JOSEPH SMITH
AN AMERICAN PROPHET

By
JOHN HENRY EVANS

NEW YORK
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1943
bership of more than sixty thousand, with a monthly magazine devoted to the work of the organization. It is by far the wealthiest of the minor bodies of the Mormon church, having assets approximating a million dollars. In 1931 it spent more than one hundred and sixteen thousand dollars for charitable purposes alone. Its annual dues exceed twenty-three thousand dollars. For many years, on the advice of Brigham Young, the Society had a "wheat fund," which it renewed annually till the Great War, when it was sold to the Federal government at a nominal figure.

56. MORMON POLYGAMY

On a certain starlit night in 1843 two men and a woman might have been seen walking out of Mulholland Street in Nauvoo toward the river bank. They were Joseph Smith, the prophet, Dimmick Huntington, and Prescindia Huntington, Dimmick's sister, who was thirty-three years old. When they had reached the water's edge, they sat down on a log.

Now, the purpose of this meeting was extraordinary, to say the least. Joseph Smith, a married man according to the law of the land, there and then proposed marriage to Prescindia Huntington, a single woman.

What else he said to her on this occasion, we do not know—except that he asked her to "think it over" and, after she had made up her mind, to let him know her decision. At a second meeting a few nights later, on the same spot and under the same conditions, Prescindia accepted the Mormon leader as her husband, and her brother, who had previously been given the necessary authority by the Prophet, thereupon performed the ceremony that made them husband and wife under "the law of the Lord."

After the death of Joseph Smith, Prescindia Huntington-Smith was married under the same law to Heber C. Kimball, by whom she had a son.

"Mother," asked this son, when he became a full-grown man and his mother was in her last illness, "if you had your life to live over again, would you do as you have done—I mean live in polygamy?"

"I would that," she answered promptly and emphatically, and added: "The principle of plural marriage is true, and, if properly lived, would redeem woman from slavery and put her on a higher plane than she has ever occupied before. There would be no prostitution in the world, and every normal woman would have a husband and children."

That is almost the whole story of Mormon polygamy, as it was practiced in Nauvoo and Utah. There are some interesting details, however.

It was undoubtedly a social reason primarily that gave rise to polygamy among the Mormon people. One cannot read the sermons and writings on the subject by church leaders, from Joseph Smith down, and come to any other conclusion. And these clear-sighted and earnest men attacked the social problem with a courage and boldness that did credit both to their hearts and to their heads.

"If all the inhabitants of the earth at the present time," said Orson Pratt in 1869, "were righteous before God, keeping his commandments, and if, further, the numbers of the sexes were exactly equal, there would be no necessity for any such institution as polygamy. Every righteous man could have his wife, and there would be no surplus of females." That was an enormous concession.

But the professor-apostle went on to say that "the numbers of the sexes of marriageable age" were by no means "exactly equal." And he gave figures in proof. "If you go to the published statistics, you will find, almost without exception, that in every State a greater number of males die in the first year of their existence than females. The same holds good from one year to five years, from five years to ten, from ten to fifteen, and from fifteen to twenty." Thus in Pennsylvania there were more than seventeen thousand females between the ages of twenty and thirty in excess of males of the same ages; in Massachusetts, more than thirty-three thousand; and in New York, more than forty-five thousand. These figures were quoted from the United States census reports for 1860. In 1930 the excess of females between the ages twenty and thirty in the entire country was one hundred thirty-five thousand eight hundred eighty-five.
"What is to be done with this surplus of females?" inquired the noted philosopher. "I will tell you what Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York say. They say, virtually: 'We will pass a law so strict that, if these females undertake to marry a man who has another wife, both they and the men they marry shall be subject to a term of imprisonment in the penitentiary.' Indeed! Then what are you going to do with these thousands of females of a marriageable age? 'We are going to make them either old maids or prostitutes, and we would a little rather have them prostitutes; then we men would have no need to marry.'

This is the conclusion many of these marriageable males between twenty and thirty years of age have come to. They will not marry because the laws of the land have a tendency to make prostitutes, and they can purchase all the animal gratification they desire without being bound to any woman.'

These laws, incidentally, were not Christian laws at all. They were heathen laws. "Since old pagan Rome and Greece—worshippers of idols—passed a law confining a man to one wife, there has been a great surplus of females, who have had no possible chance of getting married." The nation from which present-day Christianity, for the most part, was derived, was a polygamous nation. But when the Reformers of the sixteenth century undertook to change certain aspects of the faith, they overlooked this greater aspect of marriage. And now all the so-called Christian peoples had the notion, in spite of the widespread and deep-rooted blight of prostitution, that they had made a notable advance in culture by adopting the monogamic system of marriage, in place of the polygamic.

That, as we said, was in 1869. Even before this, however, another Pratt, the mathematician's brother Parley, had expounded what may be termed the "limitation" theory, of which the "surplus" argument by Orson was the supplement.

"A wise legislation, or the law of God," said the poet-apostle, in a remarkable little book called *A Key to the Science of Theology*, first published in 1855, "would punish, with just severity, the crimes of adultery and fornication, and would not suffer an idiot, the confirmed, irreclaimable drunkard, or the man of hereditary disease or vicious habits, to possess or retain a wife; while, at
the same time, it would provide for a good and capable man to honorably receive and maintain more wives than one. Indeed, it should be the privilege of every virtuous female who has the requisite capacity and qualifications for matrimony, to demand, either of individuals or government, the privilege of becoming an honored and legal wife and mother, even if it were necessary for her to be married to a man who has several wives."

It remained for the apostle George Q. Cannon, a highly intelligent and widely read and traveled man to set forth a third reason for polygamy. This found its cogency in the leveling of the whole female sex.

"The practice of the world," said this alert statesman, also in 1869, "is to select a few of the sex and elevate them. There is no country in the world, probably, where women are idolized to the extent they are in the United States. But is the entire sex in the United States thus honored and respected? No; it is not. Any person who will travel, and observe while he is traveling, will find that thousands of women are degraded, and treated as something vile, and are terribly debased in consequence of the practice of men towards them.

"But the gospel of Jesus and the revelations which God has given to us concerning patriarchal marriage, have a tendency to elevate the entire sex, and give to all the privilege of being honored matrons and respected wives. There are no refuse among us—no class to be cast out, scorned, and condemned; but every woman who chooses can be an honored wife, and move in society in the enjoyment of every right which woman should enjoy to make her the equal of man, as far as she can be equal."

To the "surplus" theory of Orson Pratt, the "limitation" theory of Parley P. Pratt, and the "equalizing" theory of George Q. Cannon, must be added another, which, although it cannot be ascribed to any particular individual, somehow filtered through into the general mind of the Mormon commonwealth. It is the "character" theory. According to this idea the polygamous family, partly because it is large, is more conducive to the development of the personality than the monogamous family.

It will be remembered that the underlying principle in the religion of Joseph Smith is the preciousness of the soul—not a few
souls merely but all souls. That is why the Mormon leaders, including the founder of the faith, were so deeply stirred over the problem of the underworld, and led them to reach out for a solution of it by removing the cause. Individual growth was the ultimate goal of Mormonism—a process rather than an end.

But personal development was impossible in a state of isolation. It was possible only in the group. Character was chiseled out through attrition, through human contacts, through the method of give and take. “I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain,” the Prophet said once in Nauvoo, “and the only polishing I get is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else, striking with accelerated force against religious bigotry, priesthood, lawyer-craft, doctor-craft, lying editors, suborned judges and juries, and the authority of perjured executives, backed by mobs, blasphemers, licentious and corrupt men and women—all hell knocking off a corner here and a corner there. Thus I will become a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty, who will give me dominion over all and every one of them, when their refuge of lies shall fail, and their hiding place shall be destroyed.” It was this knocking off of corners that brought character to perfection.

The primitive group, the family, contributed more to this “smoothing and polishing” process than any other of the social groups. This was especially so in the polygamous family.

Here the children enlarged the scope of their natural associations and made greater and more numerous contacts than in the average monogamous family—which helped them to fit themselves into the mosaic of the larger group, the community. This was true whether the families lived together or in different homes. The wife and mother, in addition to increasing the number of objects of her affection, made at least an attempt to subject her petty irritations, jealousies, what not, to the larger ends of life. And the husband and father, besides having to adjust himself to a new set of conditions, would be called upon to fight a stiff battle for an ideal of justice, fair-dealing, and suspended judgment, in the home; and this ideal, of necessity, would carry over into other and larger social contacts. No one realized better than the polygamous husband, if he tried at all to “live the principle,” what

Professor Foerster meant when he said: “Only people whose thoughts are entirely removed from the realities of life can fail to realize that the small and intimate circle of the family must afford to the human personality a much richer and more secure development than the best public educational institution.”

Polygamy or, as the Mormons prefer to call it, “plural marriage,” was first introduced among the Saints in Nauvoo, in 1841—although the Prophet had had the idea in mind ever since 1831.

Bold and courageous as Joseph Smith undoubtedly was, yet he shrank for years from venturing upon a revelation of his secret. He had been reared under the monogamic ideal; his disciples likewise; and they had been taught, and believed, that any deviation from the moral law was not only a wrong in the eyes of the law and of society, but a grave sin in the sight of God. How, then, was he to break the news to his first lieutenants and later to others of the faithful? Lorenzo Snow tells of an all-night conversation with the Prophet on the river bank (a favorite spot, it seems), concerning this very topic, and of the great anxiety of the leader as to its effects on the community. He was under no illusion as to the consequences to himself—that it might eventuate in his death. It required, one gathers, more than Joseph Smith’s sex-urge, however great that may have been, to fly in the teeth of the age-old convention of monogamy, especially under the circumstances.

Already he had had an inkling of the commotion, even upheaval, such a doctrine as he had in mind would stir up. At intervals, during those ten years, the charge of polygamy was often hurled at the Mormons. Most of them did not know what it was all about. The fact is that Joseph Smith had confided his secret to some intimate friends—one of the Johnsons; and the secret had become known to others, who could not keep it. There is no doubt that polygamy had a good deal to do in bringing about the Prophet’s death.

In April, 1841, however, the Mormon leader launched his sensational craft, by taking to himself another wife. The woman was not Prescindia Huntington. There were several before Prescindia Huntington, and several after her—some twenty-seven in all, not counting Emma. One of these was Eliza Snow, sister of Lorenzo
Snow, an intelligent woman of poetic ability. Having thus set the example, the Prophet required that the apostles enter the order—which they did after a mental struggle, we are told, and holding out on grounds of fear. By the time of the martyrdom of the Smiths it was an open secret, in Nauvoo and in Hancock county generally, that the Mormons were practicing polygamy.

More or less confusion followed. Once it became known that the principle was practiced, such men as John C. Bennett took advantage of the situation to play fast and loose erotically, without forming the ties that the Prophet had intended. They thus ignored all moral bonds. And when the head of the church publicly rebuked them for their immorality, they fell upon him in fury.

For, as a matter of fact, the Prophet drew a very sharp distinction between a sexual relation within polygamy, as within monogamy, and a sexual act outside the polygamous bond. Plural marriage was a marriage, just as a single marriage was a marriage. The only difference was that the second had the sanction of the state, while the first had the sanction of the church only. But they were equally binding on the conscience; both proscribed sexual relations outside these ties. In neither case could any moral excursions be tolerated.

This lack of discrimination on the part of both men and women created difficulty among disciples and outsiders. Also it laid the Prophet open to misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

In 1852, after the Mormons had found a home in the West, Brigham Young made a public acknowledgment of the doctrine, and urged its practice. Doubtless among the reasons for this public announcement were: That it explained the marital relations of those who had already embarked on the practice, that it would head off prostitution, and that it would increase the Mormon population. Utah therefore presents an advanced phase of polygamy.

Here are the conditions, in general, under which the doctrine was put into effect:

To begin with, not every married man might take another wife. He had first to secure the permission of the president of the church. For only he, or some one delegated by him, could perform a plural marriage ceremony. Otherwise it was a case of adultery, and thus punishable by excommunication. Presumably the candidate for a second wife had the necessary qualifications—physical, mental, moral, spiritual, and financial. That was the theory. Polygamy was therefore limited to those who were "fit."

And then, whoever wished to marry in polygamy had next to obtain the "consent" of the wife he already had. If, however, that consent was denied, he was free to do as he pleased in the situation. Usually approval was granted—for reasons the wife probably kept to herself. Indeed, quite often the wife not only chose the second helpmate, but carried on the preliminary negotiations. In some cases two women were taken to the altar at the same time, although of course one of them had to be "first."

As for the manner of living, sometimes there was but one home, sometimes there were as many different homes as there were wives. The separate home system was found to be more satisfactory on the whole. Staying at each home for a day or a week at a time, the husband endeavored to show as little partiality as possible—although doubtless in his heart he may have had a "favorite," as Brigham Young is said to have had.

Always, moreover, there was equality as between the wives and as between the children. No distinction was made between the first wife and the second or the fifth, nor between the children of the legal and those of the plural wife. And, as George Q. Cannon asserted, there was no class of women to be cast out on account of their station. No prostitution existed in Utah till the non-mormons took it there; and few, if any, old maids.

Polygamy died hard among the Mormons. But it is now as dead as the proverbial door nail. When Congress, in answer to a popular demand by men and women all over the United States, passed anti-polygamy laws, the Saints refused to give up their doctrine, till after the highest court had rendered a decision on their constitutionality.

For this apparent disloyalty there were two principal reasons. One was that they did not believe any law could legislate out of existence a religious belief, such as polygamy was in their view. And then the law would require the polygamists to disown women with whom they had lived and by whom they had borne children,
and to bastardize the offspring of their plural wives. And this they would not do. They preferred to go to jail—as hundreds of them did. In those days the "co-hab," as he came to be called, who "promised to obey the law" against polygamy was looked upon by his own people as a renegade.

The practice of polygamy among the Mormons, however, was not effected without some opposition from the women. Emma Smith was particularly recalcitrant. William Clayton, secretary to the Prophet in 1843, and the apostle Orson Pratt, give us glimpses of her mind in the matter.

One morning, says Clayton, Joseph and Hyrum came into the office together. They were talking about plural marriage. Hyrum wanted his brother to reduce his ideas on the subject to writing, so that he might convert Mrs. Smith. After that Joseph would have "peace." Any woman, he added, could easily be convinced that the principle was true. "You don't know Emma as well as I do," Joseph commented, but sat down and dictated to his secretary. Hyrum then took the document away with him.

When he returned, Joseph asked him how he had fared. Hyrum answered, "I have never had such a talking to in my life. Emma was very resentful."

The fact is that, later, Mrs. Smith burned the original document, which she had coaxed away from her husband for the purpose. Fortunately Bishop Whitney had made a copy of it.

Emma, Pratt tells us, was "embittered against Joseph, and at times fought against him with all her heart; then again she would break down in her feelings, and humble herself, and would lead forth ladies and place their hands in the hands of her husband, and they were married to him, according to the law of God."

On the whole, however, the Mormon women accepted the principle of plural marriage in the same spirit as the men, especially those who had been taught to look at it in the larger way.

We have already seen what Prescindia Smith-Kimball thought on the subject. Helen Mar Whitney, daughter-in-law of Bishop Whitney, after she had been "a spectator and a participator in this order of matrimony for over thirty years," declared that "the system tends to preserve social purity" and that "it alone can remedy the great social evils of the present day," adding that "when lived up to as the Lord intended, it will exalt the human family." And one of Orson Pratt's eight wives says that all the twenty-five children of her husband were "endared to her by mutual affection," and their mothers "by mutual and long-continued exercises of toil, patience, and sisterly kindness," notwithstanding they were conscious of "imperfections in this life." Eliza R. Snow-Smith, plural wife of the Prophet says this: "Virtue is the foundation of the prosperity of any nation; and this principle of plural marriage tends to virtue, purity, and holiness."

As a matter of fact, the Mormon women of Utah were as reluctant as the men to abandon the practice of polygamy—at least those who had been inducted into the principle during the first generation. When anti-polygamy laws were about to be passed, fifteen hundred women met in Salt Lake City "to protest against the misrepresentation of the ladies engaged in anti-polygamy crusades, and to declare their sentiments on the subject." One of these sentiments was thus expressed by Mrs. Snow-Smith:

I am proud to state before this large and honorable assembly that I believe in the principle of plural marriage just as sincerely as I believe in any other institution which God has revealed. I believe it to be necessary for the redemption of the human family from the low state of corruption into which it has fallen.

And I truly believe that a Congress composed of polygamic men who are true to their wives would confer a far higher honor upon a nation, and would perform better service to this country than a Congress composed of monogamic unreliable husbands.