MORMONISM IN ILLINOIS

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CHAPTER IV
CONFLICT IN NAUVOO

From all physical evidences, it was possible to conclude that Nauvoo was a growing, prosperous, and untroubled city in the early months of 1844. Nevertheless, the conflict which was to drive the Mormons out of Illinois was slowly developing. There were two principal sources of the trouble—opposition to the strong Mormon political organization and dissension within the church because of polygamy. In his attempt to control the temporal lives of his followers, Smith asserted his authority in political affairs. He often referred to the kingdom of God which he hoped to build on earth. Durham describes the Mormon state as follows:

That good society, the kingdom of God on earth, must be erected on the foundations of the pure gospel, applied socially and politically as well as individually, with 'all things common'—all things, whether spiritual principles, knowledge and application of governmental practices, or economic goods. Only from this commonness comes unity, and the happy state.  

After he became a candidate for President of the United States in 1844, Smith collected his various utterances on political matters and published them in a pamphlet entitled Views of

1 Homer G. Durham, Joseph Smith, Prophet-Statesman (Salt Lake City, 1944), 14.
produced the most bitter opposition to the Mormons. It was here that the first anti-Mormon party composed of both Democrats and Whigs was organized. Thomas Sharp, the editor of the Warsaw Signal was a vehement anti-Mormon from the beginning. He stated that the objectives of the non-Mormon party were:

...that of either correcting the unhallowed usurpation of power by that band of villains at Nauvoo, [on] sic their extermination from civilized society.... It should be the firm determination of every one holding in veneration the institutions of his country, upon the first outrage against a citizen of this county, to give [sic] those 'Latter-day Devils' a scathing that will eclipse the 'Missouri Persecution,' or in other words Missouri Justice.85

Later, he issued a call to surrounding communities to "aid us to rid the Earth of a pest such as has never before polluted its surface since it was redeemed from chaos."

The political influence of the Mormons was the chief cause of the conflict between Mormon and gentile, but it was polygamy which produced the schism in the church and led indirectly to Smith's death. Regarding Smith's adoption of polygamy, Paxson wrote: "The Mormons were in general the same stamp as their fellow frontiersmen until they took to

84 Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 288.
85 Warsaw Signal, June 5, 1844, cited in Snider, "Mormonism in Illinois."
86 Ibid., June 19, 1844, cited in Snider, "Mormonism in Illinois."
The first mention of a new Mormon system of marriage occurred in Kirtland. There were many rumors of polygamy among the Mormons at that time, but all of them were vigorously denied by Smith and other officials. In August, 1835 a church conference adopted the following resolution:

Inasmuch as this Church has been reproached with the crime of fornication and polygamy, we declare that one man should have one wife, and one woman but one husband, except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again.

There were also rumors of polygamy in Missouri. A church official was brought to trial for his attempted violation of the marriage law. He informed a woman whose husband was away that he had received a revelation of her husband's death and she had been commanded to marry him, but her husband returned before the ceremony. The official was removed from office by the church court.

The idea of developing a new system of marriage had first come to Smith in Kirtland. In 1835 there were rumors of his affair with a young servant girl who lived in his house. One church member was excommunicated for his share in

87 Frederic Paxson, The Last American Frontier (New York, 1915), 92.
89 History of the Church, II, 247.
spreading the gossip. It was at this time that Smith's new theory of marriage began to take shape. His new system was a contradiction of the Book of Mormon and his earlier revelations on the subject of marriage. It was necessary, therefore, to disregard temporarily his own fancy, for, as Brodie wrote:

Joseph was no careless libertine who could be content with clandestine mistresses. There was too much of the Puritan in him, and he could not rest until he had redefined the nature of sin and erected a stupendous theological edifice to support his new theories of marriage. In 1840 his plans were complete and secretly he began to explain his new doctrine to a few carefully selected saints. Parley Pratt, a prominent church official, wrote that Smith taught him the principles of the "eternal family organization." Smith was very cautious; for until all the saints were united and ready to accept it as a publicly announced doctrine of the church, he wished to avoid arousing the anger of the gentiles. The number of saints who would receive the plan was to be increased gradually until all had been informed. In the meantime all church officials were instructed to deny all rumors of polygamy, and no one was allowed to preach on the

91 History of the Church, III, 16.
92 Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 183.
93 Ibid., 297.
subject without Smith’s permission. However, he did make one attempt to test public reaction. Under his direction, Udney H. Jacob wrote a defense of polygamy which was published in Nauvoo in 1842. Jacob defended the system with lengthy Biblical references. The reaction was immediate and adverse, and Smith was forced to deny any connection with the venture.

Smith’s motive for establishing polygamy was a personal one; for, according to Linn, “its original object was to grant him unrestricted indulgence of his passion.” Nevertheless, there were other factors which contributed to the adoption of polygamy in Nauvoo, and Smith defended his system on the basis of its social aspects. It provided security for women whose husbands were away as missionaries; it provided a home for many poor foreign women; it provided a husband for women whose legal husbands would not come to Nauvoo because they were not Mormons; it provided more children to speed the growth of the New Zion.

It was John C. Bennett who exposed the practice of polygamy and forced Smith to discard his plans to bring the system into the open gradually. At the time of his arrival in Nauvoo in 1840, Bennett was secretary of the Illinois Medical

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95 Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 298.
96 Times and Seasons, December 1, 1842.
97 Linn, The Story of the Mormons, 28.
98 Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 304.
Society and quartermaster-general of the Illinois militia. He had come to Nauvoo to assure Smith that he could secure the passage of the charters in the legislature. He became a member of the church, and Smith was very much impressed with his self-acclaimed ability. However, others did not regard him so highly. In describing Bennett's activities on behalf of the passage of the charters, Ford wrote that he "was probably the greatest scamp in the western country", and "he was everywhere accounted the same debauched, unprincipled and profligate character." Smith repaid Bennett for his service to the Mormons by giving him a favorable position in Nauvoo. He became Smith's personal aide, assistant president of the church, mayor of the city, brigadier-general of the Legion, and chancellor of the University of Nauvoo. Smith even received a revelation in which he reported the Lord as saying: "I have seen the work which he hath done, which I accept if he continue, and will crown him with blessings and great glory." Shortly, however, rumors began to circulate about Bennett. Hyrum Smith wrote to his brother Joseph while on a missionary tour that

99 Ibid., 266.
100 Ford, History of Illinois, 266.
101 Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 268.
102 History of the Church, IV, 341.
he had learned of Bennett's desertion of a wife and two children and his expulsion from the Masonic Lodge because of his conduct. At first Smith paid little attention to this report or to other rumors concerning Bennett's true character. However, as Bennett became more and more ambitious and more eager to use polygamy for his own purposes, he lost favor with Smith. In later years Smith wrote in his church history that upon two occasions he had reprimanded Bennett for his affairs with numerous young women. The friction between the two increased rapidly until their interest in Nancy Rigdon caused an open break. Bennett was aware of Smith's desire to have Nancy for his wife, and he had informed her of Smith's intentions. When Smith wrote to her explaining his new marriage doctrine, she informed her father who forced Smith to apologize for his actions. Knowing Bennett's part in the incident, Smith drew up a list of charges against him. He secured affidavits which proved that Bennett had seduced many women in Smith's name and with the promise of marriage and that he had performed many abortions. Smith confronted Bennett with the evidence and forced him to resign from all of his offices. His case was then placed before the High Council for trial. The gossip about Bennett had spread

103 Ibid., V, 37.
104 Ibid., V, 37, 42.
105 Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 310-11.
106 Ibid., 311.
throughout Nauvoo, and after a very stormy session, the
Council voted to excommunicate him. In the meantime, however,
Smith had decided that his position would be less dangerous
if Bennett remained in the church where he could be controlled
more easily. Smith urged him to make a public confession of
his evil deeds and beg forgiveness. "Then," wrote Brodie,
"to the astonishment and indignation of many present, Joseph
pledged mercy for him." Since most of his people disapproved
of his action and as unrest and conflict continued, Smith
returned to his original decision and excommunicated Bennett
on June 23, 1842.

Bennett then embarked upon a campaign to destroy
Smith's power and influence. Beginning in July, 1842 he
wrote a series of articles for the Sangamo Journal; the
articles eventually appeared in most Illinois newspapers and
in a book entitled The History of the Saints: or, An Exposé
of Joe Smith and Mormonism. He charged that Smith had ordered
him killed, that Smith had planned the murder of Boggs, that
Nauvoo was an evil city where prostitution, murder, theft,
and drunkenness were sanctioned by church officials, that
any young woman could be forced to marry any church official
at his command, that Smith had organized a band of murderers
to assassinate anyone who opposed him, that a special system
of Mormon women had been organized to become "wives" of church
and that the Legion had been organized to avenge the saints

Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 313. 108 Ibid., 314.
who had died in Missouri and to terrorize the non-Mormons in Illinois. He declared that he had not actually been a Mormon, had not believed their doctrines, and joined them only to expose the evils of Smith. His claims and charges were accepted by many Whig newspapers, although the Quincy Whig reminded its readers of Bennett's reputation and stated that his articles were filled with "so much wickedness" as to be unbelievable. The sensationalism produced anti-Mormon sentiment, which the church tried to prevent by publishing accounts of Bennett's character. He was described as "one of the most degraded, polluted, perjured scoundrels that now live."

The uproar in Nauvoo continued until the spring of 1843, when, by that time, most Mormons believed the denials of polygamy made by the prominent Mormons. In February, 1843, Smith made the following indirect denial:

There is a great noise in the city, and many are saying there cannot be so much smoke without some fire. Well, be it so. If the stories about Joe Smith are true, then the stories of John C. Bennett are true about the ladies of Nauvoo; and he says that the ladies are all organized of those who are to be the wives of Joe Smith. Ladies, you know whether this is true or not. It is no use being among hogs without a snout. This biting and devouring each other I
cannot endure. Away with it. For God's sake, stop it.\footnote{113}

It was not until the spring of 1843 that Smith wrote the revelation, which he had supposedly received years earlier, concerning plural marriages. The revelation was addressed to Emma Smith and commanded her to accept the system or be punished. There was a detailed justification of polygamy on biblical evidence and a statement of the law of plural marriages as it had been revealed to Smith. When the revelation was read to the High Council, confusion again returned. Most Mormons believed that the doctrine had been expelled with Bennett, and Smith had continued to excommunicate members for preaching polygamy. The Times and Seasons reported that Hiram Brown was excommunicated for "preaching polygamy and other false and corrupt doctrines."

This at the time when Smith had, according to Brodie, forty-nine wives.

Soon after Smith announced his revelation on the spiritual wife doctrine, he began to lose the friendship of

\footnote{113} History of the Church, V, 286.
\footnote{114} Doctrines and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints (Salt Lake City, 1921), Section 132, cited in Haford, "Nauvoo—the City Beautiful," 133.
\footnote{115} Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 343.
\footnote{116} Times and Seasons, February 1, 1844.
\footnote{117} Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 335-36.
William Law, one of the most wealthy and influential Mormons. He opposed both Smith's practice of polygamy and his economic monopoly. He refused to obey Smith's economic directives. His opposition was so outspoken by December, 1843 that Smith said, "I am exposed to far greater danger from traitors among ourselves than from enemies without... We have a Judas in our midst." However, Smith was in no great danger from Law until he attempted to take Law's wife, Jane. After a bitter quarrel with Smith, Law gained support from Dr. Robert D. Foster, who was also a prominent Mormon opposed to polygamy. When the two men told their stories to other Mormons, they were excommunicated along with William Law's wife, Jane, and his brother, Wilson. The Laws and their fellow-dissenters opposed Smith because of polygamy and they wanted to restore purity to the church. They tried to form an organization of all those who opposed the immorality, but they gained only a few. Smith's spy system kept under surveillance all those suspected of association with the Laws.

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118 Ibid., 368.
119 History of the Church, VI, 152.
120 Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 369.
121 Wilson Law was a brigadier-general in the Nauvoo Legion and a high-ranking church official.
The Laws decided to publish a newspaper in the interest of reforming the church. In a letter to Mr. Gregg, Francis Higbee, an associate of the Laws, stated that the fixtures had been purchased and the first issue would be published that month. He wrote that the newspaper would be named the Nauvoo Expositor, for it would expose the evils of Joseph Smith's government and doctrines. The Nauvoo Expositor was published on June 7, 1844. It proclaimed that its motto was: "The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth." The preamble stated that the Mormon religion was a true religion, but Smith had not kept the honor and glory of God, that the publishers, who were William Law, Wilson Law, Charles Irvin, Francis Higbee, Chauncey Higbee, Robert D. Foster, and Charles D. Foster, had tried to bring reform quietly, but Smith had prevented it. They stated:

We are aware, however, that we are hazard ing every earthly blessing, particularly property, and probably life itself, in striking this blow at tyranny and oppression.  

They believed that the political power of Smith was contrary to church doctrine. They introduced fifteen resolutions for the reform of church organization, the discontinuation of certain social activities, and the repeal of the city charters.

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123 Letter from Francis Higbee to Mr. Gregg, May (date missing), 1844. Illinois State Historical Library.
124 Nauvoo Expositor, June 7, 1844.
They published affidavits from various people concerning the practice of polygamy. They promised to continue speaking out until the grievances were corrected and the abuse of power was ended; they did not, however, intend to bring down a mob upon Nauvoo. In conclusion, they wrote:

We would not be worthy of the name of an American citizen, did we stand by and see, not only the laws of the State, but the laws of the United States set at defiance, the authorities insulted, fugitives from justice fleeing for refuge, asking and receiving protection from the authorities of Nauvoo, for crimes committed against the government of the United States, the Mayor of a petty incorporated town interposing his authority and demanding the right of trial for the fugitive on the merits of the case, by virtue of Habeas Corpus, issued by the Municipal Court of Nauvoo. It is too gross a burlesque upon common sense—a subterfuge too low to indicate anything but a corrupt motive. 125

The publishers had presented their case in a straightforward manner. Smith could not treat their disclosures as he had Bennett's, for they were not presented in an exaggerated or sensational manner. He decided that the newspaper should not be allowed to continue publication, but, as Brodie wrote:

...here again he was betrayed by his utter incapacity for dealing skillfully with opposition; a weakness that his political and legal successes in Nauvoo had served only to intensify. He had become an autocrat who could think only in terms of suppression. 126

Smith brought charges against the newspaper and placed the case before the Municipal Court. There was no jury or regular

125
Ibid., June 7, 1844.
126
Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 377.
trial; the charges were made that the *Nauvoo Expositor* would destroy law and order in Nauvoo, therefore, it was a nuisance and should be destroyed. The marshal and a force of the Legion enforced the court's order for the destruction of the newspaper. The Laws fled to Carthage where they issued a warrant for the arrest of Smith, the marshal, and the members of the Legion who had destroyed the press.

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