CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE MORMONS AND NON-MORMONS, NAUVOO, ILLINOIS, 1839-1846

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Chauncy L. Higbee, after leaving the Church, signed an affidavit in June, 1844, in Carthage that the Mormons were taught that they had a right to steal from Gentiles for the benefit of the Church, that there was a secret organization known as the Danites, whose duties were to rob, steal, and commit murder, and that Smith personally urged the Danites to assassinate ex-Governor Boggs of Missouri. It was admitted by the non-Mormons that Higbee's testimony may have been exaggerated; that he had, however, been very close to Smith for several years and therefore his testimony could not be disregarded completely. The apostate's newspaper, Nauvoo Expositor, in publicly condemning the teaching of the Church that shedding innocent blood, i.e., the blood of a Mormon, was the only crime a Mormon could commit, further excited the anti-Mormons.

The critics of Mormonism realized that if a secret band of assassins were prowling the country then no one could ever feel secure until the Mormons were driven from the State; the fate of Boggs was an event not to be unheeded.

Although numerous apostates left the Church feeling disgust with the pretentions of Smith and the other church leaders, none created a greater degree of resentment for the Mormons than did John Cook Bennett, former Mayor of Nauvoo and high ranking officer in the Nauvoo Legion. Smith officially excommunicated Bennett on June 23, 1842, and he commenced writing letters of exposure to the Sangamo Journal, in which letters he accused Smith of the most vile crimes and sins. Bennett's letters reflected his own profligate character and showed himself to have been a hypocrite and an ingrate. But his letters did arouse considerable interest among the non-Mormons and enormously increased the enmity felt toward the
the Mormons. He excused his membership in the Church on the ground that he aimed only to procure substantial information regarding the secret designs of the Mormons.

It was publicly admitted by the church leaders that Bennett was excommunicated because he had taught some of the female members of the Church that promiscuous intercourse was a doctrine of the Church and used Smith's name to sanction his immoral conduct. Bennett in turn accused Smith of an attempt to make Miss Nancy Rigdon and Miss Martha Brotherton his spiritual wives, along with several others. Because of the slanderous nature of the charges made by both Smith and Bennett, it was impossible for the non-Mormons to decide which one was the greatest rascal.

Bennett published the letter which he avowed Smith wrote to Nancy Rigdon and in which he attempted to win her approval of the doctrine of plural marriage: Smith had foolishly written to her: "That which is wrong under one circumstance may be and often is, right, under another. . . What ever God requires is right, no matter what it is. . . " Smith added that all things which God sanctions by revelation is lawful and right.

Smith made himself appear a worse villain when he authorized Stephen Markham to publish his affidavit that Nancy Rigdon was a disreputable girl, but at a later date authorized several other Mormons to state that Nancy Rigdon was a virtuous girl and that Stephen Markham was a corrupt character and a liar. The opponents were disgusted with the display of villainy by Smith and the other Mormons acting in behalf of Smith.

Then Sidney Rigdon, father of Nancy, published the statement that he was authorized by his daughter to explain that the letter
published by Bennett was not written by Smith, but by another person, and that Bennett was not authorized to publish it. The non-Mormons fully realized that the letter defending polygamy was written by someone in Nauvoo and that it was written for the purpose of enabling Smith to accomplish a diabolical purpose, and which proved that the spiritual wife system was taught by Smith.

Another shocking scandal which unfolded as a result of Bennett's letters and which further substantiated the popular belief that polygamy was a doctrine of the Church, at least among the officers, was the affair concerning the eighteen year old English girl Martha Brotherton. She recorded her experiences in detail for the purpose of confirming Bennett's accusations and voluntarily published them in the St. Louis Bulletin.

She confessed that Brigham Young proposed marriage to her in a room over Smith's store in Nauvoo and that Smith agreed to perform the ceremony. Both Young and Smith explained that it was lawful for a man to have more than one wife. For the anti-Mormons, her letter had a strong appearance of truth, and it was admitted that even if Bennett had never written a word, her letter was enough to condemn Smith and his infamous followers to eternal damnation.

The critics did not place abounding confidence in either Bennett or Rigdon, for they had both been active and prominent members of the Church and must have known of the villainies which were practiced in Nauvoo, but remained silent until they were excommunicated or disgruntled. However, the critics did acknowledge that Bennett's letters and disclosures were enlightening.

That the church leaders were practicing and teaching polygamy was further substantiated by other apostates such as Oliver H. and
T. F. Olney who asserted that lasciviousness and adultery were common practices among the Mormons and that Bennett's disclosures were true. O. H. Olney felt that it was his duty to warn all men against the impostures of Nauvoo. The apostates believed that they had been imposed upon in matters of a divine nature.

Smith further reflected dishonor on his own character when he delivered speeches to specially called gatherings and in which he used abusive and obscene language in reference to the opponents, the apostates, and the Whig newspapers. Because it was widely known that he spoke while under the influence of alcohol, he was commonly known as the holy debauche.

The city of Nauvoo was often referred to as the community of wives; W. H. King, a Presbyterian minister of Hancock County, wrote to a fellow pastor on May 3, 1842, that he supposed that Nauvoo was as perfect a sink of debauchery as was the ancient city of Sodom.

The doctrine of polygamy was a gradual evolution; as Smith's prestige increased he found it easier to persuade women that the practice of polygamy was not a sin but an assurance of divine favor. He located various passages in the Bible authorizing it. But as his philandering became a public scandal, it was necessary to obtain the support of the opinion of his followers and to persuade them that polygamy was sanctified and necessary for salvation.

On July 12, 1843, Smith officially announced that he had received the revelation sanctioning polygamy, and asserted that those who did not marry in accordance with the revelation would become in the next world ministering servants, but those who fulfilled the obligations of the revelation would become Gods.

The non-Mormons were now convinced that the Mormons were using
a religious creed to cloak sin and as an excuse to pursue debasing and lustful purposes. The doctrine was declared by them a bane of society and totally destructive of the home and family. It was public revulsion against this doctrine that led to the downfall of Smith.

The Mormons were condemned also because they adopted the two-fold policy of denouncing the doctrine of polygamy publicly while practicing it privately. The Mormon newspaper Wasp repeatedly denied that polygamy was a doctrine of the Church.

That there was a great degree of moral laxity in Nauvoo was brought to public attention by the trial of Joseph Smith in the Nauvoo Municipal Court, May 6, 1844. Smith had excommunicated Francis Higbee because of his infamous conduct in connection with the spiritual wife system. Higbee sued Smith for slander. During the trial, which Higbee did not attend, the many disclosures made by Smith regarding Higbee's immoral conduct indicated that Nauvoo had become a totally depraved city.

The Nauvoo Expositor charged that women of foreign nations were induced to leave their families and friends and to sacrifice their wealth and property to come to Nauvoo to be taught the mysteries of God, but instead were instructed in the doctrine of spiritual wifery. It was also asserted that the conditions of the females in Nauvoo were miserable and wretched, and that the numerous orphans were testimony to the wretched conditions existing in Nauvoo. Although the actual facts pertaining to the women of Nauvoo may have been greatly exaggerated, the Expositor's account did contribute to the feeling of bitter resentment toward the Mormons and which culminated in the expulsion of the Mormons from the State.
Nauvoo Neighbor, December 20, 1843, Vol. 1, No. 34.

Times and Seasons, March 15, 1843, Vol. 4, No. 9.


Times and Seasons, March 10, 1843, Vol. 4, No. 9.

Sangamo Journal, August 17, 1833, Vol. 11, No. 93.

Times and Seasons, November 1, 1840, Vol. 2, No. 1.

Times and Seasons, May 1, 1843, Vol. 4, No. 12.


Warsaw Signal, June 19, 1844, No. 19.

Alton Telegraph and Democratic Review, March 19, 1845, Vol. 10, No. 11.

Ibid., July 9, 1842 Vol. 7, No. 28. On May 6, 1842, Governor Boggs of Missouri was fired upon while seated near the window in his home in Independence. He managed to recover. O. P. Rockwell, a Mormon of Nauvoo, returned to the city shortly after the attempt on Boggs’ life, boasting that he had been to Missouri; John Cook Bennett claimed that Smith ordered Rockwell to commit the deed.

Ibid., November 19, 1842, Vol. 7, No. 47.

Thomas Gregg, History of Hancock County, p. 284.
Wasp, June 25, 1842, Vol. 10, No. 11.


Illinois State Register, July 15, 1842, Vol. 3, No. 50.


Wasp, September 3, 1842, Vol. 1, No. 20.

Sangamo Journal, September 23, 1842, Vol. 11, No. 5.

Wasp, September 3, 1842, Vol. 1, No. 20.

Sangamo Journal, September 23, 1842, Vol. 11, No. 5.


Quincy Whip, August 13, 1842, Vol. 5, No. 16.

Wasp, July 30, 1842, Vol. 1, No. 16.

Quincy Whip, November 19, 1842, Vol. 11, No. 7.

Sangamo Journal, October 7, 1842, Vol. 11, No. 7.


Fawn Brodie, No Man Knows My History, p. 269.


Joseph Smith, Pearl of Great Price (Salt Lake City: Latter-day Saints Publishing Establishment, 1878), p. 69.

82 Times and Seasons, February 1, 1844, Vol. 5, No. 3.