369–70.

<sup>12</sup> *HC* 4:424.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 91.

<sup>14</sup> Zimmerman, *I Knew the Prophets*, 19–20, as cited by Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy, A History*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 22.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 92.

<sup>16</sup> See Susan Sessions Rugh's article in this issue for more information about Ramus/Macedonia.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 92–93.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 93–94.

<sup>19</sup> *HC* 5:391.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin F. Johnson to President Anthon H. Lund, LDS Church Archives, May 12, 1903.

<sup>21</sup> *HC* 6:60.

<sup>22</sup> "Benjamin F. Johnson's Testimony," affidavit by Benjamin Franklin Johnson, May 1887, *The Historical Record*, comp. Andrew Jensen, 9 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jensen, 1882–90), 6:221–22.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 96.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 94.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 94–95.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 29–30.

<sup>27</sup> *Historical Record* 6:221–22.

<sup>28</sup> The name Ramus was changed to Macedonia on March 1, 1843. See *HC* 5:318.

<sup>29</sup> *HC* 5:318.

<sup>30</sup> Scott H. Faulring, *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 341.

<sup>31</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 95.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin F. Johnson, "An Open Letter from Benjamin F. Johnson to Grover Cleveland, the President of the United States in Defense of Plural Marriage," LDS Church Archives, January 15, 1886. Written to Grover Cleveland while Johnson was in hiding in St. George, Utah, because of polygamy. Reprinted in E. Dale LeBaron, "Benjamin Franklin Johnson: Colonizer, Public Servant and Church Leader" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1967), 323.



(Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1967), 323.

<sup>33</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 30–31.

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 95.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 30–31.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin F. Johnson, letter to the editor, *Deseret News*, June 25, 1902.

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 96.

<sup>38</sup> John F. Horne, affidavit sworn at Mesa, Arizona, on September 23, 1962, LDS Church Archives; photocopy in possession of the author.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Joseph Johnson, affidavit sworn at Mesa, Arizona, on October 8, 1960, LDS Church Archives.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 32–33.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 20.

<sup>42</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 97.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 98–99. Also see chapter eleven, "The Fall of the Kingdom," in Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 306–41.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 101.

<sup>47</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 52.

<sup>48</sup> *HC* 5:392.

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, letter to the editor, June 25, 1902. See also *HC* 6:60.

<sup>50</sup> D. Michael Quinn, "The Council of Fifty and Its Members, 1844 to 1945," *BYU Studies* 20 (Winter 1980): 165; Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967), 19, 64; and Flanders, *Nauvoo*, 278–305. In his later life, Benjamin F. Johnson stated that the Council of Fifty was organized on April 3, 1843, but his recollection seems to have been inaccurate.

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin Franklin Johnson, original manuscript of "My Life's Review," LDS Church Archives. This portion was deleted from the printed book. The author has a copy on file.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 20.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Minutes of Council of Fifty, Saturday, April 10, 1880. Located in Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

<sup>55</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 23–24.

<sup>56</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 101.

<sup>57</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 101.

<sup>58</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 102–3.

<sup>59</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 103.

<sup>60</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 53–54.

<sup>61</sup> Johnson to Gibbs, 53.

<sup>62</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 104.

<sup>63</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 104.

<sup>64</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 105.

<sup>65</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 106–7.

<sup>66</sup> *HC* 7:481–82.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 106.

<sup>68</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 107.



<sup>70</sup> Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 108.

<sup>71</sup> Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, LDS Church Archives, October 23, 1859.

<sup>72</sup> Conference Report of the Seventy-first Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 6, 1900, 41.

<sup>73</sup> William F. LeBaron to author, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, September 29, 1964.

<sup>74</sup> Because of Benjamin Johnson's reputation as close confidant of Joseph Smith and as a defender of plural marriage, twentieth-century fundamentalists adopted him after his death as a source of their supposed authority. They claim Joseph Smith secretly passed to him the presidency of the High Priesthood and other rights, which they say he conferred on a LeBaron grandson. See Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 203.