

## Chapter 1

### Cochranism

#### The Origin of Utah Mormon Polygamy

For over a century and a half, the leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, have claimed that the Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr., received a revelation in July 1843, which commanded the Saints to practice polygamy. The truth is, however, that polygamy in the Church had its beginnings, not with Joseph, but with a man named Jacob Cochran. About 1816 Cochran started a denomination in the area of Saco, Maine, in which he introduced polygamy. Some of his polygamous practices were later adopted by Apostles Brigham Young, John Taylor, Heber C. Kimball, Parley P. Pratt, Orson Hyde, and others. These Church leaders secretly practiced polygamy in Nauvoo before Joseph's death, without his approval.

The astounding story of Jacob Cochran's polygamy is told by G. T. Ridlon, Sr., who was related to some of the "Cochranites," as they were called. He spent twenty-five years writing a book, published in 1895, entitled *Saco Valley Settlements and Families*. Excerpts from his book are printed below to acquaint the reader with polygamy as it was being practiced prior to the organization of the Church in 1830. Titles have been inserted in brackets into Ridlon's account in order to lay a foundation for later discussions of the various subjects in his book:

#### —The Cochran Delusion—

He [Jacob Cochran] must have been a unique and very remarkable character. His intellectual, mesmeric, and physical powers were certainly extraordinary. Whatever view we

may entertain regarding the soundness of his doctrines, the methods employed by him, or the character of the man, we have no warrant for believing that he was an illiterate, impulsive ranter, who carried forward his work like a cloud driven by a tempest. On the other hand, he was cool, calculating, and deliberate. . . .

In the towns bordering on the Saco [River] several hundred professed conversion under his preaching, and the influence of the "revival" extended from this locality into other towns in western Maine, until, within a year from the inauguration of the movement, about a thousand persons made a profession of religion. Many of these were sincere believers in the New Testament and were never involved in the ridiculous practices encouraged by the leader.

When Cochran first began to preach in Scarborough and Saco, his commanding appearance, evident learning, matchless oratory, and the uncertainty existing regarding his creed opened to him the churches, and some of the settled pastors listened to him with amazement. . . .

### **[Revelations to Practice "Spiritual Wifery"]**

When Cochran had secured a firm foot-hold in the community, his creed evolved a new and startling phase. He preached against the legal marriage bond, and in the ideal state pictured by him the inhabitants were neither married nor given in marriage; this should begin on earth, being God's standard for society, and be as nearly approximated as mortal conditions would admit of. The affinities were to be all spiritual and were infinitely superior to any relations formed by natural affection. He admonished all who had been united in the bonds of matrimony according to the laws of the land to hold themselves in readiness to dissolve such union and renounce their vows. All revelations to this end were to come through Cochran, of course, and in the allotment of the spoils the leader, by virtue of his rank, was sure to get the "lion's share." Tradition assumes that he received frequent consignments of spiritual consorts, and that such were invariably the most robust and attractive women in the community.

### [Cochran Taught the Exchanging of Wives]

As we have intimated, he had a sort of permanent wife, locally known as "Mrs. Cochran"; but his loyalty to her was subject to such revelations as he might receive anent his duty (?) to others. Some who were conversant with these affairs, now living, relate that on one of Cochran's professional visitations he informed one of his male followers that he had, while at prayer in his house that morning, received a communication direct from Him who dwells above the stars that embodied, *inter alia*, a requirement of a peculiar character, namely, that he and the brother addressed should, for the time being, *exchange wives* (italics added). To this, as from the Lord, via Cochran, his medium, the layman consented, and leaving Cochran to assume the government of his family, he immediately went to pay his respects to Mrs. Cochran. Now this woman was somewhat skeptical in regard to her husband's doctrines and practices, and when she responded to the knock at her door and inquired about the nature of the man's errand; when he told her about her husband's new revelation, with clenched fist and flashing eyes she replied: "You go straight back and tell Jake Cochran his God is a liar."

### [The Origin of the Garden of Eden Temple Ceremony]

In place of figure-drawings upon a black-board to illustrate scriptural incidents, he employed the more impressive mediums of flesh and blood. One of the favorite tableaux introduced by these fanatics was the personification of our first parents, as they were supposed to have appeared before fig-leaf aprons were in fashion. We have not found a description of the stage scenery used as accessory to this performance, but a part of the programme was for the disciples present, both male and female, to sit upon the floor in a circle while the ideal Adam, in the person of Cochran, and Eve, in the person of some chosen female, came into this extemporized "Garden of Eden". . . .

But disintegrating elements were now beginning to disturb the system. The fact that the preaching of Cochran had the effect to destroy domestic peace, and ruined the home life of many who had become identified with the movement, pro-

duced a more healthy reaction than the leader had anticipated. Married men embraced the doctrines promulgated, while their more virtuous or level-headed wives would have no part or lot in the matter. On the other hand, women who had hitherto lived consistent and respectable lives became infatuated with Cochran and his preaching, while their husbands were decidedly averse to both.

These conflicting elements in the home were stimulated rather than conciliated by the leader, and hatred was eventually engendered between heads of families which culminated in separation. . . .

But as the people became acquainted with his style, and the prejudice that preceded his coming wore away, he would excite curiosity and stimulate sensation by introducing some novel ceremony or by making startling statements in his sermons. . . .

At Limington, meetings were held at the dwelling of a native of Buxton, who once lived on Woodsum's hill, below Salmon Falls. Runners were sent down to Buxton and Hollis to advise Cochran's disciples that "Brother Jacob" would hold meetings on such a day and evening. To avoid suspicion, the Cochranites went from home at night and followed a circuitous route to Limington. One of these was a brother of the man at whose house Cochran was to preach. Sister Mercy [a beautiful young "medium"], the one who alternated between the terrestrial and celestial worlds, was there, ready to soar away or to remain in the body, as the leader of ceremonies might wish; if it was deemed best for the success of the service that Mercy depart, Cochran gave the signal and away she went—upon the floor. On this occasion, however, she did not go beyond recall, for when the services had closed and the time for rest came, the owner of the house placed a candle in Cochran's hand, opened a sleeping-room door, and with a significant gesture bade Brother Cochran and Sister Mercy "goodnight". . . .

The matter embodied in this chapter was not culled from dim traditions, that had been handed down from generations enfeebled by age, but has been received from the lips of venerable persons, of unimpaired mental faculties, who had listened to the preaching and witnessed the peculiar practices of Jacob Cochran while he held such a mighty sway in the

towns on the Saco [River]. I could have supplemented these statements by quotations from a bundle of yellow documents that were formulated by a magistrate who lived in Buxton at the time these things occurred, but some of these affidavits would be of too sensational and personal a character for my purpose. I have not torn the veil asunder from the top to the bottom, by any means, and have left out enough of tradition and documentary evidence, relating to this remarkable delusion, to fill a volume. . . .

The result of this wide-spread religious epidemic was far-reaching and ruinous. For nearly three-score years this corroding wave of influence has been creeping downward, keeping pace with the three generations of descendants of those who were involved in the original delusive excitement inaugurated by the villainous destroyer of homes and human happiness, who, though dead, speaks still through the instrumentality of his influence and by the soul-blight of their posterity, born out of wedlock.

Some of the scenes witnessed in the domestic circles in the Saco river towns were heart-rending. Young wives who had refused to prostitute their principles of virtue, by submitting to the demoralizing practices of the Cochranites, were bereft of their children and forsaken. Such were left in sorrow and poverty, and all their remaining days refused to be comforted because those they had loved "were not." An aged and saintly woman was recently visited whose father, once an industrious farmer with a pleasant home, became a public advocate of the Cochran creed, and who, after long neglect of his farm and family to follow what, in his delusion, he called duty, visited foreign lands and eventually died, a stranger among strangers, thousands of miles from home and kindred. As this venerable woman adverted to her childhood days and her father's expatriation, she groaned in spirit and wept; a far-off echo of a voice that had preached pernicious doctrines, but long ago silenced by the paralyzing hand of death.

We know of a sea captain who lived on the west side of the Saco. He had married a beautiful daughter of respectable parentage, and to them two pretty boys had been given. Before Jacob Cochran appeared in that community peace and contentment reigned in that home-circle. But the father, a man of speculative and unstable mind, was swept from his

moorings by the sophistry of this imposter and spent the time that should have been devoted to the interests of his family with the followers of the "New Apostle to the Gentiles," as some called him. He had a "spiritual wife" assigned to him, said farewell to Hannah, tore her children from her bosom, and left for the westward, where a community of primitive Mormons had congregated. . . .

### **[Restoration Missionaries Labored among the Cochranites]**

The Cochran craze paved the way for a Mormon invasion in the Saco valley. A full-blooded Cochranite made a first-class Mormon saint.\* Jake Cochran was a John the Baptist for the Mormon apostles, who appeared on his old battleground and gathered up the spoils. The inhabitants of the river towns, as well as some in the interior, were afflicted with Cochranite grasshoppers, followed by Mormon locusts. Scions cut from the decaying trunk of the old Cochran tree were readily engrafted into Mormon branches, but the fruit was not the same; when these had become firmly united, they were transplanted bodily to new soil, considered more congenial to their development, in the state of New York.

Some of the old people, now living, confound the two movements, and we have found insuperable difficulty in sifting the chaff of error from the wheat of truth. It seems to have been a most remarkable coincidence, which has the appearance of concerted action between Cochran and his successors. Almost as soon as he vacated the field, the founders of the Mormon hierarchy invested it. The history of the Mormon church makes Brigham Young come to Maine in 1832 or 1833. The doctrine preached by [Samuel] Smith, Pratt, and Young, in York county, was not of an offensive nature; it was, properly speaking, Millenarianism.

The excitement was immense. The inhabitants went twenty miles to hear these earnest missionaries preach. A change from Cochranism was wanted, and this new

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\*This statement by Ridlon was printed in 1895 when the controversy over polygamy in Utah was receiving national attention and was at its zenith. It applies to the Mormon Church in Utah at the time, and not the Latter Day Saints during the lifetime of Joseph Smith, Jr.

gospel seemed to be an improvement. Old wine was put into new bottles, and many drank to their fill. *At this time polygamy had not been mentioned* [among the Mormons] (italics added). No attempt was made to form an organized church; Cochran had preached against such, and Brigham found these disciples averse to any ecclesiastical government, and waited until he had transported his converts to Manchester, N. Y., before enforcing this part of his creed. . . .

The Mormon excitement spread into every town where Cochran had made converts; these had been washed from their moral and rational moorings by the tidal-wave let loose upon the community by Jacob, and the Mormon inundation landed them high—if not dry—in New York state.

The Mormon elders were unwearied in their efforts to enlarge the circle of their influence and to drum up recruits for their semi-religious community. Like flaming heralds, they traveled from town to town, and their evident sincerity and unbounded enthusiasm drew thousands to hear them. . . .

James Townsend went from Buxton with his family, consisting of a wife and four children. He proved loyal to the end; went westward by stages, and built the first hotel in Utah. Only a few years ago he visited the East and called upon his relatives and early acquaintances. He returned to his home in Salt Lake City and soon died, leaving a vast estate.

Some who joined the westward Mormon tide became preachers and traveled extensively on our continent and in foreign lands to promulgate the faith held by the church of the Latter Day Saints. Many who removed to the New York settlement went west as far as Ohio, and some of them, after their brethren went to Nauvoo, purchased land and became successful farmers there. (G. T. Ridlon, Sr., *Saco Valley Settlements and Families*, 269–283)

### **Ridlon's 1895 Account Illustrates the Cochran Connection**

The information taken from Historian Ridlon's book, in his chapter entitled "The Cochran Delusion," reveals some definite likenesses between Cochranism and the Mormon Church's polygamy, including:

1. Cochran used the term "spiritual wives" just as the Utah polygamists did;
2. Cochran claimed that permission to practice polygamy must come through revelation to the leader, just as in the Mormon Church's theology;
3. The leader's permission was required before spiritual wifery could be practiced;
4. "Assigning of wives" was practiced in both systems;
5. Exchanging of wives was sometimes practiced by both;
6. Oaths of secrecy were a requirement of Cochranism, and are still a part of the LDS temple ordinances;
7. The "Garden of Eden" ceremony was practiced by Cochran and is also a part of the Mormon Church's temple ceremonies.