

Lying for the Lord: An Essay

Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage. Appendix I.

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Modern Mormonism's reputation for sobriety and honesty is proverbial. Latter-day Saint sermons are freighted with admonitions concerning the importance of upright, open dealing with one's neighbors. Like John Milton, Heber C. Kimball said that truth summoned special powers of its own. There was, he said, no need for "any lies being told, or of any misrepresentations being made."¹ The church, like its Deity, said another leader, should use straight language. God's words were "yea and amen, plain, pointed, definite, no two meanings about them."² Those trafficking in deceit, warned George Q. Cannon, lost the spirit of God as well as the trust of men.³ "I do not care how wise the man is, how long the prayer he may make, or how reverend [*sic*] he may look," said John Morgan, "if he tells a lie, it is a lie, and you cannot change or alter it."⁴

In early 1907 the First Presidency issued a major address in which they specifically denied the use of duplicity in any of their dealings. "Enlightened investigation," they said, had always been the goal of the church. Again, in 1910, when the magazine crusade against new polygamy was reviving, an editorial in the *Deseret News* said that not only had Latter-day Saints always been truthful but that they, of all people, were most obliged to be so. They "cannot say one thing and do another."⁵ Those adhering to the gospel must operate "in full light," said Apostle John A. Widtsoe. "There is no secrecy about [Mormonism's] ... doctrine, aim, or work." The church, he said, had always fought darkness, and, in its pursuit of knowledge, should let chips from "the axe of truth" fall where they may.⁶ A contemporary apostle repeated these injunctions, declaring that there simply is "no justification for lying."⁷ And a member of the First Presidency, enlarging on the same theme, warned that when one resorts to falsehood and deception, [p. 364] even in behalf of a worthy cause, there is danger such practice will spread to other employments "like a disease that is endemic."⁸

Professions of this sort call into question the behavior we have seen attending Mormonism's contest with the world over polygamy. It is as if the church read from differing scripts. Depending on circumstances, Mormon authorities seemed to shift between registers of opposing values. So dramatic an inconsistency cannot fail to provoke inquiry. It fairly begs the scholar's attention.

Despite its declarations, Mormonism has always sequestered, in one way or another, a surprisingly large amount of its ritual and doings. The degree to which its revealments were connected with the occult in early America has been recently noticed.⁹ Ceremonies associated with the endowment in Mormon temples have long been hidden and oath-protected. Council of Fifty gatherings were conducted in strict privacy.¹⁰ In the nineteenth century men were chastised for publicly discussing what occurred in priesthood meetings and, early on, were told there were things best kept even from their wives.¹¹ Much of the discussion associated with reestablishment of the School of the Prophets in the early 1880s related to graded instruction for candidates at different levels of worthiness. Secret ceremonies were involved and initiates were told not to reveal what was said.¹² Deliberations and accounts by the church's highest leaders remain unavailable to the public to the present day.

These and other concealments suggest not only an equation between the secret and the sacred but an essentially defensive psychological posture. While this undoubtedly acted, as David Brion Davis pointed out, to confirm the worst suspicions of their enemies, it also strengthened the Mormon sense of community.¹³ Church members' secrets set them apart from the world, sealed them up to one another through things arcane, and fortified them in their confidence that they were the special friends of God.¹⁴

We saw how church leaders at the time of Joseph Smith withheld knowledge concerning polygamy not only from the general public but from many of their own followers. There seems always to have been a special sensitivity about the subject—perhaps because rumor concerning sexual misconduct nagged the church with such stubbornness from its beginning. A month before he was killed, the Prophet Joseph Smith admitted that it seemed he had been married little more than five minutes to his wife Emma before it was charged that he had plural wives. Talk of spiritual wifery and adultery so plagued the church, he said, that "a man dares not speak or wink, for fear of being accused" of [p. 365] such things.¹⁵ At the same time, the fact of plurality on the part of Joseph and his associates and the coloring of truth in connection with it has been reported by almost every student of the period.¹⁶

Outright denial was but one of several strategies employed. Declarations of fidelity to law, disapproval of those who married too quickly after the death of a first wife, and expressions of outrage when accused of departures from traditional morality were also used to obstruct an open view of what was happening.¹⁷ Statements denying plurality were phrased either to permit more than one interpretation, or to avoid directly disallowing the possibility of such marriages if correctly authorized.¹⁸ Words like *priesthood*, *sealing*, *giving counsel*, or urging attention to the parable of the talents carried special meanings for the initiated.¹⁹

Some have explained that the Saints properly condemned "spiritual wifery" or John C. Bennett's "secret Wife system." These were not the same, it is argued, as "plural marriage" or "celestial marriage"—what Mormon leaders actually preached. It has also been said that, in those instances in which Joseph and others denied that "the church"

was teaching plural marriage, they were correct. Most of the general membership were unaware of what was happening, it had not been made an official doctrine, and those practicing it were doing so by private permission only.²⁰

Not only do such defenses ignore repeated denials that they were engaging in the practice under any name but there are grounds for believing that the term *spiritual wife* was, in fact, employed by Mormons both before and after their exodus to the Great Basin.²¹ Beyond this, later in the century, as part of the skirmishing between Utah and RLDS Mormons, the contradictions were acknowledged and described as “very wisely drawn,” as one of the evidences that plurality was indeed in vogue among those close to the prophet.²² There is testimony that instruction was expressly given on how to conceal it.²³ And one must confront pretzled language like that of the prophet when, though husband to scores of women, he exclaimed, “What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one.”²⁴

Given the mobbings, dispossessions, and murders that were so often the lot of the Saints, there is good reason for tendencies toward enclosure. We earlier remarked on the sense of insecurity and the formative significance of such things in early Mormonism generally.²⁵ This undoubtedly explains why the prophet laid such store by loyalty and friendship. Joseph’s instruction to the Quorum of Twelve Apostles in 1839, born of cruel experience, was, above all else, “do not [p. 366] betray your *Friend*.”²⁶ A connection between secrecy and friendship was made in 1841 when he said that the reason more “secrets of the Lord” were not revealed was because so few could keep them. This was followed, once more, by emphasis on the need to observe and honor friendship even to death.²⁷ Justus Morse told how, as a Danite in Missouri in 1838, he and others were directed to assist each other when in difficulty by lying, “and to do it with such positiveness and assurance that no one would question our testimony.”²⁸ The greatest of evils, Joseph said in his 1839 address to the apostles, were “sinning against the Holy Ghost and proving a traitor to the brethren.”²⁹ Mosiah Hancock remembered that the prophet spoke on the subject in Nauvoo, lamenting that he had been betrayed by some who were closest to him.³⁰ Given the perils and social complexities involved, it is easy to understand why dissimulation was used in protecting the church’s polygamous affairs.³¹

Neither Mormon nor Gentile, it was sometimes said, was able to absorb a full disclosure of the truth. Not only had Saint Paul indicated that new converts must be fed a modified doctrinal diet, but Joseph Smith, in an early revelation, referred to his followers as “little children,” unable to “bear all things now.”³² On other occasions he spoke of the inexpediency of telling all, of the non-written nature of some of his revelations, and the great difficulty he had in teaching things contrary to tradition.³³ Brigham Young remembered that, as early as in Kirtland, the prophet told him that if he was open about what he had received from heaven, “not a man or woman would stay with me.” And Levi Hancock recalled that Joseph once remarked to him that if he were to reveal all God had shown him, his own followers would seek his life.³⁴ The sense of peril, if all were made public, extended to a concern for the entire Mormon community. “What would it have done for us,” asked Orson Hyde later, “if they had known that many of us had more than one wife when we lived in Illinois? They would have broken us up, doubtless, worse than they did!”³⁵

Mormon leaders undoubtedly found the deceit involved an onerous condition. This may be why the prophet counseled the Female Relief Society not to be overzealous in their search for wrongdoing and to be charitable toward the accused. He was especially aggravated by stories about adultery and the taking of spiritual wives.³⁶ Discomfort with holding a curtain to the eyes of Mormons themselves prompted Joseph to attempt, on more than one occasion, a cautious unveiling of the practice. This was certainly the intention, for example, with issuance in 1842 of the Udney Hay Jacob pamphlet.³⁷ It also explains the prophet’s reminder to his followers that part [p. 367] of his mission involved a breaking down of superstition and a reformation of what was considered sinful.³⁸

Polygamous activities by the leaders, and the deceit considered necessary to shelter them, contributed directly to the assassinations of Joseph and Hyrum Smith.³⁹ During the city council debate over allegations in the *Expositor* concerning his doctrines and behavior toward women, Joseph found it necessary to double back upon himself, declaring he had not kept the doctrine secret but had taught it openly.⁴⁰ It was nearer the truth a few months later when, raging against the proposal that it was yet necessary to hide things about the church, the prophet’s widow told William Clayton that “it was secret things which had cost Joseph and Hyrum their lives.”⁴¹

Dissimulation did not cease when the Saints moved west. Although greater freedom existed as early as their stay in Iowa, there was still reticence about their marriage philosophy, and secrecy was enjoined on participants.⁴² In a well-known 1850 debate with Protestant ministers in France, Apostle John Taylor, although the husband of ten wives, denied that polygamy was practiced in the church, saying that it was a thing “too outrageous to admit of belief.”⁴³ Orson Pratt, on call to publicly champion the practice, bent facts about it.⁴⁴ And many years later Charles W. Penrose admitted that, after the prophet’s death, some things about him were deleted from church publications “for prudential reasons.”⁴⁵

So far as the practice of plural marriage in the Great Basin is concerned, Brigham Young once said that, while some told the outside world it did not exist, he refused to blanket the facts. “I never deny it,” he said. “I am perfectly willing that...[non-members] should know that I have more than one wife and they are pure before the Lord and are approved in his sight.”⁴⁶ At the same time, in connection with his theories of the godhead, Young said he withheld much of what he knew. And George A. Smith revived the theme of a filtered exposure for those young in knowledge of the Gospel. The majority of things sacred and binding on the Saints, said another, properly remained unwritten.⁴⁷ Emphasis on the importance of protecting friends also continued. In 1859, probably as part of an effort to obscure church connection with the Mountain Meadows massacre, apostles Amasa Lyman and George A. Smith fulminated against doubting members who “sought to betray and expose their brethren into the hands of their enemies.”⁴⁸

Referring to the charge that Latter-day Saints in Utah resorted to falsehood when asked about their marriage patterns, Richard Burton repeated their answer, saying they wished only to deny imputation of [p. 368] any similarity between the Mormon practice of “true patriarchal marriage” and the “spiritual wifedom,” “free loveism,” and “Fanny Wrightism” familiar to outsiders.⁴⁹ Claims that the generality of people were unprepared to accept all

truths received by God's oracles continued to be made to justify Mormon reservation. And the turning of words or attribution of qualified meanings to certain passages of language was defended as communicating truth in a way that "those who had the spirit of truth could understand."⁵⁰

When the national campaign against Mormon polygamy became intense, the use of non-truths spread rapidly to the larger body of the church. In his account of the legislative and constitutional extremes to which Idaho legislators felt they must go, John D. Hicks described those Mormon tactics that provoked the response. It was alleged, he said, that "when polygamists were prohibited from voting, the Mormons promptly swore that they were not polygamists; when those who taught polygamy were discriminated against, everybody immediately became silent on the subject; and when members of organizations which advocated polygamy were denied the ballot, they withdrew...from the Mormon Church."⁵¹ Children were instructed to deny knowledge of family relationships, of their parents' whereabouts, and even of their own last names.⁵² One church authority was so concerned about the pervasiveness of intentional falsehood that he feared for its effect on the moral fiber of Mormon society. In a letter to President John Taylor in 1887, Charles W. Penrose expressed concern that "the endless subterfuges and prevarications which our present condition impose...threaten to make our rising generation a race of deceivers."⁵³

A revealing instance arising from such policies occurred when committee hearings were conducted on Utah's proposed 1887 constitution and accompanying petition for statehood. Franklin S. Richards, a Mormon attorney who counseled the church in legal matters and a son of Apostle Franklin D. Richards, worked with the territorial delegate John T. Caine to present Utah's case. In a series of letters from the nation's capital to the First Presidency, Richards explained that he felt great anxiety about the assignment because certain questions, if not answered carefully, could prejudice congressmen against them and there was already suspicion that Mormons were not to be trusted. He was particularly worried about queries as to whether plural marriage was a commandment binding on the Saints. There was also concern as to whether a compact could be struck between the church and the government—that is, to what extent could official Mormonism [p. 369] be made responsible for the polygamous behavior of private citizens in Utah.⁵⁴

By careful design Richards and Caine were able to work their way around these issues. This involved taking an aggressive, rather than defensive, stance at the hearings, allowing them to head off difficult questions. Caine also read the 1843 revelation to the congressmen in such a way and crafted his answers to their inquiries so as to give a modified impression of the truth. He stated that plurality was not a commandment to the Saints and that "celestial" and "plural" marriage were not the same thing; and he treated the idea of a "compact" between the church and the government so that leaders could later deny they were bound by it. Beyond this, Caine denied there was any mistruth in Mormon statements, calling such charges "the merest balderdash." He also said polygamy was "a dead issue" in Utah and that it would not be revived.⁵⁵ Richards, at least, believed his answers to have been guided by inspiration and thanked the First Presidency for approving his conduct.⁵⁶

Not all were happy with this approach. Speaking at a church meeting in Nephi, Utah, Apostle John W. Taylor branded Caine's statement on the death of polygamy a "d—d lie." If plural marriage were dead, he declared, "the whole religion was dead." More importantly, Taylor devoted most of his reported remarks to the error of employing mistruth as a defense. In the first place, he said, it was impossible to deceive the nation in such things. The Saints were sure to be found out. More importantly, honesty was also a part of the Gospel. Instead of prevarication, Taylor said, Mormon spokesmen should tell the truth and take the consequences. Rather than bending and deceiving, they should declare firmly for polygamy as a Mormon essential, leaving members to conduct themselves according to their own consciences.⁵⁷ Deception as a part of Mormon strategy was an issue of growing difference between Apostle Taylor and other church leaders. Referring to the time of the Smoot investigation, his wife Janet said: "John was considered a little out of harmony because he didn't like this way of doing. He was a frank man and didn't like to say one thing aloud and another in a whisper."⁵⁸

Taylor's dissent is significant, not only as an echo of anxieties already expressed by Charles W. Penrose but because of its agreement with one of the major themes of this book: the consequence of pragmatic resort to distortion, the opposition of public statement to private fact, and the growing acceptance by church members themselves of claims that polygamy was entirely a thing of the past—a belief succored [p. 370] by conviction that their leaders would not lie. Taylor's objection to the Caine statement made little difference, however. A month and a half after his comment in Nephi, President George Q. Cannon was asked at a special church meeting which of the two was correct, John T. Caine or Apostle Taylor. Cannon answered that both were right. In a legal sense, polygamy was dead. Ecclesiastically, however, the principle remained alive. Another authority illustrated the church's approach by saying that he no longer gave recommends for marrying plural wives but gave them for obtaining whatever blessings the Lord might bestow.⁵⁹

It was hardly unexpected, then, that the Woodruff Manifesto was probably drawn, and certainly interpreted, with ulterior purposes in view. Mormonism's continued support for polygamy after 1890, and the use of devices to obscure it, was but a perpetuation of styles long practiced. There was a difference, however, in that after 1890 leaders found it necessary to exclude not only Gentiles but many church members from a knowledge of newly authorized plural contractions. This returned the church to circumstances analogous to those under the Prophet Joseph Smith in Nauvoo. Whereas all Mormons, polygamous and non-polygamous, might take umbrage from attacks on the church's tenets during the crusade, after 1890 they were divided into two classes of their own: those who believed the leaders' pretensions about the abandonment of polygamy and those who looked upon such statements as a hedge against discovery of the truth. As in the Nauvoo period, those aware of these things had to reconcile them as best they could. Franklin S. Richards once told Carl A. Badger how he appropriated purposeful inconsistencies by his leaders. He put such problems aside, he said, by considering the good and the noble men and women in the church, as opposed to what he would forfeit by rejecting them for their faults.⁶⁰

However large their church's treasury of merit, some Mormons still balked at the practice of deceit. In a 1903 letter from Wiley Nebeker of Afton, Wyoming, to Apostle John Henry Smith, Nebeker said he was troubled by the fact that, although the church made official statements that plural marriages were no longer condoned, he frequently heard of men and women, some from his own area, entering the principle. Rumors to this effect were so common

that both members and non-members in Wyoming talked about it. It was even said, he told Smith, that some were specially called by apostles to continue the practice. Nebeker went on to say that, while he accepted the divine origin of plural marriage and believed it to be as true as baptism and repentance, he could not condone a duplicitous policy that said one [p. 371] thing while doing another. "To be plain," Nebeker wrote, "while I am fully converted to the belief that this is a true principle, I am not converted to the idea that the Lord justifies deceit and falsehood." Surely, he declared, if God wanted the practice carried on, it would be better to openly admit as much, "even if it brings persecution upon us, because then there can be no reproach—we will not be under the necessity of apologizing to our own consciences."⁶¹

Because rumors of the kind referred to by Nebeker were so widespread, he suggested that Apostle Smith use his [Nebeker's] letter as the basis for a public statement on the subject, possibly in the columns of the *Deseret News*. At the least, he asked for private explanation in the matter. Smith replied within the week. Unless there was a verbal exchange or other yet undiscovered communication between the two, the apostle's response illustrates the wall of disinformation leaders constructed around the practice of post-Manifesto plural marriage. Smith told Nebeker that not only was permission presently unavailable for anyone in the church to enter the principle but since the Manifesto no one had been authorized to undertake a polygamous marriage. There may be a few who were plurally married before the Manifesto who could yet be found living together, Smith said, but that was the size of it. The doctrine was true but the practice was forbidden out of regard for laws of the land.⁶² Whatever Wiley Nebeker thought of this answer, it is clear Smith felt it best not even to address the central issue raised—dishonesty. Instead, by providing no more than an unqualified repetition of church denials, the apostle perpetuated it.

The pressure on those undertaking plural marriages in the post-Manifesto years was extraordinarily intense. Katherine C. Thomas, whose father, George Mousley Cannon, had married her mother as a polygamous wife in 1901, said she and her siblings were told not to ask their parents about their plural relationship. As a child she was instructed to conceal from others the identity of her father, and as a first grader in Salt Lake City she was required to attend school using a false name.⁶³ Anthony W. Ivins's son, Heber Grant Ivins, told of his dismay as a youngster when a church officer visiting with one of his plural families in the Ivins home lectured one of his children on the need to give a false name when asked by others who she was. Later, after he became an apostle and moved to Salt Lake City, another of Ivins's children, Florence, described how, following a meeting with fellow apostles and the First Presidency, her father seemed upset. When Florence asked her mother what the matter was, Mrs. Ivins confided to her that during the meeting President Smith had said he "would lie any day to save [his]...brother." Ivins—who, as we saw at the time of [p. 372] the Smoot investigation, had always opposed deceit—was shaken. Florence said that she believed her father troubled over President Smith's statement for the rest of his life.⁶⁴

With the world divided into those for and those against, suspicions sometimes partook of an intramural character, infecting relationships between quorum members themselves. At the time of the Smoot investigation, when great care was taken to coordinate answers and cloak Senator Smoot with the appearance of ignorance regarding the polygamous activities of his colleagues, for reasons yet unclear one of the plural wives of President Joseph F. Smith referred to Apostle Charles W. Penrose as "a Judas."⁶⁵ Uneasiness also led some leaders to caution their colleagues not to write everything that was said and done in their diaries. Referring specifically to the journals of George Q. Cannon and Abraham H. Cannon, Joseph F. Smith feared their enemies might gain access to and use such materials against them. For this reason some urged that no private record of what transpired in their meetings be kept by individual apostles at all.⁶⁶

Men engaged in what they believe are great causes naturally order the data of their perceptions to vouchsafe their dearest goals. This is not always a conscious process. As Wingfield-Stratford said in his discussion of John Richard Green, a well-known English historian captive to the whig-liberal myth, he was an entirely honorable gentleman "who would have rather died than lied deliberately." Yet his biases were so deeply felt that, although contradictory, what he found and what he read were made to fit neatly into the frame of an already accepted historical scheme.⁶⁷ In the early 1890s, when Mormon leaders were attempting to organize church members along traditional party lines, they once instructed their followers that political commitment was less important than the appearance of division itself. When asked if such an approach were not insincere, George Q. Cannon said sincerity was irrelevant in the present case. Without such division, he said, more unfriendly legislation was likely. And security against this, he urged, was of greater priority.⁶⁸ However disingenuous they may have appeared to an outsider, it is unlikely Mormon leaders sensed anything but righteous consistency in their defensive adaptations for so high a cause as plural marriage.

Matthias F. Cowley provides another illustration of how malleable, in threatened circumstances, traditional values can be. At the time of his hearing before the Quorum of Twelve Apostles in 1911, describing how he had performed post-Manifesto plural marriages when authorized by George Q. Cannon and others, he related the chastisement he once received for consulting too broadly in certain cases. He [p. 373] also spoke of the practice of pre-dating post-1890 plural marriages so as to make them appear to have occurred before the Manifesto. "I mention these things," he said, "only to show the training I have had from those over me." He might have added that they were but drawing on the teachings of others before them.⁶⁹ Yet Cowley did not view himself as a dishonest man. In what would otherwise seem a non sequitur, he told the quorum: "I am not dishonest and not a liar and have always been true to the work and to the brethren...We have always been taught that when the brethren were in a tight place that it would not be amiss to lie to help them out." Then, in words remarkably close to those that troubled Anthony W. Ivins (and those remembered from an earlier occasion by Justus Morse), Cowley said he had heard a member of the First Presidency say that "he would lie like hell to help the brethren."⁷⁰

In addition to a commitment to friendship, and the capacity religious intensity has for blurring moral boundaries, Cowley's statements draw our attention to another feature of the Mormon belief system. Church authorities from the time of the prophet Joseph Smith onward placed great stress on the need for "following the brethren." Because men and women were thought not able always to see as far and as clearly as their leaders, church members were told that, when confronted with doubt or difference, they should subordinate their judgment to that of priesthood superiors. As Brooks Adams explained when discussing early New England, the power of the ministry lay in parishioners' belief that religious authorities possessed vision unavailable to the common run of men. When this

belief combined with suspicion that disagreement with the ministers' views had a better than average chance of being the work of the Devil, ecclesiastical authorities found enormous forces in their hands.⁷¹

These assumptions made it possible for Mormon leaders to claim that the Lord's servants ought properly to "dictate" not only "in the greatest and what might be deemed the most trifling matters" but to impose judgment as well. Men refusing calls to go on church missions, for instance, were once told they should expect to forfeit their wives for insubordination.⁷² Utah's territorial governor, Arthur L. Thomas, spoke to this very condition. He said it had nothing to do with the Saints' ethical character; but because of Mormon belief in the inspiration of their leaders, if they should "be told to sign a declaration [that] they were Mohammedans and that the priesthood understood the matter and it was for the advancement of the cause and the glory of God, they would probably do it."⁷³

Latter-day Saint precept, with its rich and contradictory texture, [p. 374] occasionally urged men and women to dissent from church leadership if they believed it morally wrong.⁷⁴ More often they were told not to criticize their leaders, not to openly dispute their judgment, and, as Brigham Young once put it, to remember that "sheep must follow the Shepherd, not the shepherd follow the sheep."⁷⁵ The Prophet Joseph Smith provided an example when, after being refused, he attempted to persuade Nancy Rigdon to become his plural wife: "That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another...Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire...But in obedience there is joy and peace unspotted."⁷⁶ This feature of Mormon society was, and continues to be, often discussed and criticized.⁷⁷ At the same time, it has been an important reason for Latter-day Saint communal success. It lent its weight to the survival of polygamy when the principle was under siege. As one Mormon explained in accounting for his polygamous father's forthright practice of the doctrine: "You don't question things. If the church says it, you don't say yes or no, you go along."⁷⁸ Adherence that is willingly blind necessarily relegates truth to a lesser order of priority.

To these explanations must be added another. In the minds of some, their circumstance was entirely involuntary. The Saints had been brought to a condition in which they must be true either to their religion, with its requirements, or to their country, with, in their view, its unrighteous laws. This unwanted dilemma is what gave them cloven speech and manners. Anxious justification was clearly what prompted President John Taylor to declare in 1880: "Have we done anything covertly? Not until we were forced to."⁷⁹ Richard W. Young, a prominent Salt Lake City attorney and stake president, struggled with the same issue before the Smoot investigating committee in accounting for false denials in the early church. Although uncomfortable with such things, Young explained them as the result of "exigency" and "circumstances."⁸⁰

Men yet living with plural wives, contrary to the law and after the Manifesto was interpreted as prohibiting it, were, said another churchman, like one having to pull his ox from the mire on the sabbath.⁸¹ Henry S. Tanner explained it best. The promises made by the Mormons to the government, he said, were extracted by force. It was like a man seized by a powerful foe and compelled to say things ordinarily repugnant as the only way to obtain his freedom. Under such circumstances, Tanner stated, the words had no binding power. Consequently, the Mormons were as free as if they had made no promises at all.⁸² By interpreting anti-Mormon laws as Satanic artifice [p. 375] in which the Saints had become involuntarily ensnared, those who continued to marry and live polygamously were forced to prevaricate as the only way of escape.

The Book of Mormon prophet, Nephi, once was instructed to take the life of another that God's purposes might be fulfilled.⁸³ With His help the Saints could outwit the enemy again. Verbal contortions might be inspired. Church leaders sincerely believed that God sometimes led them by a different way when important things were at stake. When Heber J. Grant astonished Judge John W. Judd by telling him that he did not intend to observe the laws prohibiting polygamous cohabitation, Judd asked about Grant's signed promise that, if given amnesty, he would keep such laws. The apostle was reported to answer "that that made no difference, [because] every man who signed had to make his election of the force of his signature."⁸⁴ This was close to the thrust of Apostle John Henry Smith's alleged remark that the Woodruff Manifesto was but "a trick to beat the devil at his own game."⁸⁵ Like the Shia of Islam, Mormons believed that dissimulation for the cause really was not wrong. Because they were compelled, by lying with mental reservation the faithful were yet in the service of the Lord.⁸⁶

History is generous with examples of individuals responding in similar ways when caught in circumstances like those confronting the Saints. Not only were there instances in scripture, like Abraham, who had such resorts forced upon them, but in every war there have been cases when to lie was construed as an act of patriotism.⁸⁷ And what is to be said of the deceit surrounding circumvention of things like British taxes in the colonial period or the fugitive slave laws? Heber Bennion, recalling President Heber J. Grant to memory of the Mormon practice of false denial in the past, reminded him that, depending on the circumstance, it could be quite acceptable. If such behavior were to be categorically condemned, what of the countless fibs told to children in the interest of benign myth? What was to be done with Jacob lying to obtain Esau's blessing? And, he asked, what of President Joseph F. Smith's purposeful misstatements before the Smoot investigating committee?⁸⁸ These same considerations led Anthony W. Ivins's son Grant to plead extenuation in the church's behalf.⁸⁹ Given the high priority attached to the practice of polygamy, one can understand the lengths to which Mormon determination was carried in preserving it.

These arguments have been addressed before, however. In the nineteenth century Thomas B. H. Stenhouse noted that not only must the Mormons bear greater responsibility for their dilemmas than they [p. 376] were inclined to do but, said Stenhouse, "if once admitted to be justifiable, how frequently and to what other ends may [such resorts] ... not be used?"⁹⁰ This was a cogent reminder and one often remarked before. It was the essence of Montaigne's warning that purposeful misrepresentation usually leads to corruption in other things.⁹¹ And Thomas Hutchinson, on the eve of the American Revolution, cautioned that lying could be excused in behalf of immorality as easily as principle. In any case, he said, it was "a scurvy trick at best."⁹²

It was confusing enough to some young Mormons that the worthiest in their communities would surreptitiously engage in polygamy, knowing it was against the law.⁹³ But to subscribe to a policy of overt deceit by arguing for its service to a higher end compounded the evil. It was this to which Carl A. Badger referred when, smarting with

embarrassment over statements by his leaders during the Smoot investigation, he lamented that, if only the church had been faithful to the promises they had made and to the Manifesto, all the world would have admired their integrity. As Badger described it, however, church leaders had decided there were some things more important than honesty. The result, he said, was moral confusion.⁹⁴ One wonders if the same thing was in the mind of George D. Kirby in 1910 when, writing in the *Improvement Era* of allegations that Mormons were deceitful, asked if, after all, there might be “truth in the charges.”⁹⁵ This again reminds one of the fears expressed by Charles W. Penrose and John W. Taylor.

Most fundamentally, what brought these trials upon the church was the decision to project only the *appearance* of compromise. As Senator Joseph Bailey said when interrogating Joseph F. Smith in 1904, given the alleged gravity of their attachment to the doctrine, he would have thought that, as Christians, Mormons would have gone “to the stake” before temporizing with plurality.⁹⁶ A policy of pretense once taken, however, casuistry, secrecy, and moral contradiction necessarily followed. And this, just as certainly, invited charges of hypocritical behavior. After the turn of the century, outsiders more than once observed that Mormon leaders consistently stood for honest policies—so long as their own affairs were not involved. As one gentile resident was reported to express it, “When any of us sin...we sin for our own sakes.” But when a Saint crossed the line, it was done “for Christ’s sake.”⁹⁷

In 1897 someone pretending to be a church member, calling himself “Juab, a High Private in Israel,” wrote a sardonic response to remarks about continued polygamy and Mormon deception that were made at a meeting of Methodist ministers. “Juab” faulted the pastors [p. 377] for their want of heavenly guidance. Otherwise, he said, they could easily interpret the Manifesto and other cases of Mormon “inspired phraseology.” Everything the Mormons said and promised about polygamy had been prayerfully and thoughtfully written. If they found such documents confusing or contradictory, the ministers simply lacked a discerning spirit.⁹⁸ It was the Saints, of course, that “Juab” mocked. In 1898 Theodore Schroeder published a blistering series of articles entitled “Polygamy and Inspired Lies.” In these installments he cited instance after instance, from the time of Joseph Smith the Prophet to Schroeder’s own day, illustrating the church’s use of mis-truth as a way to hide polygamy. In the end he asked the question historically posed by others: “How can we ever know that the reasons which prompted falsehoods once, may not be inducing falsehoods to be told again?”⁹⁹

Much of the *Salt Lake Tribune’s* ferocity in these years was fueled by disgust that Mormon leaders would, while claiming their church to be the Lord’s special vessel of truth, so frequently corrupt it. In 1899 the *Tribune* sarcastically reported comments by a local bishop to the effect that it may be necessary to distort facts to get Brigham H. Roberts elected to Congress. This was justified not only because the full truth could be told later but because the hand of the Lord was “in it all.”¹⁰⁰ While the paper’s allegations were sometimes extreme, it is difficult to refute their insistence that it was nearly “impossible for a Mormon Elder to be a new polygamist without at the same time being a liar.”¹⁰¹ Sensitive to such statements, the leaders responded with denial, affirming their honesty again and again.¹⁰²

The inventive capacity of Mormons intent on entering polygamy by some means that would preserve a measure of ethical redemption is impressive. In addition to semantic usages such as *union* and *sealing*, thus permitting denials of plural *marriage*, reference has also been made to instances involving the marrying of two wives on the same day; reliance on the fact that women were always sealed to men, allowing their husbands to deny that *they* had married polygamously; use of proxies; marrying a new wife legally, after the death of a prior legal spouse, while maintaining relationships with earlier plurals; the performance of ceremonies at sea or in foreign countries; and resort to concubinage.¹⁰³ The variety of ruses employed will never fully be numbered. Guy C. Wilson, Jr., remembered the case of a Mormon couple intending a polygamous marriage; when asked by the magistrate if either had been married before, the groom answered “yes.” “But,” he added, “she’s in the cemetery.” His first wife was indeed in the local cemetery, standing up very much alive.¹⁰⁴

[p. 378] Last of all, the use of mistruth as a device for assisting the survival of plurality provided a nursery for those who continue in polygamy today. Mormon fundamentalism is at least partially a consequence of such tactics. Contemporary polygamists place great reliance on President John Taylor’s 1886 revelation, given when he was in hiding from United States marshals. In the revelation those wishing to receive the highest glory in the hereafter were admonished to continue to live the principle in spite of pressures brought upon them to bring it to an end.¹⁰⁵ Subsequently, certain individuals were said to have been specially commissioned to keep plural marriage alive until the millennium.¹⁰⁶ Many of those who practice plural marriage today trace their authority to this alleged commission. Inasmuch as President Taylor was living “on the underground” at the time these events are supposed to have occurred, and because the supposed commission was given from expectation that opposition would continue, the movement took a resistance to disclosure from its infancy.

Citing Mormon history as precedent, fundamentalists defend the propriety of reticence and false denial when dealing with the things of God, especially plural marriage. The use of codes and ciphers when threatened by hostile laws is approved. The priority of covenants and friendships is affirmed. And when placed in difficult circumstances, they have broken pledges to civil authorities to secure freedom for themselves and their families.¹⁰⁷ Dorothy Allred Solomon, recalling her upbringing in a prominent fundamentalist home, summarized the atmosphere by saying, “Although we were reared to treasure truth and ‘cling to the light,’ our way of life was filled with secrets.” The resort to distortion, what was referred to as “Mormon logic,” rested uncomfortably on every aspect of their existence. She remembered that this was justified by her father, a fundamentalist leader, with the aphorism “We must sometimes disobey a lesser law to keep a higher one.”¹⁰⁸

An important aspect of fundamentalist apologetics is the contention that plural marriage was never condemned by the Mormon *priesthood*. A careful reading of denials and statements suspending the practice, it is said, reveals that they were done only in the name of the *church*. The difference between priesthood and church allowed men, they say, to truthfully claim the church, as an organization, had discontinued plural marriage and would excommunicate any found disobedient to its rules. Individual priesthood holders, on the other hand, might yet take new wives acting on their own responsibility.¹⁰⁹ In other words, the church may have abandoned polygamy, issued the [p. 379] Manifesto, and placed violators in danger of losing their membership, but the priesthood held firm with the

principle.

As earlier suggested, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries some Mormons thought that the church could find in its status as an entirely private organization fence enough to shelter the practice.¹¹⁰ Because it acted as the official voice of Mormonism, however, the church was too easily caught on the cusp of formal, juxtaposing roles. A preferred solution was found in separating the church, *qua* church, from individual priesthood holders, thereby double casting those who led and spoke for the organization. Such a construction met the need nicely, allowing church leaders to act at chosen times as corporate spokesmen and at others as individual priesthood bearers, alternating personas as circumstance required.

Precedent for such a division could be found at least as far back as President John Taylor.¹¹¹ Near the turn of the century, rumor circulated among some stake presidents that plural marriages were still possible if they were performed “by the priesthood” outside the country.¹¹² At the time of the Smoot hearings, Carl A. Badger recorded that he heard the church was not involved with polygamy. President Smith, however, as a priesthood authority accountable to God, could perform plural ceremonies.¹¹³ And Apostle John Taylor in 1911 affirmed that, as he saw it, since the time of his father’s 1886 revelation and certainly since the Manifesto and the 1890s, the Lord had “put everybody upon his own responsibility” and had taken “the responsibility from the Church.”¹¹⁴ It was this that led a son of Apostle Taylor, Samuel W. Taylor, to describe the contrivance as a conspiracy, a “big secret.”¹¹⁵ Until the time of President Heber J. Grant, the argument goes, such a distinction provided a workable cover. With the succession of Grant to the church presidency, fundamentalists contend, this exchange of dress ceased and official Mormonism, impatient with the exercise, became an entirely monogamous society.¹¹⁶

Fundamentalism, as a phenomenon, is far from peculiar to Mormonism. It commonly occurs when institutions move away from earlier belief patterns. Scholars who study the subject suggest that, more than an attempt to restore, fundamentalism always has dynamic dependencies on the present and that its complexity is such that boundaries and models used for explaining it are necessarily heuristic.¹¹⁷ Mormon fundamentalism—sharing with similar movements elsewhere an anxiety about things such as the purity and binding power of inherited text, fearfully scouting the meanings of cultural accommodation, and hungry for more authentic, spiritual experience within [p. 380] traditional walls—displays as its most visible feature a remarkable preoccupation with polygamy. As with the nineteenth-century church, it is the most conspicuous tenet of a majority of non-conforming Mormon groups.

To the extent that they are genuinely artifactual, these dissenters provide confirmation for one of the book’s central themes—the prized regard developed by the old church for marriage in polygamy. And this high priority, when threatened by an unfriendly environment, explains the resort to shielding apparel, coded communications, secrecy, and misleading denial. Because of the church’s sometime approval of these flections, alternating voices and faces in purposeful illusion, they assured today’s following of fundamentalist actors who believe the play neither is nor should be at an end.

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104. Guy C. Wilson, Jr., *Memories of a Venerable Father and Other Reminiscences* (Fullerton: California State University, Oral History Program, 1988), 129.
105. Fred C. Collier, comp., *Unpublished Revelations of the Prophets and Presidents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 1981), pt. 1:145-46.
106. Recent accounts that review claims concerning these events are J. Max Anderson's anti-fundamentalist *Polygamy Story: Fiction and Fact* (Salt Lake City: Publisher's Press, 1979), 63-76; Fred C. Collier's rebuttal, in "Re-Examining the Lorin Woolley Story," *Doctrine of the Priesthood* 1 (Feb. 1981): 1-17; and the very readable description in Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 128-29, 190-91.
107. For fundamentalist discussion and affirmation of this tradition, see "Our Position," *Truth* 10 (March 1945): 269; "Prosecution Won't Stop Us, Polygamists' Leader Says," *Ogden Standard Examiner*, 10 Sept. 1944; Joseph Leslie Broadbent, *Celestial Marriage?* (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1927), 23-24; Joseph W. Musser, *Celestial or Plural Marriage: A Digest of the Mormon Marriage System as Established by God through the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Truth Publishing, 1944, 1970), 148; Lynn L. Bishop and Steven L. Bishop, *The Keys of the Priesthood Illustrated* (Draper, Utah: Review and Preview Publishers, 1971), 76-77, 117, 172-74, 192-97, 226-40; [Gilbert Fulton and Rulon Allred], *The Most Holy Principle*, 4 vols. (Murray, Utah: Gems Publishing, 1970-75), 4:20, 68, 164-67, 213; Dennis R. Short, *Questions on Plural Marriage with a Selected Bibliography and 1600 References* (Salt Lake City: privately published, 1975), 9, 10, 18-21, 36, 37, 42, 43, 44. For examples of fundamentalist pragmatics in dealing with the law, see Anderson, *The Polygamy Story*, 87, 88.
108. Dorothy Allred Solomon, *In My Father's House: An Autobiography* by Dorothy Allred Solomon (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), 31, 42-43, 110-11 *passim*.
109. While the distinction between church and priesthood is referred to in most Mormon fundamentalist writings, perhaps the two most extensive and carefully developed expositions of the argument are to be found in Bishop and Bishop, *Keys of the Priesthood*, 3-75, 201-3 *passim*; and all of Gilbert A. Fulton, *That Manifesto* (Kearns, Utah: Deseret Publishing, 1974).
110. See above in chap. 2, 55; and the instructions given by church leaders to territorial delegate John T. Caine, as described in Edward Leo Lyman, *Political Deliverance: The Mormon Quest for Utah Statehood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 60.
111. "Discourse by President John Taylor," DN, 2 June 1880. Also see reference to Taylor's dispersion of authority for performing plural marriages, above, 52-53.
112. Herbert L. James to John M. Cannon, 10 June 1902, original in private possession.
113. Badger Diaries, 22 Dec. 1904 and 12 Feb. 1905.
114. John Taylor, in *Trials*.
115. "A Biographical Sketch of the Life of Mary Evelyn Clark Allred," *Star of Truth* 2 (Nov. 1954): 301; Samuel W. Taylor, *Rocky Mountain Empire: The Latter-day Saints Today* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 21, 81-97; and *idem*, *The Kingdom or Nothing*, 301-2, 309-10.
116. Some, like Byron Harvey Allred, believed the process to have been well advanced before the time of Heber J. Grant. He saw the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, with deeds like the expulsion from their number of Matthias F. Cowley and John W. Taylor, as especially culpable. See the entirety of Allred's *A Leaf in Review of the Words and Acts of God and Men Relative to the Fullness of the Gospel* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1933). For contentions that, with Heber J. Grant, the church took especially long steps toward compromise with the world, see Bishop and Bishop, *Keys of the Priesthood*, 241-62ff.; and Short, *Questions on Plural Marriage*, 5. Modern church authorities have never rejected the distinction between church and priesthood, albeit the difference sometimes seems vague. See John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations: Aids to Faith in a Modern Day* (Salt Lake City: Murray & Gee, 1943), 177-78; and Gordon B. Hinckley, "Priesthood Restoration," *Ensign* 18 (Oct. 1988): 72.

117. See the remarks of Lionel Caplan in the introduction to *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*, ed. Lionel Caplan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 5-22. The following also provide comparative insight into the Mormon fundamentalist experience: Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); Rodney Stark, ed., *Religious Movements: Genesis, Exodus and Numbers* (New York: Paragon House, 1985).