

## Chapter 19

### Joseph's Sermon against Polygamy

Joseph Smith's sermon in which he denied being a polygamist is a fitting closing for this volume, even though there are many more conclusive proofs of his innocence in the long and complicated story of Utah Mormon polygamy. The additional proofs are to be treated in later volumes.

In 1844 William Law, a former member of the First Presidency at Nauvoo, formed a conspiracy along with others to depose Joseph and take the leadership of the Church from him. This group of conspirators went so far as to organize a new church called the "Reformed Mormon Church" and issue a call to the Saints to reject Joseph and join the new church (see the *Nauvoo Expositor*, Friday, June 7, 1844). William Law and others also went to the county seat at Carthage and gave testimonies which resulted in three indictments being brought against Joseph. One accused him of being guilty of polygamy. The story of this conspiracy will take several chapters in a later volume to discuss in detail, but Joseph's sermon in answer to the polygamy charge is of utmost value here.

William Marks, a member of the grand jury, and Joseph's devoted friend, made him aware of the grand jury's indictments. The news of the indictments arrived in Nauvoo on Saturday, May 25, a month before Joseph's martyrdom, and spread like a prairie fire. By ten o'clock the next morning when the Sunday worship services began, thousands of Saints gathered at the Stand (an outdoor meeting place near the Temple) to hear the Prophet discuss the indictments. Thomas Bullock, one of Joseph's secretaries, recorded the sermon, which appears today in the LDS Church history under the title, "Address of the Prophet—His Testimony Against the Dissenters at Nauvoo."

Excerpts from that sermon are given below. (It is recommended that the reader study the entire sermon in the *LDS History of the Church, Period I*, 6:408–412.)

Joseph declared:

Another indictment has been got up against me [the polygamy indictment]. It appears a holy prophet [William Law] has arisen up, and he has testified against me [causing the polygamy indictment to be brought forth]. . . . God knows, then, that the charges against me are false.

*I had not been married scarcely five minutes, and made one proclamation of the Gospel, before it was reported that I had seven wives.* I mean to live and proclaim the truth as long as I can.

This new holy prophet [William Law] has gone to Carthage and swore that I had told him that I was guilty of adultery. *This spiritual wifeism! Why, a man dares not speak or wink, for fear of being accused of this.* . . . William Law . . . swears that I have committed adultery. I wish the grand jury would tell me who they [the alleged wives] are—whether it will be a curse or blessing to me. . . .

A man asked me whether the commandment [revelation] was given that a man may have seven wives; and now the new prophet has charged me with adultery. . . . Wilson Law [William's brother] also swears that I told him I was guilty of adultery. . . . I have rattled chains before in a dungeon for truth's sake. *I am innocent of all these charges, and you can bear witness of my innocence, for you know me yourselves . . . What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one.*

I am the same man, and as innocent as I was fourteen years ago [when charged with polygamy shortly after his marriage to Emma Hale]; and I can prove them all perjurers. (*LDS History of the Church* 6:410–411; italics added)

This sermon is extremely important because in it Joseph Smith declared, just one month and one day before his martyrdom, that he had only one wife. In other words, he declared that he was not a polygamist. It is significant that this sermon is published by the LDS Church itself, in its most important history. The sermon alone proves that Joseph was not a polygamist.

There are a number of points in the sermon which deserve close analysis:

1. *I had not been married scarcely five minutes . . . before it was reported that I had seven wives.* Joseph was plagued with polygamy rumors all his public life and always denied being a polygamist. Either he told the truth and was a true prophet; or he was a polygamist who was a liar and base deceiver, and was therefore a fraud and a false prophet. There is no half-way situation in this matter. As previously stated, he never hesitated to tell the truth about any other doctrine, in spite of persecution—which is evidence that he was also telling the truth in this case.

2. *This spiritual wifeism! Why, a man dares not speak or wink, for fear of being accused of this.* This is a reference to Dr. Bennett's teachings two years earlier that Joseph taught that "promiscuous intercourse between the sexes, was a doctrine believed in by the Latter-Day Saints . . . that myself and others of the authorities of the church not only sanctioned, but practiced the same wicked acts" (*Times and Seasons* 3 [July 1, 1842]: 839–840). Joseph is declaring that spiritual wifery rumors are still prevalent in Nauvoo, and that they are all false.

3. *A man asked me whether the commandment was given that a man may have seven wives.* If Joseph had been guilty of polygamy, and was trying to keep it secret as the Utah polygamists claim, he certainly would not have made this statement. The truth is that he wanted to get the whole matter out in the open and to put a stop to the polygamous activities which some of the apostles and their friends were practicing at the time.

4. *What a thing it is for a man to be accused of . . . having seven wives, when I can only find one.* Here is a definite declaration by the Prophet that he had only one wife—Emma. This statement alone answers the question of whether or not

he was guilty of polygamy. Those who later claimed that he had more wives were polygamists themselves, who used his name to cover their own crimes of polygamy. Or, like William Law, claimed Joseph was a polygamist in order to depose him.

5. *I can prove them all perjurers.* Joseph's statement that "I can prove them all perjurers" was very significant, for it meant that he had foreseen the coming problem of being accused of polygamy and had taken the measures to be able to prove that he was innocent. He declared in the same sermon:

For the last three years I have a record of all my acts and proceedings, for I have kept several good, faithful, and efficient clerks in constant employ; they have accompanied me everywhere, and carefully kept my history, and they have written down what I have done, where I have been, and what I have said; therefore my enemies cannot charge me with any day, time, or place, but what I have written testimony to prove my actions; and my enemies cannot prove anything against me. (*LDS History of the Church* 6:409)

Unfortunately, Joseph's carefully laid plans to prove his innocence were thwarted by Brigham Young and his followers—for they took Joseph's papers with them to Utah and kept them from the public.

Joseph Smith III (son of the Martyr) explained:

At the death of my father, Joseph W. Coolidge was appointed administrator of the estate. . . . The private and personal correspondence of my father, many books and some other matters of personal character were in his office in care of [Apostle] Willard Richards, and others, clerks and officials. These were either retained by the administrator upon his own responsibility; or were refused to my mother's demand at the direction of the Twelve; the latter we were at the time led to believe. . . . In answer to repeated demands for my father's private papers, journal and correspondence, made by my mother, there was an invariable denial. (Edward W. Tullidge, *Life of Joseph the Prophet*, 744–745)

In another account Joseph III stated concerning the LDS leaders' refusal to return his father's private papers to Emma:

His private records, biography, portions of history—family and general—manuscripts, memoranda, and parts of his library were all included in this refusal to comply with Mother's request. (*Saints' Herald* 82 [January 29, 1935]: 144)

Most of the "good, faithful, and efficient clerks" were not good and faithful to Joseph. Some were polygamists themselves, and they rewrote Joseph's history under Brigham's direction to make it appear that Joseph was the author of polygamy. The Mormon Church has published, "Moreover, since the death of the Prophet Joseph, the history has been carefully revised under the strict inspection of President Brigham Young, and approved by him" (*LDS History of the Church* 1:v-vi).

Elder Charles Wandell, upon reading Joseph's history as published by the LDS Church, declared that Joseph's history had been changed. He asserted:

I notice these interpolations because having been employed (myself) in the Historian's office at Nauvoo by Doctor Richards, and employed, too, in 1845, in compiling this very autobiography, I know that after Joseph's death his memoir was "doctored" to suit the new order of things, and this, too, by the direct order of Brigham Young to Doctor Richards and systematically by Richards. (*RLDS History of the Church* 4:97)

After Joseph's death, Brigham Young expanded his polygamous base by bringing more and more Saints into the polygamy fold. After he had led his followers to Utah and Joseph had been dead for eight years, Brigham publicly presented to the Saints a mysterious document (Section 132 of the LDS Doctrine and Covenants). He claimed that it was only a copy of an original revelation which Joseph had received. Brigham claimed that he had kept the copy secretly hidden in his desk. He declared:

This revelation has been in my possession many years; and who has known it? None but those who should know it.

I keep a patent lock on my desk, and there does not anything leak out that should not. (Supplement to *Millennial Star* 15 [1853]: 31; RLDS *History of the Church* 3:349)

The mystery which was “had in secret chambers” for years was now made public. That mystery was polygamy! Joseph Smith fought against polygamy all of his public life, but Brigham Young managed to bring it into the Church in spite of Joseph’s efforts to keep it out.