

Chapter 5

The Apostles Brought Polygamy into the Church

Cochranism was not the only source of polygamy. Indeed, polygamy was a common subject of discussion in America during the 1830s. Over a hundred different religious colonies or communes in America were practicing some form of polygamy during the years that the Church was being formed. In 1868 William Hepworth Dixon wrote two volumes entitled *Spiritual Wives*, which gave much information about the various forms of polygamy, spiritual wifery, and like practices during that time.

Dixon was a distinguished English writer and the editor of the *Athenaeum*, a literary magazine published in London. He traveled extensively in America gathering facts about polygamous groups, and even visited Salt Lake City where he interviewed Brigham Young. Dixon wrote:

A few words dropt by Brigham Young, in the course of a long reply to questions of mine on another point, told me that the Mormon Pope knew more than could be found in books about that doctrine of the Spiritual wife, which, in our own day, in the midst of our churches, and chiefly, if not wholly, among men of Teutonic race, has flowered out into so many new and surprising domestic facts: at Salt Lake City into Polygamy; among the New England spiritual circles into Affinities; at Mount Lebanon into Celibate Love; at Wallingford and Oneida Creek [New York] into Complex Marriage, and in a hundred American cities into some more or less open form of Free Love. (William Hepworth Dixon, *Spiritual Wives* 1:79)

Dixon's statement that some form of spiritual wifery was being practiced "in a hundred American cities" will no doubt be

surprising to many. However, other writers confirm his findings. Of interest also is his statement on the subject of polygamy—that Brigham Young knew more about the “doctrine of the Spiritual wife” than could be found in books. This meant that Brigham Young was intimately familiar with other religious societies which were practicing polygamy. In a sermon in 1860, Brigham Young confirmed that he had a knowledge of many other religions. He said:

I used to go to meetings—was well acquainted with the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, New Lights, Baptists, Freewill Baptists, Wesleyan and Reformed Methodists,—lived from my youth where I was acquainted with the Quakers as well as the other denominations, and was more or less acquainted with almost every other religious ism. (*Journal of Discourses* 8 [1861]: 38)

It has already been shown in an earlier chapter that Brigham had a firsthand knowledge of Cochranism, having been in attendance at the Church’s conference in Saco, Maine, in 1836, and having married Augusta Cobb who was well acquainted with Cochranism.

America was not the only nation in which polygamy was a popular subject of discussion in the 1830s and 1840s. It was a matter of interest and speculation in England and other parts of Europe during the time that the first Church missionaries were there. It seems that whenever God moves to start something as marvelous as the restoring of the New Testament Church, which was officially organized in 1830, that Satan also starts a new surge of evil to destroy it. One of Satan’s major efforts in this direction during the time that the Church was being formed was a revival of interest in polygamy—which occurred in three different countries simultaneously, but independently. Dixon recorded:

It has not, I think, been noticed by any writer that three of the most singular movements in the churches of our generation seem to have been connected, more or less closely, with the state of mind produced by revivals; one in Germany, one in England, and one in the United States. . . .

These three movements, which have a great deal in common, began without concert, in distant parts of the world, under separate church rules, and in widely different social circumstances. The first movement was in Ost Preussen [Germany]; the second in England; the third, and most important, in Massachusetts and New York. They had these chief things in common; they began in colleges, they affected the form of family life, and they were carried on by clergymen; each movement in a place of learning and of theological study; that in Germany at the Luther-Kirch of Königsberg, that in England at St. David's College, that in the United States at Yale College. (Dixon, *Spiritual Wives* 1:84–85)

It is significant that these three manifestations of the polygamous spirit all occurred in religious and intellectual circles—at leading universities in each country. This made polygamy more acceptable than if the practice had occurred in small, unknown, radical groups.

Books published in England attest to the fact that polygamy had long been a subject of discussion in that country before the Church's missionaries arrived in 1837. They include:

T. T. Payen, *The Cases of Polygamy, Concubinage, Adultery, Divorce, etc., Seriously and Learnedly Discussed* (London: 1732);

James Cookson, *Thoughts on Polygamy Including Remarks on Theolyptora and Its Scheme* (Winchester, England: J. Wilkes for the author, 1782);

Delany Patrick, *Reflections on Polygamy* (London: 1739);

Johannes Lyser, *Polygamia Triumphatrix* (Europe: 1682);

John Towers, *Polygamy Unscriptural* (London: 1780);

William Hepworth Dixon, *Spiritual Wives*, 2 vols., 1868.

Some of the Apostles Increased Their Interest in Polygamy While in England

It was shown in the previous chapter that Brigham Young testified that he had polygamous manifestations while serving as a missionary apostle in England. Elder Edwin Stafford testified that he was satisfied that Brigham Young was in adultery

while there. It should be remembered that the missionaries who went to the English Mission were idolized by many of their converts, which had a tendency to increase polygamous desires. An example of their popularity is revealed in the following account:

Elder Kimball, accompanied by Elder Fielding, walked to Chatburn and Downham for a last farewell. In Chatburn, the people left their work and flocked to the streets to greet them. Children followed them from place to place, singing. "Some of them said that if they could but touch us they seem better. They evidently believe there is Virtue in Brother Kimball's Cloake," Elder Fielding wrote. (*The Ensign of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* 17 [July 1987]: 26)

In this setting, in a country where polygamy was a subject of discussion, as it was in America, it was natural for the apostles and the other missionaries to develop theories to justify their polygamous desires. There is evidence that these brethren added to their desires for polygamy, and belief in it, as a result of their experiences in England.

As mentioned previously, Brigham Young stated that "While we were in England, (in 1839 and 40), I think the Lord manifested to me by vision and his Spirit things [concerning polygamy] that I did not then understand. . . . [T]here had never been a thought of it in the Church that I ever knew anything about at that time" (*Messenger* 1 [June 1875]: 29; *Deseret News*, July 1, 1874). Lorenzo Snow, also a missionary to England and a brother to Eliza Snow (who became a plural wife of Brigham), stated:

There is no man that lives that had a more perfect knowledge of the principle of plural marriage, its holiness and divinity, than what I had. *It was revealed to me before the Prophet Joseph Smith explained it to me.* I had been on a mission to England between two and three years, *and before I left England* I was perfectly satisfied in regard to something connected with plural marriage. (*Deseret Semi-Weekly News*, June 6, 1899; italics added)

A Book Promoting Polygamy Was Published in England

In addition to these two admissions of polygamous tendencies, there were other indications that the English Mission was a factor in bringing “a thing which is had in secret chambers” into the Church during the Nauvoo period. One was a book which prominent English priesthood members promoted, that told of Jacob (of the Old Testament) and his twelve sons.

Some of the more prominent priesthood members in England showed an unusual interest in polygamy and the “patriarchal order” (which was their terminology for those ancient patriarchs of the Old Testament who practiced plural marriage and concubinage). Part of their interest was generated by this book entitled *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Sons of Jacob*. It was published by Elder Samuel Downes of the Church at Manchester, England, in 1843. Note in the statement below that Downes showed the book to many of the brethren and they urged him to publish it. His preface states:

Beloved Brother, In sending forth unto the nations of the world the following pages, in a form whereby the humblest of our Brethren may possess themselves of it, I shall not know how truly thankful to feel to Almighty God, if, upon a perusal of its contents, it may meet with that approbation which it is the wish of your humble brother it should do. . . . Having shewn it to many of my brethren, and it having met with their approbation, they are wishful to possess themselves of it also. I now at their solicitation for the church, and for mankind in general, send it forth unto the world; and my heart's desire to God is, that the sublime truths contained in it may cause the hearts of the saints to rejoice and the wicked to see. . . . Art thou a Bishop, a Minister. . . ? Look upon Jacob, O ye parents, peruse the twelve godly fathers in time and order. Learn of him and his to pray aright. (Preface to *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Sons of Jacob*)

The books were sold from the Church's *Millennial Star* office and it was advertised in that publication. Editor Thomas Ward published:

We have received a hundred copies of a reprint of a translation from an ancient Greek manuscript, entitled *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Sons of Jacob*. We have to remark that this publication is not at all connected with the Church of Latter-day Saints, but merely printed by a brother, elder Samuel Downes, as a relic of antiquity, containing many portions of truth, and as a general curiosity. (*The Latter-Day Saints' Millennial Star* 4 [October 1843]: 96)

Elder Downes dedicated the book to a patriarch in the English Mission with these words:

The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Sons of Jacob, Is Most Respectfully Dedicated to My Well-Beloved Brother, John Albitson, Patriarch in the Church of Latter-Day Saints. As a token of respect and esteem for his services and unwearied zeal in the cause of God in this the Evening of Time. By his Brother in Christ, Samuel Downes.

The *Millennial Star* 3 [June 1842]: 30, refers to “Elder Albitson, the patriarch,” who was present at a general conference held in Manchester, England, on May 15, 1842. Apostle Parley Pratt presided over that conference.

The book did not condemn polygamy as do all the Three Standard Books of Scripture. That book presented Jacob’s plural marriage and concubinage as a godly way of life. It was not a book which edified the reader with true spiritual values. Neither could its claims be substantiated by the Bible, Book of Mormon, or Doctrine and Covenants. For instance, it stated, “Then an angel of the Lord appeared unto Jacob, and said that Rachel should bear but two sons, because she had forsaken the company of her husband, and chosen continency” (Elder Samuel Downes, *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Sons of Jacob*, 48). The Bible proves this claim false, for Rachel bore Jacob’s last son—Benjamin, and died in childbirth as a result (Genesis 35:16–19). In other words, Rachel did not forsake “the company of her husband.”

Downes’ book on the twelve patriarchs emphasized the pa-

triarchal order of life in the Old Testament. The same theme was adopted and amplified in the LDS Church's theology—even to this day (see Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 559).

At the meeting in which Brigham introduced the polygamy document (Section 132) to the public in 1852, with Joseph's name falsely attached, Apostle Orson Pratt gave a stirring sermon citing polygamous practices of the patriarchs of the Old Testament as the reason for having polygamy in modern times (*Journal of Discourses* 1 [1854]: 53–66). Orson became the husband of ten wives. Four were from the British Isles (*Utah Genealogical Magazine* 27 [1936]: 113–114).

One of Orson Pratt's biographers explained:

The Saints soon found that this discourse would mark a fateful turning point for the entire Church. Orson began to talk about the ancient biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the privileges and blessings they enjoyed. He asked the congregation why the Lord had permitted these former worthies to take more than one wife. The answer, according to Orson, was that this was the most efficient way for the Lord to raise up a righteous and numerous people. (Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt*, 175)

The promotion of the book about the twelve patriarchs and the emphasis upon the patriarchal order are further evidences of the direct connection between the polygamous tendencies among the English missionaries and their converts, and Mormon theology.

Some Plural Wives of the Apostles Were from the British Isles

It is more than coincidence that many of the women who later became plural wives of the missionaries to England were women from the British Isles. This is another evidence that the English avenue helped bring polygamy into the Church. A list of a few of the missionaries sent to England and their first plural wives demonstrates this connection:

Apostle Parley P. Pratt married a total of twelve wives. His

first plural wife and four other plurals were from the British Isles (see Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt*, 462–464);

Apostle Heber C. Kimball married forty-three wives, eight of whom were from the British Isles (see Stanley B. Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball—Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer*, 307–316);

Apostle Orson Hyde married a total of six wives, and his first plural wife was of English birth (see Howard H. Barron, *Orson Hyde—Missionary, Apostle, Colonizer*, 323);

Apostle John Taylor married fifteen wives (Richard S. Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, *A Book of Mormons*, 354). His first plural wife's birthplace was the Isle of Man, England (see *Utah Genealogical Magazine* 21 [1930]: 105).

Thousands of devoted English Saints joined the Church, and it is tragic that the American missionaries, who should have been godly shepherds over the flock, ensnared some of them in the evil net of polygamy. Later, many of the English Saints became aware of the apostasy and refused to follow the polygamous leaders. Numerous English converts, such as Charles Derry, became faithful workers in the Reorganization. After coming to America, he made great sacrifices to take the Reorganization's message back to the Saints in England.

Perhaps Brother Derry best summed up the destruction which polygamy caused throughout the Church when he stated, "The curse of polygamy has cast the darkest shadow over the church. The world is powerless to bring real discredit upon the church, but this vile system coming forth in the name of the church has given cause for reproach wherever the name of Mormonism is known" (*Journal of History* 8 [January 1915]: 174).