

SISTER EMMA SMITH

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Joseph Smith, Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith Family Reunion 2014

I want to thank the Smith Family Organization for inviting me and my wife to join you at this reunion. It is an honor and a joy to be with you. You are the descendants of Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith – you represent the First Family of the Restoration. I guess my wife and I represent the descendants of those who heard and accepted the message of the Restoration, in Ohio and Missouri – in Ireland and Wales.

In section 24 of Community of Christ's Doctrine and Covenants and section 25 of the LDS Church's Doctrine and Covenants, Emma Smith is referred to as an "elect lady." Some Doctrine and Covenants commentaries and LDS Church lesson manuals explain the elect lady title in reference to Emma's calling as the first president of the Relief Society. And while that is true in part, I have come to believe that there is much more to Emma's elect lady status than her role in the Relief Society.

In studying things written in the first half of the Nineteen Century, I have discovered that using *Noah Webster's 1828 Dictionary of the English Language* is quite useful. The meanings of many words have changed over the years and a word's definition common to us today may be completely different from what it meant 175 years ago. There are three different references to the word "elect" in the 1828 dictionary. Definitions include: that which is preferred; to select and choose; to designate for an office or position. And there are quite a few theological definitions. In Isaiah, Jesus is referred to as "mine elect." In scripture, "elect" can mean: chosen of God. Also, those who have been sanctified are often called "The Elect."

An in-depth exploration of Emma's life reveals that she was, indeed, an elect lady. Again, going back to the 1828 dictionary, the word "lady" has lost much of its luster in our time. Today, a person might ask, "Who were you just talking with?" and the reply might be, "I don't know; some lady." The term is commonly used in exasperation, as in, "Hey, lady, you want to move your car?"

Originally, the title “lady” was given to daughters of earls and others of high rank, but evolved into meaning any woman of genteel education. It was also a title for one who presided over a manor or a family. In the 19th century the title “lady” meant a woman of distinction. Emma Smith was certainly that - an educated, genteel, lady of the manor. But more importantly, she was a “chosen, royal daughter of God.”

Most of the churches that are expressions of the Restoration have been aware of Emma’s “elect” nature from the very beginning. As far as the LDS Church is concerned, certainly not all, but many of its members have been slower to become part of the Emma Smith fan club. But, as LDS Church members have come on board and have begun to recognize and acknowledge Emma for the strong and caring person she was, some look back and blame Brigham Young for the earlier, more negative image that existed regarding Emma Smith. He was clearly responsible for some of the things said that damaged her reputation.

Before I continue, you need to know that just as I am not a member of the Smith family, I am also not a descendant of Brigham Young. What I am, or try very hard to be, is a person striving to be as honest and objective as possible as I view history. I learned years ago that we do not KNOW much of the detail about historical events – we find what we can and develop opinions and theories. Also, I know if you look at the 1840s through 2014 eyes, you will never really come to a correct understanding of that era and the events that took place.

You also need to know that the doctoral dissertation I wrote at the University of the Pacific was about Brigham Young and that I like Brigham Young. But, that does not hinder me from recognizing some weaknesses he possessed and some mistakes he made. He is not a popular figure among many Restoration churches. And, as I see it, Emma Smith can be considered as culpable for some of the adverse feelings about Brigham Young.

I want to take just a few minutes to discuss the clash of these two very strong-willed people. We may never know exactly what happened between Emma and Brigham, but we can stop playing the blame game and try a little harder to see both sides. And then let it go and move on.

I could find no evidence of animosity between the two prior to the death of Joseph Smith. Brigham even named one of his daughters after Emma. But, whatever friendship there might have been initially deteriorated quickly when Brigham Young and the Twelve assumed leadership of the church. Through the years, historians have assigned blame for the relationship's demise to one or the other. Looking back, for whatever reasons, the anger and bitterness between the two appear to have increased over time and the insults and accusations were hurled freely from both sides.

A careful analysis of the enmity between Emma and Brigham reveals to me that there was a tendency by both to misinterpret each other's actions and motives. Additionally, a lack of sensitivity or poor judgment was manifested by both parties, perhaps because they never really understood the other's position. I see both of them as victims of circumstance, personality, differing doctrinal views, misinformation, and perhaps skewed perceptions of each other's actions. Did Brigham Young place police around Emma's home because he did not trust her, essentially putting her under house arrest? Or, did he place guards there to protect Emma and her family from possible attacks on Joseph's family? Perception makes a world of difference.

Emma did not get involved with the public debate regarding succession in church leadership. But she did privately oppose Brigham Young as Joseph's successor. It is hard to keep something like that a secret, and when known, her opposition was likely troubling and perhaps even hurtful to Brigham Young. In addition to the controversy over succession, there were misunderstandings and disagreements over what was Joseph's personal property and what was church property.

There was also the issue over where to bury Joseph's body. Joseph had a tomb constructed in Nauvoo and said to a number of brethren, including Brigham Young, that if he were to die, he wanted his body placed in that tomb. Emma had very good reasons for not burying him there. And, as Joseph's wife, she clearly had the right to bury him where she wished. But it may have been that Brigham Young felt like he was breaking a promise to the Prophet he loved.

There were other issues, but whatever the reasons for their hard feelings; both Brigham Young and Emma Smith said unkind things about

the other. In one letter to Joseph III, she spoke of the “falsehood and impious profanity that Brigham is capable of.” She made it clear that “there is not the least particle of friendship existing between him and myself.” Letters from Emma to her sons and things she said to her family about Brigham Young, likely influenced the way Joseph III and, ultimately, how the Reorganization viewed Brigham Young.

On Brigham’s part, his comments about Emma were likely more unkind, and in many ways were much worse because some were said in public meetings. You need to know a couple of things about Brigham Young. First, I don’t know that he ever wrote down or prepared what he was going to say from the pulpit. Second, and this is important, I discovered that Brigham Young had the opposite philosophy than that of Teddy Roosevelt. While Roosevelt said, “Speak softly, but carry a big stick;” Brigham’s philosophy appears to have been, “Roar like a lion, but deal softly on an individual basis.” He would say what he was thinking; but I found numerous examples where he would roar and bluster in public, but in private he was much gentler.

His public comments about Emma range from sympathetic to angry – sometimes in the same paragraph. Consider these statements by Brigham Young:

What of Joseph Smith’s family? What of his boys? I have prayed from the beginning for Sister Emma and the whole family. There is not a man in this Church that has entertained better feelings towards them . . . and when they make their appearance before this people, full of power, there are none but will say, “Amen! We are ready to receive you.”

But notice the sharp contrast in the next statement:
The sympathies of the Latter-day Saints are with the family of the martyred prophet. I never saw a day in the world that I would not almost worship that woman (referring to Emma – but then, this:) if she would be a saint instead of a devil.”

Little wonder that many of the Mountain Saints of that era and beyond, especially those who never knew Emma, had a somewhat negative view of her. Unkind things about her were said by the president of their church; a man they viewed as a prophet. That is all

that I want to say about the Emma Smith / Brigham Young feud – except I am very familiar with the “Healing Letter” delivered from Brigham Young’s descendants to Joseph Smith’s descendants. I hope there will be healing; and I hope it will go both ways.

On an encouraging note, in recent years there has been increased understanding and a much-more positive focus in the LDS Church on Emma Smith. My guess is that some of this is due to this very Smith family organization. Lessons about Emma have appeared in LDS Church-written manuals for Sunday classes and for high school and college students attending LDS seminary and institute. These lessons were a welcome sight. The generations following my own do not see Emma in a negative light. (I know; I have been teaching high school and college-age students for 38 years)

Complimentary, Pro-Emma articles have appeared in LDS church magazines. And I am aware of at least a half dozen books that have been published praising Emma’s strength and character. There have been several documentaries and one feature film about Emma Smith.

What I am trying to say is that LDS Church members are coming around to what others have known for years – that Emma Hale Smith was an elect lady. Sorry it has taken so long to get there.

You are all aware that Emma met Joseph when he boarded at the Hale home while he was employed by Josiah Stowell to search for buried treasure. Even after Stowell abandoned the treasure hunting, he kept Joseph on as a hired hand working on his farm – which allowed Joseph more time with Emma. On a trip home during that time, Joseph told his mother about Emma. He said that she would be his choice in preference to any other woman he had ever seen. Later, Joseph and Emma discussed marriage and approached Emma’s father, who responded with a very firm “NO.” That had the appearance of the end of the relationship.

But, in January 1827, Emma visited Josiah Stowell in Bainbridge and saw Joseph. Many years later she told her son, “I had no intention of marriage when I left home; but during my visit as Mr. Stowell’s, your father visited me there. My folks were bitterly opposed to him; and being importuned by your father, aided by Mr. Stowell, who urged me to

marry him; and preferring to marry him to any other man I knew, I consented." Joseph and Emma eloped and were married on January 18, 1827.

There are a number of sources that describe Emma; her appearance, her character and personality. Here are a few:

She stood tall and erect (about five foot nine). She had raven-colored hair and dark, hazel eyes that complimented her olive complexion. She usually brushed her long, dark hair to a shine and sometimes wore little curls at the sides of her face.

She had a fondness for horses and could manage them well in riding and driving. She was often seen on horseback beside her husband in a military parade. She always dressed becomingly and her riding costume showed off her shapely figure to the best advantage.

She was described as intelligent, articulate, and possessing a keen sense of humor. I read one account where a man at a social gathering teased her that she was fishing for a compliment, at which she immediately replied, "I never fish in shallow water." When Judge Stephen Douglas unexpectedly visited the Mansion House with some of Nauvoo's leaders, she had to come up with a quick dessert to serve them. She fried apple fritters to a fluffy perfection. Enjoying the treat, guests asked what she called the dessert. Emma smiled and said, "Candidates." When asked why, she good-humoredly replied, "Isn't it just a puff of wind?"

Here is another quote from one of her friends:

Sister Emma was benevolent and hospitable; she drew around her a large circle of friends, who were kept like good comrades. She was motherly in nature to young people; always had a houseful to entertain or be entertained. She was very high-spirited and the brethren and sisters paid her great respect . . . many of them indebted to her for favors and kindnesses.

Lucy Mack Smith said of her daughter-in-law, "I have never seen a woman in my life, who would endure every species of fatigue and hardship, from month to month, and from year to year, with that unflinching courage, zeal, and patience, which she has ever done; for I

know that which she has had to endure – she being tossed upon the ocean of uncertainty – she has breasted the storms of persecution, and buffeted the rage of man and devils, which would have born down almost any other woman.”

What information we learn about Emma Smith, we get primarily from others. She left no journal and there are very few letters she wrote that still exist. We are aware of some of the things she experienced and we do have some stories from her life.

We know that the labor with the birth of her first child was extremely long and difficult. That first baby, a son, died within three hours of birth. We also know that for two weeks following the delivery, Emma was very close to death – with Joseph by her side watching over her.

We read where Emma acted as scribe for her husband, writing a small portion of the Book of Mormon manuscript.

We learn about the loss of the twins Emma gave birth to; and shortly thereafter her nursing and caring for another set of twins whose mother died in childbirth.

We know that Emma experienced many lonely times because Joseph was often absent, either busy with Church responsibilities or vexed by lawsuits and arrests. After the Church was organized, the enemies of her husband caused Emma many anxious moments. She saw Joseph come home tarred and feathered. She experienced him being arrested and taken away from their family, not knowing when **or if** he would return.

As a little boy in my class for children at church, I heard the story of Kirtland’s School of the Prophets held on the second floor of the Newell K. Whitney store. Over 20 elders packed into a small room. I remember the teacher telling us that as soon as the meeting began, the men would light tobacco pipes and discuss the things of the kingdom in a room so filled with smoke that they could hardly see each other. There were also those who chewed tobacco and it was soon all over the floor.

Joseph and Emma lived in the Whitney store, and the task of scrubbing the tobacco spit from the hardwood floor fell upon her. She could not make the floor look decent because the stains were impossible to get out. She may have complained about being asked to perform this thankless task, but there was more to it. Emma told Joseph that the environment concerned her. The whole situation seemed less than ideal for gospel discussions. Based on Emma's concern, Joseph inquired of the Lord and the Word of Wisdom was revealed.

During the months that Joseph spent in Liberty Jail and the Mormons were driven from Missouri, Emma at age thirty-four, was forced from her home in February. She took her family (Julia, age 7; Joseph III, 6; Frederick, 2; and Alexander, who was 8 months old) on a two hundred mile journey across the American frontier, from Far West, Missouri to Quincy, Illinois. After traveling on what has been called the Mormon Trail of Tears, she and her family crossed the frozen Mississippi River into Quincy. In a letter to her husband she wrote that the recollection of that experience "is more than human nature ought to bear."

In addition to saving her family, Emma carried with her and preserved some important documents, including the manuscript of the Bible that Joseph had been revising.

Emma was responsible for the compilation of THREE hymnals – the first one in Kirtland; the second in Nauvoo; and the third one published in 1861 under the direction of her son, Joseph III, president of the RLDS Church.

I have already mentioned that she was the first president of the Relief Society of Nauvoo—Emma had proposed the name of that organization. The Relief Society raised funds for the building of the Nauvoo Temple and taking care of the poor. They also united in preparing petitions and gathering signatures to give to the governor of Illinois, asking him to protect Joseph Smith from extradition to Missouri. The first petition had 800 signatures – the second, about a thousand.

There are many things about Emma Smith that have impressed me over the years, but for me, *personally*, two stand out from the others.

First, was the tender care she gave to Lucy Mack Smith. From the time that Joseph and Emma came to live with his parents after they eloped, Lucy and Emma developed a very close relationship. Lucy lived near Joseph and Emma most of the seventeen years that they were married. Shy greatly admired Emma and after Joseph's death she tenderly said to Emma, "I am convinced that only a widow can imagine the feelings of a widow."

Although Lucy was welcomed by and felt at home with Emma, she was an independent person and, even though somewhat feeble, desired to live in her own home. When most of the Mormons evacuated Nauvoo, Lucy lived with her daughter in a town north of Nauvoo until 1851. At that time she moved in with Emma, who had returned to Nauvoo and remarried. When Lucy could no longer walk, Emma's husband, Lewis Bidamon, made her a wheelchair. In her old age, Lucy became very feeble and lost the ability to feed herself. Emma took care of her until she died in May 1856. Emma had always been willing to take care of people in need. Her care of Lucy Mack Smith in the final years of her life is a testimony to Emma's love and kindness.

Finally, this last item I will share tells me more about the noble nature of Emma Smith than anything else I have read. In 1847, three years after the death of Joseph, Emma married a man named Lewis Bidamon.

About Lewis Bidamon, Joseph III wrote: "There was much in the character of the man that called forth admiration. His house was open to all his friends; . . . there was always room at the table for any who might be present when the meal was ready and his uniform sociability made everyone welcome." Joseph III also wrote of Pa Bidamon that "He was not a good judge of human character and was easily imposed upon" and "while his moral character might not be considered of the highest quality" as far as the transactions of life are concerned, he has "a desire to deal honorably with his fellow men." I believe the Smith children cared for and appreciated him as a step-father. He was the only father that David Hyrum would ever know.

Lewis had been married before. His wife had died and left him with two daughters. Emma accepted the girls (ages thirteen and eleven) as her own children. And while that was very kind of Emma, it was not

particularly unusual. The next part of the story is what causes me to hold Emma in the highest regard.

On a farm just outside of Nauvoo lived a widow named Nancy Abercrombie. She was twenty-four years younger than Emma. Nancy gave birth to an illegitimate daughter in 1859 – father unknown. In the fall of 1863 she became pregnant again. This time, Lewis Bidamon was the child's father. The boy was born in March 1864 and was given the name Charles Edwin. Emma would turn sixty the summer of that same year. Emma left no record of any personal feelings or hurt she must have felt when she discovered what had happened. But, what she did after that demonstrates to me that she whole-heartedly believed the Relief Society motto: Charity Never Faileth.

Nancy tried to raise her family by herself for four years, but struggled. In 1868 she asked Emma to take Charles, at age four, and raise him as her own. Emma did. Later, Charles Edwin Bidamon wrote of Emma: "I was raised in her home and knew what kind of woman she was . . . she was a person of very even temper. I never heard her say an unkind word, or raise her voice in anger or contention. . . . She had a queenly bearing, without the arrogance of a queen. A noble woman, living and showing charity for all – loving and beloved."

And that's not all of the story. As Charles grew older, Emma gave his mother, Nancy, a job so she could be close to her son.

And there is still more to the story: As Emma sensed that she was approaching death, she was concerned that 15-year-old Charles Bidamon would have to live with the stigma of being an illegitimate child. So, she called her husband, Lewis, and Nancy Abercrombie to her bedside and asked them to marry after she was gone so that Charles would have proper parents. About a year after Emma died, Lewis and Nancy were married.

It is difficult for me to comprehend that degree of charity and compassion. I stand in awe of Emma for the Nancy Abercrombie incident alone.

In the dark hours before the dawn of April 30, 1879, Alexander heard his mother call, "Joseph, Joseph, Joseph." He quickly awakened his

brother, Joseph III, and they hurried to her room. They saw her raise herself up and reach out her left hand. "Joseph," she said, "Yes, yes, I'm coming." She lay back down and passed away.

It seems somewhat ironic to me that when Brigham Young died in his home on August 29, 1877, about two years before Emma, that he, according to his daughter, Zina, opened his eyes, gazed upward exclaiming, "Joseph! Joseph! Joseph!"

I have wondered if there was an awkward moment in the life after this when Brigham and Emma met. I have wondered if Joseph intervened, and perhaps mildly chastened them for their disputes in mortality. My guess is that they are friends again. I don't know.

But this much I do know. Emma Hale Smith was not perfect. Like all of us, she made mistakes in her life. But, the scriptures say, "Cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all . . . and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him or her." I know that Emma Smith possessed great charity and it shall be well with her. She was and is an elect lady—chosen to accomplish a great work here and, I believe, a great work in the eternities.