

Podcast 149: We've Lost the Argument

In this installment, Denver discusses the pervasive malignment of Joseph Smith throughout the scholarly world, how it stacks up in light of the actual evidence, and how and why it has been perpetuated and promoted ever since Joseph's murder in 1844.

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DENVER: My wife, daughters, and daughters-in-law have a book—I don't know what they call it—book gang or something. (I know it's not a book "club"; they wanted to sound more militant than that.) Whatever the group calls themselves—and they read books every month and then talk about them. And as a result, a book came to my wife's attention that (the two of us) we read together (which is not altogether true; we listened to the book on tape as we were driving or sitting in a sauna until we finished the thing). However, we own a copy of the book. So I have looked into the text itself. It was a New York Times bestseller. [The] copyright is 2018, so it's been around for a few years (although I'd not heard of it). [I] mentioned it to some people, and apparently, a lot of people have read this book. It's called *Educated, A Memoir*, written by Tara Westover. It's autobiographical, but a number of things have been changed, as the book **tells** you; names and identifying details got changed because, apparently, some of the people who are living and who are identifiable if you knew her and her family well enough or her experiences well enough, you'd be able to identify them. So in that sense, it's autobiographical—but it's not altogether nonfiction; there is some fictionalized details to it.

She had a dysfunctional family, a father who was a survivalist and a conspiracy theorist. And they lived in Idaho on a farm with a junkyard on it, and he was a junker. And the family included a brother who was both abusive and suffered a number of head injuries that made him even more prone to violence. And she suffered at the hands of that abusive brother. But the family was "Mormon" (after a fashion)—a kind of conspiracy-theorist-based family with a strong patriarch who (the father, you know) ruled with an iron hand. She (in the book) would characterize her father as being bipolar and having some mental deficiencies.

But essentially she grew up uneducated, and then (through self study) managed to get herself through the ACT and got admitted and attended Brigham Young University where she got a bachelor's degree and got the notice of a faculty member who sent her on a program to Cambridge. She wound up on a scholarship to Cambridge, got her Master's of Philosophy (after her Bachelor's at Brigham Young), her Master's from Trinity College in Cambridge, [and] subsequently became a visiting fellow at Harvard University, and then returned to Cambridge where she got her Ph.D. in History in 2014.

Throughout the book... The story is gripping. I mean, it's... Once you get started, it's hard to put the book down. I imagine that if you were to ask for an account of the same events through the eyes of other people, that you may come away with a different conclusion about many of the people, many of the personalities, and many of the events in the book—and she makes no pretensions about it being altogether accurate.

But in her journey to become educated, she has to fight against the limitations of her background and overcome that—in a way that is a heroic story. And the details of the characters as they're being unraveled in the story, it's really quite gripping. And it's remarkable. And she's a remarkable person.

As she gets into her Ph.D. program and along the way, it becomes apparent that her command of historical investigation, different historical philosophies, and different historians are something with which she's acquainted at a doctoral level. And it's an impressive sojourn throughout the whole of it. (And her writing style is really good; she creates a world through the words she employs that pulls you in and really lets you see the scenes unfold as she narrates them through.)

But there was one thing in the book that saddened me considerably, because what it tells me is that—at this point, with the current state of historical analysis—we've altogether lost the argument, and people have reached a conclusion which, in my view, is unsupported by the historical record. But when a Ph.D. historian that writes such a compelling book includes this passage in it, it's just now taken for granted that the thing I will read to you in a moment is an established fact beyond all dispute, and that you needn't even investigate the matter any further. Here's the paragraph:

I thought of Joseph Smith, who'd had as many as 40 wives. Brigham Young had had 55 wives and 56 children. The church had ended the temporal practice of polygamy in 1890, but it had never recanted the doctrine. As a child, I'd been taught by my father but also in Sunday School that in the fullness of time, God would restore polygamy, and in the afterlife, I would be a plural wife. The number of my sister wives would depend on my husband's righteousness. The more nobly he lived, the more wives he would be given.

Well, that might be true enough about where the LDS Church is at present, because they've said as much in their essays that they've put out on their website. But for someone who's investigating the provenance of polygamy in the LDS Church, the picture is considerably more muddled than the paragraph that she's given there. And she allows no room for doubt. She allows nothing for the possibility that perhaps what the church is advocating is not, in fact, supported by the historical record but was rather introduced by Brigham Young after the death of Joseph Smith.

The work that has been done by Rob Fotheringham in the videos that he's put out on YouTube, the book that has been written by Whitney Horning, and efforts by others (myself included) to go back and look at the source material raises considerable doubt about whether or not Joseph Smith ever had what would be called a "wife" other than Emma Smith. He proclaimed to the contrary, that he had that one wife. Joseph Smith certainly did something that was called "sealing." But at the time that the word "sealing" was used during Joseph Smith's lifetime, the word did not necessarily imply marriage, and it certainly didn't imply marital relations in a sexual sense. That changed considerably when the public practice was announced in 1852, and the effort to advocate it by Brigham Young turned sealing into not only marriage, but sexual relations and the production of progeny and so

on. I mean, the form that it existed in before the death of Joseph Smith was nothing like the form that sealing took after it was adopted by Brigham Young.

I would hope that historians would be a little more humble about the whole subject. The multi-volume set that Brian Hales put together advocates the party line and makes assumptions based upon the post “public announcement” of it in 1852 and the affidavits that got gathered when they were in the middle of litigation over the authenticity of the church’s claim to be the original during the Kirtland Temple lawsuit—and then, subsequently, the constitutional challenge to determine that it was an authentic part of the belief of Mormons that plural wives was in-and-of-itself “salvific.”

Brigham Young attributed advice that he got from a U.S. Senator—and the likely candidate for that was Stephen Douglas; he doesn’t identify who the senator was—but that the senator had advised Brigham Young that if he could defend plural wives as an “essential part of salvation in the religion of the Mormons” that it would pass scrutiny under the First Amendment before the United States Supreme Court. That resulted in a whole series of sermons that, in fact, tied salvation directly to having plural wives (which, as it turns out following the Manifesto, becomes really clear that that was a convention that was adopted—a teaching that was adopted—for litigation purposes).

They backed off of it, and Wilford Woodruff (and all those subsequent church leaders that followed after him) never once said, “Oh, and by the way, we continue to be damned because we don’t have plural wivery going on.” It just got eliminated, and salvation was still possible (in the Mormon religion) without the presence of the plural marriage. That epoch between the 1852 time period and the decision of the United States Supreme Court—in *Reynolds vs. United States*—was a period in which illegal contrivance was used in order to buttress a lawsuit that the church had hoped to win. And nothing more than that.

But those statements—those dogmatic statements involving salvation—produced, in turn, a whole host of offshoot fundamentalist groups that believe that their salvation (using quotes from that era, using the *Journal of Discourses*, using things that were said by presidents of the church, things that were said by members of the Quorum of Twelve to justify winning a lawsuit), they rely on those today to justify the continued practice, with the mistaken belief that their salvation is dependent upon that. The whole of Mormon history has been polluted by the extravagant claims that Brigham Young made and attributed to Joseph Smith—because Brigham didn’t think that he had the persuasive authority to get people to adopt the practice if he was the originator. He had to lay it at the feet of the more respected predecessor, Joseph Smith. And so, he and others who wanted access to more women went along with him.

But if you go to the historical record and you limit your inquiry to anything that was in existence on June 27th, 1844 (the day that Joseph Smith was murdered) and before that date, you don’t have anything to tie Joseph to the practice other than rumors and innuendos and accusations, many of which are from people that are not credible.

In the *Joseph Smith Papers* (volume 12 of the *Joseph Smith Papers*), there’s a letter that Joseph got in the ~~June~~ [May] timeframe of 1843 in which a fellow is complaining to Joseph

about the dishonesty and self-serving conduct of Robert D. Foster [and] Wilson and William Law. The letter (that was written by a member of the church who was a convert that had come over from England) was complaining about the way in which people were being exploited by these land speculators. They were borrowing money, they were attributing the credit worthiness of themselves to Joseph Smith's backing them. The fellow who wrote the letter is Thomas Rawcliffe. The letter is in May of 1843. It begins on page 330, and it runs through page 342 of volume 12 of the *Joseph Smith Papers*, in which he complains about the dishonesty and the deceitfulness of Robert Foster and Wilson Law and William Law.

William Law (at the time) was a member of the First Presidency. Robert Foster would be tried for his membership in the December timeframe of 1843, and he would be excommunicated from the church in April of 1844. William Law, as a member of the First Presidency at the time, was bitter and disaffected from Joseph because Joseph refused to seal William Law's marriage (because William Law was an adulterer, and Joseph considered it inappropriate to do the sealing).

Well, the three people that the fellow complains about to Joseph (Thomas Rawcliffe complains about)—Robert D. Foster, Wilson Law, William Law—all three were later involved as publishers and writers in the *Nauvoo Expositor* that made the accusations (the original accusations) against Joseph Smith: that he was practicing some kind of plural wivory in Nauvoo. Now, that becomes one of the bases for historians to say, "Ahah! People in high position blew the lid off Joseph's secret practice, and the *Nauvoo Expositor* is at least a contemporaneous source that you can look to and rely upon to say, 'Yeah, something was going on behind the scenes.' And these guys exposed it!"

The problem is that all three of them had reasons to lie. All three of them had history, if you believe Rawcliffe—all three of them have history of being deceitful, dishonest, self-dealing, and not only that, of **attributing their dishonest behavior to Joseph Smith**. Here's from the letter:

I cannot imagine that you are aware of the devilish transactions that are going on in this place and the way that your name is used to accomplish them.

He goes on—Rawcliffe goes on—to say:

See if you will suffer men holding high offices in the church and city to swindle me out of my little money, whether I'd be Mormon or not.

So, his concern (Rawcliffe's concern) is that these guys were doing things—duping people under the cloak of religion to get them to trust them—and then saying that Joseph Smith was really responsible for what they were doing. One of the things that Robert Foster did (and he's quoted by Rawcliffe) is that he promises to repay him: "So help me God, and Joseph will be bound with me." Rawcliffe talks about them "using Brother Joseph's name so much."

The fact that Joseph was accused of doing the very thing that these witnesses were themselves up to was similar to what Sampson Avard had done previously in Missouri, who testified against Joseph Smith when it was, in fact, Sampson Avard that was responsible for

the violence and the burning and the thieving that went on. Mormon history is plagued with the insiders with credibility—ostensibly with credibility—who turn on Joseph; people that we later know were themselves violent or adulterous or dishonest turn on Joseph, and then, because they were in a position close to him, they say things about Joseph that Joseph says **is a lie**. But their status is used as evidence that they are telling the truth and that Joseph is lying.

Mormon history is plagued with this kind of a problem, through and through, top to bottom. Mormon history—early Mormon history, in particular—has (without any question) a lot of scoundrels involved in high positions. The thing that has to be asked is: Does the presence of Judas make Christ something less than Lord? Does the presence of “Judases” in the time of Joseph Smith make Joseph Smith something less than a virtuous prophet?

I have a very hard time believing that all of the lofty, lovely, virtuous, profound, deeply insightful things emanated from a man who was corrupt, dishonest, deceitful, treacherous, and unfaithful to his wife. He protested and claimed himself to be loyal to Emma throughout his life. After his death, Emma defended his character and said the same thing about Joseph’s virtue as Joseph had said when he was alive. I don’t think a corrupt fountain can bring forth good water. And I think Joseph was a good fountain, a pure one that brought forth things lovely, virtuous, and of good report.

LDS history—because they want to claim authority through Joseph Smith, that there was this continuity because Brigham Young succeeded him, and Brigham Young could not have been a corrupt deviator who innovated and adopted an adulterous practice that Joseph Smith had condemned—they have to turn Joseph into a liar in order to rescue authority they want to claim through Brigham Young.

I don’t think Brigham Young deserves to have a life raft thrown at him at the expense of the character of Joseph Smith. And I’m disappointed that we’ve lost the argument, but lost it has been. And when you have someone that has studied history, going back and looking at what she thinks is an adequate basis for making the statement, and she writes, “I thought of Joseph Smith, who’d had as many as 40 wives,” I don’t think it’s possible to win the argument in the popular mind.

The only question is: Can people of deep reflection, can people who are willing yet to consider a matter, can people who reject the idea of whoredoms and adultery and dishonesty and lying and who would never consider it appropriate to be a bald-faced liar in order to protect or preserve your religion, can people who have pure hearts and real intent, can **they** still be taught and persuaded that Joseph Smith was a virtuous man, loyal to his wife, and the glaring fact that he never fathered a child with anyone other than Emma Smith, the one he professed to be his only wife, can that still persuade some few people to practice virtue in their own lives and to accept the truthfulness of the things that were restored through Joseph Smith?

I think rather than abandon the argument altogether, I think it needs to be conceded that in the public mind, the argument’s over, and we lost. But the few who are the humble followers of Christ (the people to whom I dedicated the very first book I wrote, *The Second*

Comforter, Conversing with the Lord Through the Veil, the few who are the humble followers of Christ) may **still** be rescued from this pile of lies that has taken over this subject.

The foregoing was recorded on November 14, 2021 in Sandy, Utah.