



Faith

Joseph Smith apparently was not Josephine Lyon's father, Mormon History Association speaker says

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A century-old question about whether Josephine Lyon was the child of founding LDS prophet Joseph Smith Jr. from a polygamous marriage to her mother was addressed Saturday during a session on the concluding day of the 51st annual Mormon History Association Conference that convened this year at Snowbird's Cliff Lodge.

And in another of scores of sessions during the two-day event, scholars presented their impressions of the Council of Fifty minutes, a recently released document from the Nauvoo, Illinois, period of LDS history.

DNA researcher Ugo A. Perego presented his findings supporting the conclusion that Joseph Smith was not the biological father of Josephine Lyon, who was born Feb. 8, 1844, in Nauvoo, four months before the Mormon leader's martyrdom at Carthage, Illinois.

Perego, who holds a doctorate in genetics and molecular sciences from the University of Pavia in Italy, has for years studied the DNA of the family of Joseph Smith, among other figures in Mormon history.

In the past, seven sons (Orrison Smith, Moroni Pratt, Zebulon Jacobs, Mosiah Hancock, Oliver Buell, John Hancock and Don Alonzo Smith) were ascribed to Joseph Smith through polygamous unions. Negative findings resulted after DNA testing was employed to reconstruct Joseph Smith's male Y chromosome signature and to compare it to the Y chromosome of male descendants of the alleged sons.

"However, the most frequently mentioned child linked to Joseph Smith through plural marriage is Josephine Lyon," Perego said. "Josephine's mother, Sylvia Sessions, was married to Windsor Lyon, but historical evidence indicates that Sylvia was also married to Joseph Smith. Near the end of her life, in 1882, Sylvia told Josephine that she was the daughter of the Prophet Joseph Smith."

The statement was recorded in an affidavit given by Josephine in 1915.

"DNA testing used in the past and based solely on the male-inherited Y chromosome could not be employed to address the question of Josephine's biological paternity," Perego explained. "Being a girl, she would not have received that piece of DNA from her father. However, she would have inherited approximately 50 percent of each of her parents' autosomal DNA."

Only in recent years has autosomal DNA testing been available to analyze considerable portions of the human genome at an affordable cost, Perego said. Moreover, supporting technology and a better understanding of how to use the data for family history research has only come about lately.

"The current study therefore utilizes autosomal DNA data to resolve a historic question that has been unresolved for more than 100 years, that of Josephine's true parentage," Perego said.

He noted that 55 DNA samples, mostly from direct descendants of Joseph Smith and Josephine Lyon, with a few from Hyrum Smith and other Lyon lines used as controls, were collected for the study.

Autosomal DNA was produced and compared to support recorded genealogical records, first within the Joseph Smith and Josephine Lyon families to validate the genealogical records and biological relationships, and second between the two families to investigate a possible biological connection between Joseph Smith and Josephine Lyon.

"DNA comparison between the two families showed no genetic evidence of a biological relationship, while comparison of

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Josephine Lyon's descendants with other individuals descending from Lyon's lines bearing no apparent close relationship to the Smith family showed a significant amount of shared DNA," Perego reported. "This information strongly supports that Joseph Smith was not the biological father of Josephine Lyon, but that she was the daughter of Windsor Lyon."

In a Friday session at the conference, the subject was the minutes from the Council of Fifty, an organization established by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo in 1844 to represent a future theocratic kingdom of God on earth. Following the prophet's death, the council continued to meet under the leadership of Brigham Young and played a key role in planning for the westward trek of the Mormon pioneers from Nauvoo to the Salt Lake Valley.

The minutes of the council remained in the church archives in Salt Lake City and unavailable for research until they were released in September 2013. They comprise a soon-to-be-published volume in the Joseph Smith Papers project of the LDS Church History Department.

Advance copies of the minutes were made available to four scholars – Richard Bushman, Jan Shipps, Richard Bennett and Paul Reeve – who gave their assessments during the conference session.

Bushman of Columbia University, author of the popular Joseph Smith biography "Rough Stone Rolling," said the minutes are "a triumph of the Church History Department's transparency policy."

"Over the years, the council minutes obtained almost legendary status as a trove of dark secrets sequestered in the recesses of the First Presidency's vault. Now, the minutes are to be published for all to examine."

Bushman said the minutes shed light on questions pertaining to the last days of Nauvoo that could not be answered before.

Though none of the topics addressed therein are completely new, "the minutes reveal how desperate and angry the leaders were and how far they were willing to go."

Bushman posed the question of whether or not the church was committed to the United States as a host government in the wake of church members having suffered oppression.

"The papers don't offer a definitive yes or no answer to this question," he said.

"If the ties were never severed completely, the strongest impression in the rhetoric that William Clayton recorded in the minutes was of men ready to abandon ship," Bushman remarked. "Anger the saints felt at the abuses they had suffered and the impotence of government in rescuing the Mormons boils to the surface time and again. In places, the language was excruciating. Perhaps much of the council's rhetoric was froth, not hard policy, but they gave vent repeatedly and passionately."

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