



Type: Book Chapter

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## The Religious Dimension of Emma's Letters to Joseph

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Source: *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, The Man*

Editor(s): Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate, Jr.

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University,  
1993

Page(s): 117-125

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# *The Religious Dimension of Emma's Letters to Joseph*

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Richard Lloyd Anderson

True biography travels beyond places and events to inner motives and aspirations, so recent decades of factual discovery can actually increase the difficulty of writing real church history. Knowing voluminous details about a person does not insure knowing the person. Belief is best seen in reliable reports of personal views, in private diary entries or in non-public letters. We know of only five surviving letters of Emma to Joseph, and they are all the more precious because she left no diary and few other personal letters before the martyrdom. Such firsthand insights into her personality are quite rare.

Time permits only a focused use of Emma's notes to the Prophet. Unmentioned here is the light they shed on events, on family life, and the considerable sufferings they reveal. Yet the "poor Emma" theme is overworked, not only in sentimental semi-fiction, but even in the long biography of her, *Mormon Enigma*, wherein Emma is too often ennobled at the expense of Joseph. After all, the great question is *why* she endured 17 years of constant adjustment and danger at the Prophet's side. The answer is that she obviously shared his spiritual commitments in order to share his persecutions.

It is incomplete history to analyze Emma's letters without Joseph's. Moreover, her notes have a context of conviction which fully appears only by carefully comparing her husband's activities and pressures in each situation. My plans are to finish

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a manuscript on Emma that started long ago as a collection and study of the correspondence of the leading couple in early Mormonism. For me this approach stands the test of time—their agreements and shared responses clearly reflect eternal values. Emma did not suffer merely *for* Joseph, or in the worst scenario, *because* of Joseph; but in reality she suffered *with* Joseph because she believed in his integrity and the revelations he published to the world. The question here is how Emma's letters to her husband show their common religious values and beliefs, especially when read against the background of his situations and letters to her.

The Prophet had already written to his wife in several absences on Church business before 1837, when her first surviving letters appear. No year was more stressful to the Prophet than 1837—it began with the failure of the Kirtland Bank, at midpoint it faced a severe national and local depression, and it ended on the eve of his forced exodus with his family from Ohio to Missouri. Murmuring against Joseph's leadership, doctrine, and policies was at its height during 1837. He stood before the April conference to defend his authority as Church President and explain "the causes of the embarrassments of a pecuniary nature that were now pressing upon the heads of the Church" ("Anniversary of the Church" 3:487).<sup>1</sup> In short, key Kirtland leaders had personally indebted themselves in financing the temple, the printing operations, and the land acquisitions for gathering the Saints. A week before (29 Mar 1837), Joseph Smith stood before a priesthood meeting and "prophesied that unless the Church acts in greater union than they had for the winter past, it should be scourged until they should feel it fourfold to that of the dispersion of Zion," referring to the expulsion of some 1,200 Latter-day Saints from Jackson County in 1833 (Cook and Backman 26). In the year and a half following this 1837 prophecy, about 2,000 faithful Latter-day Saints were forced to migrate from Kirtland (Backman 140, Table 2).

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations in this paper have minor editing of spelling and punctuation.

During this rear-guard year of 1837, outside persecution descended on Joseph in addition to economic disaster and intense dissent within the Church. Anti-Mormon businessman Grandison Newell filed a criminal complaint against the Prophet for threatening his life. Joseph Smith appeared personally in May-June hearings that resulted in acquittal (Parkin 269–78). But as the case came on, the danger of lynching was so real that the Prophet left suddenly to defuse the situation. Wilford Woodruff's wedding day was 13 April 1837, and he recorded his disappointment that the Prophet could not “solemnize the ceremony, but his life was so beset . . . that he was under the necessity of fleeing from his house and home for a few days” (Woodruff 1:140). Joseph wrote home immediately, though this message does not survive. In turn Emma wrote twice, expressing deep love for her husband and also assurance of their worthiness for God's protection. Her 25 April 1837 letter stated:

I cannot tell you my feelings when I found I could not see you before you left. Yet I expect you can realize them. The children feel very anxious about you because they don't know where you have gone. I verily feel that if I had no more confidence in God than some I could name, I should be in a sad case indeed. But I still believe that if we humble ourselves and are as faithful as we can be, we shall be delivered from every snare that may be laid for our feet, and our lives and property will be saved and we redeemed from all unreasonable encumbrances. (Joseph Smith Letter Book 35; hereafter Letter Book)

Contrary to one suggestion that Emma hinted at concern over her husband's sexual loyalty, her 1837 letters show deep respect for her husband, the opposite of distrust. These and her early Illinois notes reflect her reliance on the Prophet's consistency as a parent and husband. In her 3 May 1837 letter Emma uses “anxiety” for missing Joseph, and again requests that Joseph return in time to help with the children because they have been exposed to measles, which earlier had robbed them of a child (Letter Book 35–36).

Emma's religious relationship with Joseph was similar to that of other Church members: he testified of his divine

experiences, and she believed. But years of intimate observation make her faith highly significant, as when she told her son that she had not “the slightest doubt” of the divinity of the Book of Mormon because she saw the wrapped plates and watched her husband transcend his abilities in dictating the manuscript (“Last Testimony of Sister Emma” 290). After the move from Ohio to Missouri, after her husband’s arrest and detention in Liberty Jail, after her own winter exodus to Illinois with children across snowbound prairies and the frozen Mississippi, and in the midst of her own isolation and poverty, Emma still believed it was all worth it. On 7 March 1839, she wrote to her imprisoned husband: “But I still live and am yet willing to suffer more, if it is the will of kind heaven that I should for your sake” (Letter Book 37).

This continuing commitment to Joseph says much about the quality of Emma’s sacrificial love, but it also says much about Joseph’s worthiness. Her pledge to give more is deeply religious. Throughout this early 1839 letter she relies on the providence of God: she says that only He knows her heart, only He can redress their wrongs, and she fully regards her husband as an instrument in God’s hands.

Emma’s letter to Liberty is conceptually the mirror image of Joseph’s communications to her at this period. In a 4 November 1838 letter, written when his life hung in the balance just before Liberty Jail, he pleaded, “Oh Emma, for God’s sake, do not forsake me nor the truth” (Jessee, *Personal Writings* 362). On 21 March 1839, after nearly five months in custody, he answered her early 1839 letter about suffering: “My trust is in Him. The salvation of my soul is of the most importance to me. Forasmuch as I know for a certainty of eternal things, if the heavens linger, it is nothing to me” (408). And to Emma again, two weeks later he wrote: “Those precious things God has given us will rise up in judgment against us if we do not mark well our steps and ways” (427). Emma’s letter to Joseph in Liberty Jail expresses her shared knowledge of his supernatural experiences.

Joseph escaped Missouri justice and began rebuilding family life and Church leadership in Illinois in April of 1839. But late in 1839 he felt obligated to take a winter journey of 800 miles, mostly in horse-drawn vehicles, to seek Mormon reparations at the nation's capital. After travelling over a hundred miles to Springfield, Joseph wrote Emma, who soon answered him. Joseph could not contain his disappointment of being apart the winter after Liberty Jail, with small prospect of keeping in touch, noting that "it will be a long and lonesome time during my absence from you" (Jessee, *Personal Writings* 448). And on December 6 she responded, "and the time lingers long that is set for your return" ("Letters of Joseph Smith, the Martyr" 26:356). But the tone of her letter shows that she agreed with the Prophet's priority of service to God and his people. He said that personal desires must be secondary: "And nothing but a sense of humanity could have urged me on to so great a sacrifice. But shall I see so many perish and not seek redress? No, I will try this once in the name of the Lord" (Jessee, *Personal Writings* 448).

In reality both were making good on their imprisonment promises to God to give more if he required it. As president of the Church, Joseph could have assigned others to talk to the nation's leaders, but his people had given all for the Lord, and the Prophet would personally plead for reimbursement of their losses. Both Joseph and Emma were committed to the religious duty of the trip. Though Emma listed endless pressures of major sickness of family and friends in her house, she closed her 6 December letter by stressing Nauvoo's concern that God would bless the Prophet-advocate: "There is manifested great anxiety for you in this place that you may be prospered in the mission whereunto you are sent" (Letter Book 116).

Joseph returned to Nauvoo in the spring of 1840 after exhausting all possibilities of immediate federal assistance. There was relative peace until 1842, when intense efforts were made to extradite him on a Missouri charge of being accessory in the attempted assassination of former Governor Boggs. As

in Ohio in 1837, the Prophet could not easily risk arrest because of the danger of his own assassination. So Joseph successfully played cat and mouse with arresting officers in the latter half of 1842. In temporary hiding just above Nauvoo, he conferred with advisers about threats of a house to house search of Nauvoo. Joseph refused to be panicked by this alarming rumor, with its overtones of repeating Missouri militia excesses (Jessee, *Personal Writings* 528). Nevertheless, he sent Emma contingency plans of escaping with his family to the Mormon lumbering settlements in Wisconsin. Emma answered his long letter by agreeing that the conservative course of staying in Nauvoo seemed best. But she committed herself once more to any necessity for the safety of her husband or of the Saints: "I am ready to go with you if you are obliged to leave. . . . I shall make the best arrangements I can and be as well prepared as possible" (Jessee, *Papers* 2:432; see also *History of the Church* 5:110).

This possible temporary move out of the jurisdictions of Missouri and Illinois sheriffs did not materialize, but the Prophet had poured his soul out to Emma at a tender time, wistfully imagining their being together without danger. Yet such personal wishes did not diminish Joseph's sense of mission. Though speaking of a "respite of about six months with my family" (Jessee, *Personal Writings* 526), he envisioned a working vacation in his letter of 16 August 1842. Trusted secretary William Clayton would "come along and bring all the writings and papers, books and histories, for we shall want a scribe in order that we may pour upon the world the truth like the lava from Mount Vesuvius" (527). The Prophet was then in the midst of producing, correcting, and publishing his official history, which opened with his youthful confusion and First Vision and then moved to a detailed record of the revelations bringing about the Book of Mormon and organization of the Church. Other Nauvoo records confirm that completing and circulating this detailed history was among his highest priorities as the Prophet sensed his coming death. For example, on 19 May 1843 he shared with W. W. Phelps "a dream that the history

must go ahead before anything” (Faulring 378). Whether active in managing Church affairs in Nauvoo or in temporary exile, the Prophet intended to document the divine directions that restored Christ’s Church.

In this 1842 interchange the couple’s closings blend with the temple ceremonies that the Prophet had started to introduce. Joseph ended as “your affectionate husband until death, through all eternity, forevermore.” And Emma finished her very pragmatic note with, “Yours affectionately forever.” The Richards and Clayton journals show that Emma and Joseph were sealed for eternity and received full endowments during the following year.

This survey stresses the religious expressions of the first couple relevant to Emma’s five surviving letters to Joseph. Both partners assert clear spiritual values and strong faith in Joseph’s calling and revelations. Of course these were his personal experiences and must be measured by his integrity. Yet one major test of integrity is consistency, and Joseph communicated privately to Emma the same faith in his divine direction that he gave out publicly.

Joseph Smith’s unstudied conviction is equally impressive in these spontaneous expressions to his wife. And there is much more, for this discussion does not mention most of his 16 surviving letters to Emma. For instance, in 1832 Joseph wrote Emma in loneliness but expressed courage in “knowing that God is my friend—in him I shall find comfort. I have given my life into his hands. I am prepared to go at his call. I desire to be with Christ. I count not my life dear to me, only to do his will” (Jessee, *Personal Writings* 239).

Frontiers challenge the inquisitive, and the most intriguing spiritual frontiers are partitions separating mortality from immortality. Joseph Smith’s visions burst through these barriers. His assurances to Emma suggest and also directly refer to these visions, as in his 1842 proposal for the Wisconsin interlude, where the plan would be to take his scribe and in-process history “that we may pour upon the world the truth.” In saying that his



history must be known, the Prophet is also saying that its opening event, the First Vision of the Father and the Son, must go to the world.

In turn, Emma's letters quietly testify of her faith in Joseph's religious experiences. He either assumes this in writing to her, or expresses their common faith in the Restoration. He makes one such penetrating comment in connection with their 1842 conversations when in seclusion. She had made a visit with six trusted associates to a dark island to confer on his safety. In a few days he sent her the Wisconsin retreat letter, and on the same day dictated his intense gratitude for these visitors in the record he called "The Book of the Law of the Lord." Emma headed the list as he poured out gratitude to a group who knew his motives and the reality of his profound relationship with God: "These love the God that I serve; they love the truths that I promulg[at]e; they love those virtuous and those holy doctrines that I cherish in my bosom with the warmest feelings of my heart; and with that zeal which cannot be denied" (Jessee, *Papers* 2:416).

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