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## Feature

## Same Sex Temple Sealings

***Did the Early LDS Church  
Embrace Homosexual Relationships?***

By Ben Williams



*Nineteenth-Century LDS temple rituals included the practice of “sealing” men to men. While modern church authorities have nearly eradicated all evidence of this arcane practice, some historians cite it as evidence that the early church embraced homosexual relationships — but are they right?*

In the mutability of the ever-transforming theology of the Latter Day Saints, a disregarded practice of early Mormonism was the sealing of men to men. Called the “Law of Adoption,” this sacred temple ceremony has been relegated to the dustbin of LDS history, along with the “Oath to Avenge the Blood of the Prophet,” the doctrine of blood atonement, the United Order, plural marriage, slavery, certain skin colorations being considered a curse, Adam being God the Father, and ZCMI.

Brigham Young, in a talk given February 16th 1868, proclaimed, “The ordinance of sealing must be performed here man to man, and woman to man, and children to parents, etc., until the chain of generation is made perfect in the sealing ordinances back to father Adam ... until the earth is sanctified and prepared for the residence of God and angels.” (Journal of Discourses, Vol.12, p.165).

The sealing of men to men was not an early, LDS version of gay marriage in the 19th Century, however. It was a means for men to “increase their kingdom” through adoption, in the same way that being sealed to women was a means to increase a man’s kingdom through sexual reproduction. The sealing of men to men was a non-sexual way for men in the early Mormon Church to multiply and increase in status — here on earth as well as in the hereafter.

The practice of sealing men to men was instituted by Joseph Smith before the Mormons left Nauvoo to come to Utah. An article concerning the Law of Adoption appeared in the Mormon Church’s publication The Latter-Day Saints’ Millennial Star in June 1843. LDS historian Gordon Irving stated that while “no consensus exists with regard to the date when the first adoptions were performed ... it is certainly possible, perhaps probable, that Joseph Smith did initiate certain trusted leaders into the adoptionary order as early as 1842.” (Brigham Young University Studies, Spring 1974, p. 295).

Mormon historian Michael Quinn believes that Joseph Smith was not hostile to male-to-male intimacy as are the LDS General Authorities of today. In an article entitled “Male-Male Intimacy Among Nineteenth-Century Mormons: A Case Study” published in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Quinn suggested that during Smith’s 1843

funeral address for Lorenzo D. Barns, the Mormon prophet hinted at a special relationship between male friends in the eternal hereafter: "It is pleasing for friends to lie down together, locked in the arms of love, to sleep and wake in each other's embrace." (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Winter 1995, p. 110).

Antonio Feliz, one of the founders of the Restoration Church of Jesus Christ and author of *Out of the Bishop's Closet*, stated in a pamphlet titled "Jonathan Loved David" that this funereal address amounted to a coded endorsement of homosexuality among the Saints.

However, in context, the statement as recorded by Smith reads as follows: "It has always been considered a great calamity not to obtain an honorable burial. ... If tomorrow I shall be called to lie in yonder tomb, in the morning of the resurrection let me strike hands with my father, and cry, 'My father.' ... When we lie down we contemplate how we may rise in the morning; and it is pleasing for friends to lie down together, locked in the arms of love, to sleep and wake in each other's embrace. ... When the voice calls for the dead to arise, suppose I am laid by the side of my father, what would be the first joy of my heart? To meet my father, my mother, my brother, my sister; and when they are by my side, I embrace them and they me." (*History of the Church*, Vol. 5, p. 361).

Mormon apologist George L. Mitton, horrified that Quinn interpreted this passage as having anything to do with homosexuality, wrote a letter to the editor of *Dialogue*, claiming that "the 'arms of love' is a scriptural allusion — the imagery of godly love as the Lord extends it at the resurrection and otherwise." (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Winter 1996, pp. v-ix).

Some church historians claim that embarrassing anachronisms from Mormon history, such as the doctrine of blood atonement practiced during the Mormon Reformation, were only literary devices. Not so — the early, blood-and-guts Mormons were straightforward and said what they meant, leaving it to their namby-pamby descendants to whitewash their words. However, it would be a stretch to consider the "friends ... locked in the arms of love" passage as an endorsement of any sexual orientation outside the heterosexual norm.

Still, it is often cited by optimistic, latter-day homosexuals as proof of Smith's intention to sanctify a union for homosexuals — if only he had lived longer.

There is little support for this view, except for the anachronistic Law of Adoption — the early church practice of sealing men to men. And there is no evidence that the sealing of men to men was a backdoor attempt to sanctify homosexuality.

However, in an April 1997 Salt Lake City Messenger article, Jerald and Sandra Tanner wrote, "The practice certainly could have opened a door for those predisposed to homosexual temptations." Their argument was that "men who were sealed to one another were likely to have closer contact with one another than those who did not enter into the practice," and therefore more open to an intimate relationship — much like "some missionaries, who ... constantly in close contact with their companions [have] yielded to homosexual activities."

What then was the purpose of sealing men to men? The noted Mormon historian Juanita Brooks wrote, "If the prophet Joseph were to become a God over a minor planet, he must not only have a large posterity but able assistants of practical skills. Brigham Young had been 'sealed' to Joseph under this law; now he in turn had some 38 young men sealed to him." (John D. Lee: *Zealot, Pioneer Builder, Scapegoat*, p. 73).

Brigham Young's grandson Kimball Young, as chairman of the sociology department at Northwestern University, wrote of male-to-male dynamics in Brigham Young's time: "To understand the role and status and the accompanying self-images of men and women in polygamy, we must recall that Mormonism was a male-dominated society. The priesthood — which only men could hold — was in complete control, and celestial marriage, either monogamous or polygamous, exemplified the higher status of men. Women were viewed as of lesser worth, to be saved through men holding the priesthood."

In a patriarchal society it is necessary to develop a form of male bonding to show status, rank, and privilege. Early Mormon males competed not only for women but also for men.

Concerning the Law of Adoption, western historian Hubert Howe Bancroft wrote this: "The father may be either younger or older than the son, but in any case assumes the character of guardian, with full control of the labor and estate of the adopted son. Many young men give themselves over to the leaders as 'eternal sons' in the hope of sharing the honor of their adopted parents." (*History of Utah*, p. 361).

It is interesting that adopted sons in the sealing ceremony of men to men were sometimes older than the men who adopted them. Gordon Irving revealed a case in which two men "could not agree on a sealing ceremony because they both wanted to be the father." Albert K. Thurber's autobiography mentioned that in 1850, Mormon patriarch Benjamin F. Johnson approached him and, "in a roundabout way, proposed

for me to be adopted to him.”

Thurber told the presumptuous Johnson, “I thought it would be as well for him to be adopted by me.” (Brigham Young University Studies, Spring 1974, p. 304). The word “proposed” as used by Thurber conjures up many interesting scenarios of submission and dominance.

On April 6, 1862, Brigham Young claimed that the practice of sealing men to men was “a great and glorious doctrine,” but that many men were being sealed for the wrong reasons:

“By this power, men will be sealed to men back to Adam, completing and making perfect the chain of the Priesthood from this day to the winding-up scene. I have known men that I positively think would fellowship the Devil, if he would agree to be sealed to them. ‘Oh, be sealed to me, brother; I care not what you do. You may lie and steal, or anything else, I can put up with all your meanness, if you will only be sealed to me.’ Now this is not so much weakness as it is selfishness. It is a great and glorious doctrine, but the reason I have not preached it in the midst of this people, is I could not do it without turning so many of them to the Devil. Some would go to hell for the sake of getting the Devil sealed to them.” (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 9, p. 269).

The sealing of men to men actually was a more sacred principle than Celestial Marriage, according to Brigham Young. In a discourse Young gave on September 4, 1873, he said, “We can seal women to men, but not men to men without a Temple.” (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 16, p. 186).

A sermon by Brigham Young, reported by John Read, in a letter to one of his wives, revealed that Young referred to some future time “when men would be sealed to men in the priesthood in a more solemn ordinance than that by which women were sealed to men, and in a room over that in which women were sealed to man in the temple of the Lord.”

Wilford Woodruff, the fourth president of the LDS church, wrote in his journal that he “officiated in adopting 96 men to men.” (Wilford Woodruffs’ Journal, edited by Scott G. Kenney, 1985, Vol. 9, p. 408).

Kimball Young stated that the sealing of men to men was evidence “of deep, psychological Brüderschaft (brotherhood)” characterized by “obviously latent homosexual features.” He compares “the Mormon system, with all its ecclesiastical trappings and military controls” to similar organizations which had “strong homosexual components.”

According to Kimball Young, “This is true of armies; it is true of priestly orders in all religions; and certainly in many aspects of the occupational guilds of the Middle Ages.” (Isn’t One Wife Enough? The Story of Mormon Polygamy, 1954, pp. 278-280).

Brigham Young had many wives. No one knows for sure the exact count, but 27 seems to be the official number. However, he did not respect or enjoy their company and society. “There are probably but few men in the world who care about the private society of women less than I do.” (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 5, p. 99). He had numerous offspring, but had little interaction with their growth or development, seeing them more as an extension of his property in an Old Testament manner.

Young had no great fondness for men either — using them or abusing them always for the building up of the Kingdom of God, of which he was the chief benefactor. He had 38 men sealed to him, including John D. Lee who was acting on Young’s behalf as an adopted son at Mountain Meadows in 1857.


In fact, the only person with whom Young seemed to have developed a deep emotional attachment was Joseph Smith. Brigham Young recorded several visions or dreams he had of the slain Smith, wherein Young would throw his arms around his mentor, embrace him and cover him in “kisses and tears.”

Young’s last words on his deathbed were neither for his wives nor children but for his beloved Joseph, his adopted father from whom he maintained he received the “keys” to become lord and king on earth as well as in heaven.

When Wilford Woodruff became president of the LDS Church, many former practices found in temples were abandoned or modified. Churchmen could still have more than one wife in heaven, but only one at a time on earth. The practice of sealing men to men was also modified to the sealing of descendants to ancestors, and was eventually dropped altogether. The great genealogical movement within the LDS Church accelerated rapidly after this change.

The practice of sealing of men to men is also lost within the myriad Mormon fundamentalist churches that maintain that they are the guardians of the original teachings of Joseph Smith. Some rigorously uphold the ceremony of bedding female child brides and continue to form societies based upon religious communism, but none have retained the Law of Adoption.

Today the LDS Church has even “modified” passages of The Journal of Discourses, eliminating most references to the sealing of men to men. One such passage has been changed to read: “The ordinance of sealing must be performed here [son] to [father],



and woman to man” instead of “man to man.” Modern church authorities obviously would not want Brigham Young’s comments concerning men being sealed to men to be perceived even as a mild endorsement of same-sex unions.

Another example is found in the passage where Brigham Young stated: “Then man will be sealed to man until the chain is made perfect.” (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 15, p. 139). It now reads, “Then [children] will be sealed to [parents] until the chain is made perfect.”

The temples are used exclusively for individual sacred ceremonies known as “endowments,” as well as baptisms for, and “sealings” to, the dead. The temples are kept active by the gathering of extensive genealogies, where proven legal documentation of a familial relationship must exist before a sealing will ever be performed between men.

The temples are also matrimonial factories churning out thousands of heterosexual weddings daily in which women are sealed to men for time and all eternity (but never vice-versa.) Children not “born under the covenant” are also sealed to them for eternity in temple rituals.

The ceremony known as the Law of Adoption, whereby a man could have any number of men adopted to him as eternal sons has been completely abandoned. More’s the pity.