

**"LET NO ONE...SET ON MY SERVANT JOSEPH:"
RELIGIOUS HISTORIANS MISSING THE LESSONS OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY**

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Introduction:

Sometime around 139 A.D. a fellow named Marcion moved to Rome from Asia Minor where his father was allegedly an orthodox bishop. Marcion was apparently excommunicated from the church for heresy by his father. Little is known of him in Rome except for two literary projects. One was a book he wrote and another was one he tried to take apart. The effect of the latter lasted several centuries. Indeed, one could say that his legacy continues to the threshold of the third millennium since his day. Marcion didn't like the Judaizing tendencies he saw in the New Testament Gospels and many of the writings of Paul. Because of these he thought the canon as then available to him obscured the Good News. He regarded himself as commissioned to proclaim the truth in its uncontaminated purity. Canon expert Bruce Metzger tells us that "With thorough-going heedlessness of the consequences, Marcion undertook to expunge everything from the text of Luke and the epistles which echoed or otherwise implied a point of contact with the Old Testament."¹ Tertullian said "Marcion expressly and openly used the knife, not the pen, since he made such an excision of the Scriptures as suited his own subject-matter."² The apostle John anticipating this likelihood was concerned about the fate of his book of Revelation. He warned "if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book." (Rev. 22:19) Questioning prophets and the inspiration of scripture which comes from their pens is an age-old pastime. It goes on in Christianity today. And it goes on in Mormonism.

Observations On The Thesis

A recent example is Todd Compton's **In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives Of Joseph Smith**, published by Signature Books. While I acknowledge and applaud the enormous effort that is exhibited in this extensive collective biography, my concerns are with its thesis as it relates to the origin of the Mormon doctrine of plural marriage. Objectively, the tone of the book is mild, even friendly. Nevertheless, several significant passages voice the view that plural marriage was merely a mistaken social and religious experiment. While there is a general air of fairness about the book, nevertheless, Joseph Smith's status as an inspired prophet is challenged once again. In this respect **In Sacred Loneliness** has added little new to the historiography or understanding of Joseph Smith's doctrine. Indeed, it has taken a step back into the

19th century and joined hands with Eber D. Howe, John C. Bennett, Joseph Jackson, William Hall and a host of other detractors who deny Joseph's inspiration.

Late in the volume we find one of the clearest statements of Mr. Compton's view of plural marriage. He said it "was a social system that simply did not work." Why? Because it produced horrific trials in the subsequent lives of Joseph's widows. And Joseph, without adequate vision of the future, merely provided the theological rationale for the practice, but was not there to experience its practical consequences. If he would have been, the implication is, he would have realized it was a mistake and jettisoned it. In the chapter on Eliza Maria Partridge Mr. Compton writes:

It is one of the great ironies of Mormon history that Smith, who set the polygamous movement in motion, never experienced it in practical terms. He was content to marry the teenaged women who lived in his home and then let them depart when Emma objected. And he was content to let his polyandrous wives live with their first husbands, so he never bore the responsibility of providing for them, financially or emotionally, on a day-to-day basis. (p. 455.)

Compton continues his conclusions and perceptions of the failure of plural marriage:

It is striking that Eliza's daughters endured similar phenomena, which shows that the problems with plural marriage were systemic, not merely the result of a few extraordinarily insensitive men. ...

Looking at polygamy from our late-twentieth-century monogamous and feminist perspectives, one wonders why Latter-day Saint leaders did not see more clearly the problematic nature of such relationships and retreat from them.

A little farther on he writes,

It is useless to judge nineteenth-century Mormons by late twentieth-century standards. Both men and women were given an impossible task and failed at it. (pp. 455-456.)

Thus, it is not surprising that three different times in the book Mr. Compton refers to plural marriage as an "experiment."³

Reconstructing Joseph Smith's Doctrines

One of the more troubling issues is Mr. Compton's analysis and reconstruction of Joseph's doctrine of marriage. It is based on the naturalistic premise that many of the ideas he attributes to Joseph were adopted and adapted from the various theologies that swept the Burned-over District at the time.⁴ His recreation of Joseph's thinking is riddled with difficulties and spawns more problems than it solves because the analysis

of statements by others about Joseph's doctrine of plural marriage is neither thorough or sophisticated.

In addition to the philosophy undergirding **In Sacred Loneliness**, I isolate two problems. First, Compton's theological edifice is derived from secondhand statements attributed to Joseph Smith by associates who are in some cases secondary and tertiary figures in Church history. Others come from disaffected Mormons, non-Mormons and even anti-Mormons. These statements are scavenged from the five decades following the martyrdom; some are very late memoirs. Our author fails to evaluate their evidentiary value as a thorough historian should. Therefore, when these oral traditions are used to recreate Joseph's doctrine, our understanding of plural marriage is not greatly enhanced. It is interesting that very recently Carrie Miles used virtually the same sources to arrive at an almost diametrically opposite view of their meaning.⁵ Second, there is considerable evidence that Mr. Compton has over- or misinterpreted many of his sources. The combination of these problems yields an extremely suspect outline of Joseph Smith's marital teachings.

Mr. Compton's view of these issues is more simple and less demanding of the scholar. "Whatever the uncertainties in documenting this aspect of Latter-day Saint practice," he writes, "there is a clearly discernible outline of ideology in the historical record that explains the development and rationale for the practice of Smith's polyandry."(p. 22) The following is his brief statement of that theology.

'Gentile' (i.e., non-Mormon) marriages were 'illegal,' of no eternal value or even earthly validity; marriages authorized by the Mormon priesthood and prophets took precedence. Sometimes these sacred marriages were felt to fulfill pre-mortal linkings and so justified a sacred marriage superimposed over a secular one. Mormonism's intensely hierarchal nature allowed a man with the highest earthly authority—a Joseph Smith or Brigham Young—to request the wives of men holding lesser Mormon priesthood, or no priesthood. The authority of the prophet would allow him to promise higher exaltation to those involved in the triangle, both the wife and the first husband." [pp. 22-23.]

While the above statement may at first seem innocuous enough, the Devil, as they say, is in the details. By passing over the uncertainties, and relying on and mishandling variegated sources, Mr. Compton's conclusions, built upon such a sandy foundation, produce a caricature of both the doctrine and the practice. As Joseph Smith himself once observed: "If we start right, it is easy to go right all the time; but if we start wrong, we may go wrong, and it [will] be a hard matter to get right."⁶

Time permits only one example, but I have provided others elsewhere.⁷ Mr. Compton's first point is that "Smith regarded marriages performed without Mormon priesthood authority as invalid (see D&C 132:7), just as he regarded baptisms performed without Mormon priesthood authority as invalid. Thus all couples in Nauvoo who accepted

Mormonism were suddenly unmarried, granted Joseph's absolutists, exclusivist claims to divine authority." (p. 17)

Joseph Smith understood and taught that marriage is a religious ordinance which must be performed by the proper priesthood authority in order to be recognized and eternal in heaven. The knowledge that civil marriages were not valid in the eyes of God in an eternal sense did not mean that Joseph considered every civil marriage meaningless, or a sin, or illegal in some religious sense. It is true that in an instance which I wrote about in 1975, Lydia Bailey, who left an abusive husband was permitted to remarry in Kirtland without divorcing her first husband. And in Nauvoo one can find two or three cases where people who accepted Mormonism and immigrated to Church headquarters without their spouses were later permitted to remarry without securing a divorce from the partner who remained behind.

However, the conclusion that, "Thus all couples in Nauvoo who accepted Mormonism were suddenly unmarried..." goes far beyond what Joseph taught and practiced. There is no evidence, to my knowledge, of a wholesale rejection of civil marriage on the part of Joseph either theologically or practically. Lyndon Cook's compilation, **Nauvoo Deaths And Marriages, 1839-1845**, lists just over 400 civil marriages in Nauvoo for those years.⁸ Moreover, the practice of remarriage without divorce was implemented on a case by case basis. The overwhelming majority of the civil marriages of faithful saints were left intact. Mr. Compton has created a false impression of the views and practices of Joseph Smith about civil marriages.

Conclusion:

In Sacred Loneliness has contributed little that is new by way of thesis. Rather it is a restatement of a time-worn interpretation that has proved popular among critics and anti-Mormons for 150 years. It is unfortunate that this otherwise admirable volume of biographies of important women is flawed by such a weak ideological foundation. It is unfortunate because books of this flavor appeal to dissidents and critics and contribute to their cause. It shouldn't be surprising to learn that the book is being received among the anti-Mormon world with rejoicing and it is being promoted and sold by Jerald and Sandra Tanner.

Speaking specifically in the context of the revelation on plural marriage, like he did with John, the Lord warned this dispensation through the Prophet "Let no one, therefore, set on my servant Joseph; for I will justify him...saith the Lord your God." (D&C 132:60) I conclude with an expression of concern that a book which questions the inspiration and truth of Section 132 and by extension the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith is written by an LDS historian and published by a well heeled and visible harbor for authors with naturalistic and critical outlooks. Dismay is added to concern when a book with this kind of a thesis is awarded and thereby singled out as an example by other LDS historians. It would seem to me that **In Sacred Loneliness**, which would decanonize

Section 132 and challenge the prophetic call of Joseph Smith, is evidence that even religious historians frequently miss the lessons of religious history.

NOTES:

1. Bruce M. Metzger, **The Canon Of The New Testament**, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 93. This is the Clarendon paperback edition of Metzger's work which was originally published in 1987. In a footnote Metzger refers the reader to "a convenient list of the more significant of Marcion's omissions and alterations in Luke and the Pauline Epistles" to Ernest Evans, **Tertullian Adversus Marcionem**, ii (Oxford, 1972), pp. 643-646.

2. Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics*, Chapt. 38, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., **The Ante-Nicene Fathers**, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980) 3:262.

3. See pages, 2, 61, 632.

4. In **Sacred Loneliness**, pp. 20-21.

5. Carrie A. Miles, "Polygamy And The Economics Of Salvation," *Sunstone*, 21/3 (August 1998): 34-45.

6. Joseph Smith, **Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith (TPJS)**, p. 343.

7. Danel W. Bachman, "Prologue To The Study Of Joseph Smith's Marital Theology," in Daniel C. Peterson, **FARMS Review Of Books**, 10/2 (Provo: FARMS, 1998): 121-136.

8. Orem Utah: Grandin Book, 1994, pp. 89-114.