MORMONS AT KIRTLAND

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Though one may disbelieve in the divinity of its origin, one could hardly quarrel with the great principles which the Saints acknowledged during the early period as underlying the Mormon's doctrine. Smith, two years after leaving Kirtland, answered a man who had asked in public meeting, "What constitutes a Mormon?" in these words: "It is to believe that Christ is the Son of God, also a firm belief in the scriptures, then faith, repentance, and baptism for the remission of sins; the laying on of hands for the reception of the Holy Ghost, having a church organized according to the new testament pattern, and to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." It is not their great underlying principles which one rejects but the Mormon's interpretation and expansion of them; and these interpretations and expansions the Saints were not shouting from the house-tops in the year 1840.

It has been charged against the Mormons that they practiced polygamy at Kirtland. "At a secret night meeting, in a schoolhouse whose location is yet pointed out, Smith laid his new revelation concerning spiritual wives before a select few of his followers for their judgment as to its promulgation." Joseph F. Smith, the head of the Mormon Church in the

269. Times and Seasons, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 9-11
a romance published in 1856 there is a hint that Emma Smith knew that Joseph Smith had two wives before he left to go to the west. 272


The Historical Record declares that the Doctrine of Plural Marriage was first revealed to Joseph Smith in 1831, but being forbidden to make it public or to teach it at that time he contented himself with telling it to Oliver Cowdery and Lyman E. Johnson. Orson Pratt later testified that Lyman Johnson taught it to him. Several pages of testimony are given in this article to prove that Joseph Smith, contrary to what the Saints of the Reorganized Church believe today, did practice it. Mr. John C. Bennett's book, published in 1842, has a much longer list of testimonies. In one of these one finds a new name for polygamy. "William Law swore before a grand jury at Carthage that Joseph had told him that he practiced "spiritual wife-ism" as polygamy was then called." 273

273. a. Historical Record, Vol. 6, pp. 219-234; Vol. 7, p. 584

The Evening and Morning Star as early as September 1832, has an article apparently answering many charges of polygamous conduct. The editor introduces this with the words "it is a matter of joy to us to be able to present this document according to the original." The document then begins: "Some have said and still say that this Church has all things in common. This assertion is meant not only to falsify on the subject of property but to blast the reputation and moral characters of the members of the same." The article closes with the sentence, "As to the moral virtue of this society, facts speak for themselves and no tongue of calumny can do it injury where it is known." 274 The article

274. Evening and Morning Star, September 1832, p. 48; April 1833, p.187.
does not deny polygamous relations among church members unless this last sentence is intended as a denial.

As to what is meant by the Mormons when they speak of the "moral virtue of this society" any of their writers who defended the practice of polygamy after it was publicly announced in 1852, may be consulted. They all use the same argument, that from a sociological standpoint polygamy is conducive of morality, and they all explain what morality means to a Mormon. The quotation below is from the Millennial Star. "In England, France and the United States, millions of youth corrupt themselves (in vice dens), engender the most loathsome diseases, and curse their posterity with their sin -- and in vain men legislate on these matters." The next edition of the Millennial Star has much to say about the necessity that man maintain bodily purity that God might preserve a goodly seed. It bemoans the need for legislatures passing strict laws for the protection of female virtue such as disinheriting those born out of wedlock. "Some nations called Christian actually give license for prostitution and all the degradations and misery that go with it." 275

275. Millennial Star, March 15, 1851, pp. 81-83.

The Saints were printing and teaching such doctrine as this in England in 1851, yet denied until August, 1852, that they were practicing polygamy.

Robert Webb, a modern writer who defends the doctrine from the same standpoint, avers that polygamy has four points of superiority over monogamy. These are: It gives the only chance of wifehood and motherhood to the surplus woman in a population in which the males predominate; it prevents prostitution in women and roving in men which society with all its laws and institutions has never been able to suppress; and that it secures better safeguards for mother and child during pregnancy and the nursing

Some Mormons deny that polygamy achieves such results. Frank C. Cannon, who was brought up in the Mormon Church, convincingly refutes each and all of these claims. Mr. Bowles says that under polygamy a woman becomes simply the servant and serf, not the companion and equal of man and that the inevitable influence of this upon all society need not be deplored.


One concludes then that the words from the editorial in the Evening and Morning Star, "as to the moral virtue of this society, facts speak for themselves" not only do not deny polygamy but rather point with pride to the fact of its resulting in moral virtue and this moral virtue comes through practice of polygamy.

The writers who seek to prove that the Saints did not practice polygamy at Kirtland always quote a revelation given in March, 1831, "who so forbiddeth to marry is not ordained of God for marriage is ordained of God unto man -- wherefore it is lawful that he should have one wife."

The page reference given is generally that of one of the later editions of the Doctrine and Covenants. One should meet new sources with new

278. Doctrine and Covenants, 1844, Sec. 86, Verses 1-7, p. 281; 1886, Sec. 49, Verses 16-17, p. 197.

sources, and a careful study of a recent Church History written by the Mormons themselves shows that this revelation was first given to Sidney, Parley and Leman Copley as a message which they were to carry to the...
The Shakers believed in celibacy and the Mormons were to tell them that they were not ordained of God because they forbid men to marry; that all marriage is approved by the laws of God; and that one marriage is approved by the laws of man.

Having in mind the hidden meaning in words as used by the Saints at times, one cannot help but wonder if the doctrine of plurality of wives is meant by "meat" and "tenets" in a later command given March 1830. This says, "I command that you preach naught but repentance and show not these things unto the world until it is wisdom in me: for they cannot bear meat now, but milk they must receive; wherefore they must not know these things," and "Of tenets thou shalt not talk but thou shalt declare repentance and faith on the Savior and remission of sins by baptism and by fire." 281

281. Doctrine and Covenants, 1904, Sec. 18, Verses 2-4, pp. 47-48; 1844, Sec. 44, Verse 2, p. 262.

A study of the Covenants and Commandments of 1844 also shows that this revelation "who so forbiddeth to marry is not ordained of God unto men -- wherefore it is lawful that he should have one wife," was given to the elders as a text on which to preach to the Shakers. An elder and a high church officer, F.D. Richards, has written an explanation of what "lawful" meant to church officers. The command, "let the bishops, deacons, etc., be the husband of one wife," he says, meant to many that the church was against plurality. But its real meaning, on the contrary, was that it was required of all church officers that they be the husband of at least one wife as thus they might better understand and aid their fellow-men.

Marriage was a qualification necessary for office holding. 282

Further study of the Kirtland source material of 1835 brings to light many more interesting facts and ideas concerning another revelation, often quoted to disprove the claim that the Saints practiced polygamy at Kirtland. In the Messenger and Advocate of August, 1835, there is an account of a General Assembly held there August 17. The Prophet was not present. A committee, appointed September 24, 1834, was to report. Mr. W. W. Phelps arose and read an article on marriage which was adopted and ordered to be printed in the Document and Covenant book about to be published. The wording of this was to be as follows: "Inasmuch as this Church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication and polygamy, we declare that we believe that one man should have one wife and one woman but one husband." There is no "but" or "only" in front of "one wife" as there is before "one husband."

After the disposal of the above short article Oliver Cowdery arose and read a long resolution on governments and laws in general, which was likewise adopted. These two acts were apparently all that was accomplished at this meeting. 283 As the reader follows the second resolution, it is easy to picture Cowdery, reading with his tongue in his cheek, and the leaders whose diet was "meat" not "milk" adopting it, with their tongues in the same derisive position. This resolution on laws and governments is condensed in the following statements:

"They believe in governments but that no governments can exist in peace, except such laws are framed and held inviolate as will secure to each individual the free exercise of conscience."

"They believe that religion is instituted of God and that man are amenable to Him and to Him only for the exercise of it, unless their re-

religious opinion prompts them to infringe upon the rights and liberties of others.

"They do not believe that human law has a right to interfere in prescribing rules of worship to bind the consciences of men. They believe that the civil magistrate should restrain crime but never control conscience; should punish guilt but never suppress the freedom of the soul.

"They do not believe that governments have a right to deprive citizens of this privilege or prescribe them in their opinion so long as such religious opinions do not justify sedition nor conspiracy.

"They do not believe it just to mingle religious influence with civil government whereby one religious society is fostered and another proscribed in its spiritual privileges, and the individual rights of its members as citizens denied.

"They do not believe a religious society has the right to try or punish men on right of property or goods, and do believe that men should appeal to civil laws for defense of property and life."

The last column has the significant sentence. "We believe that all men are justified in defending themselves, their friends and property from the unlawful assaults and encroachments of all persons, where immediate appeal cannot be made to the laws, and relief afforded."

The whole resolution thus declares that governments may dictate and enforce civil laws only; one's conscience may dictate religious laws of all sorts, and so long as they are not seditious or in the nature of conspiracies, governments may not interfere; religious societies should not interfere with civil laws; nor civil officers with religious laws; and men are justified in anything, falsehoods or double speaking, in defending themselves from civil officers who do attempt to so interfere. Two lines for the first resolution, three columns for the second; and these
three columns on religious freedom for people who were settled on the North-west Territory where religious freedom has obtained from the first! The apparently useless procedure of dividing up the members present into class groups under a leader "whom they trusted" when it came to balloting on the question should be noted also.

The editor saw fit to add a few words in this same issue of the Messenger and Advocate to enforce the stand taken at the Assembly. He says, "If a man becomes an offender of the law he must be dealt with according to law. Thus if a man shall rob, he shall be delivered up unto the law, and if he steal he shall be delivered up unto the law ------ Search the Scriptures which you have before you" (there is only a recent and possibly corrected edition in Cleveland) --and pray for more wisdom and understanding that you may be prepared to receive and practice upon the revelations and commandments that will soon be sent forth to this generation." 284 If he rob or steal he shall be given to the law for

284. Messenger and Advocate, August 1835. Editorial

those are civil crimes. If he enters into polygamy they do not state what shall happen.

Remy says that the concubinage of the patriarchs had always impressed Smith and he resolved to appeal to God who answered giving the law of the priesthood. Stenhouse declares that Joseph became impressed with the idea of polygamy while translating the papyri found with the Egyptian mummies and the first paragraph of the revelation "has all the musty odor of the catacombs about it." 285 Werner assuredly had read


these two authorities before he informed his public in his inimitable
breezy style "how the lives of such heroes of the Old Testament as Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon made Smith wonder why he could not make his life sublime." This might account for Smith's great interest in the study of Hebrew. His God-given powers of prophecy and of understanding of the gift of tongues were sufficient for ordinary occasions, but upon any question touching Scriptural doctrine, he must be prepared to convince a Bible student such as Rigdon, who, both friends and enemies declare, stood sternly against polygamy when it was finally announced.

His fear of Rigdon may have been the reason for Smith keeping him new command from God, if he did receive one at Kirtland, a secret. Another and almost as compelling a reason is to be found in Smith's awe of his wife. As has been said he was not present at the church meeting where these resolutions were adopted but four days later he "returned to Kirtland from a trip." Emboldened by the church's support of him in their declaration, he stood in the pulpit on the day of his return and preached on the duty of wives.

At Kirtland, in November 1835, the Prophet originated and used a new marriage ceremony. He wrote in his diary: "I had an invitation to attend a wedding at Brother Hyrum Smith's in the evening; also to solemnize the matrimonial ceremony between Newell Knight and Lydia Goldthwaite. The ceremony was original with me and in substance as follows: "You covenant to be each other's companions thru life, and discharge the duties of..."
husband and wife in every respect?" Shortly before this Sister Sarah Knight, wife of Newell Knight, had a dream which was worth recording.289


She may of course have died during the period intervening between the dream and the second "matrimonial ceremony" of her husband but this second ceremony was not recorded in the Painesville papers as was the custom in that county.

There is an item on marriage just a month before this that should go into this story somewhere but just how and where is not very clear. Sidney Rigdon had been indicted for solemnizing marriages without a license and tried before the Common Pleas Court. The performance of the marriage ceremony by Rigdon had been proven on the part of the prosecution. Rigdon then produced a license of the court which had been granted to him several years before as a minister of the Campbellites. This license was to continue as long as he remained a minister in regular standing in that denomination. The prosecution next undertook to prove that he had abandoned that church and joined the Mormons. It appeared that the Campbellites, or Disciples as they were not called, kept written minutes of their proceedings and no church record of his dismissal being found, the "court rejected the testimony and a nolle was entered." 290


It seems impossible that the Geauga County Court would have granted Smith a license to marry. If he had no license why did he perform a ceremony, knowing court action would follow. The knowledge of this result may have been the reason why the Knight marriage was not regularly announced in the papers. Was it a case of sheer braggadocio toward the
law? They had won one suit in regard to their rights in this matter; let the law interfere and they would win another! Or was it a polygamous marriage and thus the account only appears in the church history?

Evidence that even elders practiced polygamy at Kirtland is found in the minutes of a meeting of the Presidents of the Seventies, April 29, 1837, which declared, "We will have no fellowship whatever with any elder belonging to the Quorum of the Seventies, who is guilty of polygamy." 291


The most damaging evidence against the Mormons comes from a charge made in writing against Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, by the Prophet himself.

"You commenced your wickedness by heading a party to disturb the worship of the Saints in the first day of the week, and made the house of the Lord in Kirtland to be a scene of abuse and slander, to destroy the reputation of those whom the church had appointed to be their teachers, and for no other cause only that you were not the persons." 292 Smith was also charged "with improper relations with an orphan girl whom Mrs. Smith had taken into the family" and it was said that he had confessed to similar relations with another young woman. 293


There is evidence in the Elders' Journal that many people thought the Mormons practiced plurality of wives. The editor of that paper writes in November, 1837, "Of the many questions asked again and again of the Mormons" and says one of these was, "Do the Mormons believe in having more wives than one?" 294 Among the hundreds of women who came to Kirt-
land during the stay of the Mormons, there were some who, judging by their previous conduct, might have tempted a Saint. The Church were warned against such, and some of these did receive Church trials for adultery.

As has been shown, at least one Saint, Harris, fell. Mr. Werner declares.

   b. Doctrine and Covenants, 1904 (Reorganized Church), Sec. 18, p. 47;
   1886, Sec. 19, Verse 28, p. 119.

that Oliver Cowdery accused Smith of seducing an orphan girl who lived for a time in his family and that Smith first acknowledged but later denied this. 296


Mr. Frank J. Cannon, writing on this subject, makes a rather far-fetched assumption that the high-sounding term polygamy was applied to chance cases of sexual irregularity. They really did, however, use the word adultery rather freely up to the time of the establishment of their school for adults and the term polygamy after that.

297. Cannon, F. J. and Knapp, G. L; Brigham Young and His Mormon Empire, p. 69.

The Cleveland Liberalist of Feb. 4, 1837, has an article answering a correspondent, O. P. Q., in the previous paper, concerning wives and husbands. If the author of this answer was not P. P. Pratt himself, it is enough like his ideas, as expressed in the Millennial Star, to have served as their model. The writer, who signs himself "Enquirer," says that he proposes to abolish the law against polygamy and allow every man to marry with the consent of his wife or wives as many more as he may judge proper. It would be more desirable to be the second or even
the third wife of a generous man than to remain an old maid, neglected and laughed at. It would relieve one wife from the burden of bearing many children and give the husband who had a barren wife the chance of having children by another. It would eminently lessen prostitution in one sex and ranging in the other. It would be no more expensive for a man to have two wives than to have one wife and hire a seamstress. It appears that a host of evils which now exist would at once cease. 298

298. Cleveland Liberalist, February 4, 1837.

It is certain that the Kirtland Mormons read this article even if they did not write it, for as early as December 24, 1836, James Carroll, Kirtland, is listed among the agents for the Cleveland Liberalist, and many letters from Kirtland men, enclosing a dollar for their subscription and praising the paper for its stand on one question or another, are printed. 299


There seem to have been four distinct eras in the history of polygamy. This first period, just discussed, during which it was probably practiced stealthily only by those church leaders to whom it was considered prudent to impart the secret. The second period, from 1843 to 1852, during which its existence was known to the church but denied to the world. The third period from 1852 to 1886 during which its acceptance was inculcated as essential to happiness in this world and salvation in the next. The last period since 1886 when it was legally forbidden.

The doctrine was emphatically denied at Nauvoo and the representa-
tives of the organization under Brigham Young and others continued to deny its existence until 1853 when they publicly espoused it. On August 12 of this year the leaders produced a document bearing the date July 12, 1843, and purporting to be a revelation given through Joseph Smith which
not only justified the practice of polygamy but enjoined the receiving of the doctrine under pain of damnation for its rejection. 300


The revelation making known this marriage-doctrine was dictated to William Clayton who wrote it down and it was prepared with special reference to Smith's wife, who was restless at his irregular relations. Hyrum Smith was ordered to read Verses 52 and 56 of it to Emma Smith, "who was not much edified by it." 301 These two verses are claimed to be another proof that Joseph practiced polygamy before 1842 since they state "Let


my handmaid, Emma Smith, receive all those that have been given unto my servant Joseph, who are virtuous and pure before me," and "Again, verily I say, let mine handmaid forgive my servant Joseph his trespasses." 302

302. Doctrine and Covenants, 1886, Sec. 132, Verses 52, 56, p. 472.

F. J. Cannon gives one a clear idea of the religious ideas back of the Mormon belief in plurality of wives. He says: "Polygamy cannot be understood except in connection with the doctrine of celestial marriage of which plurality of wives is a part. Mormonism is ancestor worship. Salvation depends not upon faith but upon offspring. Marriage must be contracted for eternity or it is not binding in the spirit world. Persons not married for eternity on earth cannot be so married hereafter. Such persons occupy inferior places as ministering angels to their more fortunate fellows who have fulfilled the new and everlasting covenant of
celestial marriage. Persons who have married for time and eternity under a sealing by the Prophet's authority retain their marital relations in the new. The highest salvation or true godship is reserved for those who have entered the practice of Polygamy. Since a man becomes a god to his descendants, the more descendants, the higher the godship. Women who have helped him attain this higher estate shine in the heavens by his reflected glory. Women who have not married and born children occupy an inferior place in the next world, lower than that assigned to celibate man.

Marriage is not only a means of heavenly advancement but it is a duty. Space is peopled with spirits waiting to put on a tabernacle of flesh. This is necessary to their progress and they are willing to enter the gates of birth by the most ignoble route, rather than not be born at all. They even haunt houses of ill fame hoping to receive the endowments of flesh.


The Brighamites, as the Salt Lake City Mormons are called, can prove beyond a doubt that Joseph Smith practiced polygamy; while the Josephites, who are the Reorganized Church, can prove by equal personal and documentary evidence that he denied and repudiated the doctrine to the last day of his life. Nevertheless sixteen women swore and allowed their affidavits to be published in the Nauvoo Expositor that Joseph Smith made proposals to them to be his concubines; twelve more in Salt Lake City claim they were spiritual wives; Smith's son testified that he had more than one; and many Mormons testified that Joe and Hyrum Smith taught them polygamy.

Legally, Kirtland Saints and Joseph Smith never practiced it. Historically they undoubtedly did.

late them and again he was told of Smith. The same thing happened on his trip to Harrisburg. Doubtless at Cleveland he was again recommended to go to Kirtland's Prophet. The Painesville Telegraph, on March 27, 1835, had printed a description of the Mummies then being exhibited and stated that a phrenology chart had been made, showing their probable emotions when alive. 472

472. a. History of the Church says W. W. Phelps and O. Cowdery discovered the rolls after the church bought the Mummies. b. Painesville Telegraph, March 27, 1835.

Smith under the inspiration of the Lord, interpreted some of the ancient writings and was overjoyed to discover they were in the handwriting of Abraham and of Joseph although they did not tell who the Mummies themselves were. The story told by two of the papyri strengthened the Mormons' claim as to the authenticity of the Golden Bible, 473 and the two books were printed and sent out to the Saints as part of the Pearl of Great Price.

Mr. Chandler obligingly gave the Prophet the following rather extraordinary testimonial, "This is to make known to all who may be desirous concerning the knowledge of Mr. J. Smith Junior, in deciphering the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic characters in my possession, which I have, in many cities, showed to the most learned and from the information that I could ever learn or meet with, I find that of Mr. Joseph Smith, Junior, to correspond in the most minute matters. Signed Michael H. Chandler. Traveling with, and proprietor of, Egyptian Mummies." With such a testimonial the leaders among the Mormons thought the Mummies a good investment. Smith says that Elder Cee called on him to make arrangements about exhibiting them. "He proposed to hire a room at John Johnson's inn and exhibit them there from day to day at certain hours, that some benefit may be derived from them." Smith complied with this request and only observed that "they must be managed with prudence and care, especially the manuscripts." 474