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William Volf

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## **Mormon Polygamy in the Nineteenth Century: The Practice of "The Principle" in Reality**

William Volf

*During the nineteenth century, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormons, encouraged the development of polygamous marriages. The primary rationale for the practice was to bring in as many pre-existing spirits into the present world and to allow all females the chance to be married. The practice of polygamy was the ideal marriage form and each church member was to behave in a manner with polygamy as a goal. It is found that among males, only the wealthy and higher level Church leaders were the members that such a practice benefitted. There is evidence that the additional plural wives, though themselves having a reduced reproductive success rate, had offspring with higher reproductive success than children of monogamous parents did. This may indicate that the choice for females to enter plural marriages was a decision based upon the potential reproductive success of her offspring. From this analysis, it is clear that it was those in the Mormon Church hierarchy who were the most ardent supporters of the principle who were also the primary benefactors of the practice of polygamy. Further, for females who entered into polygamous marriages, there was a profound belief in the church doctrine that such marriages were proper in the eyes of the Lord. The uniqueness of the development and patterns of Mormon polygamy in the nineteenth century are an important contribution to the study of marriage patterns in relation to the effects of status, wealth, and ideology.*

Polygyny is a common form of marriage throughout the ethnographic record as over eighty percent of societies allow males to wed more than one wife at a time (Pasternak, Ember and Ember 1997 citing Murdock 1967). However, few societies in the "western world" practice polygyny. This paper will review that manner in which polygamy was practiced by Mormons in the nineteenth century and assess differences and/or similarities between Mormon polygamous and Mormon monogamous marriages during this time period in regards to what types of people practiced what, family structure, fertility, and survivorship. These aspects will be related to the primary reasoning for the practice of polygamy among Mormons, that it was an important aspect of nineteenth century Mormon Church doctrine (Wyatt 1984).

### **Mormon Polygamy- A History**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormon Church, was founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith was born on December 23, 1805 in Vermont and during his early years in life he received numerous visions that would influence the fundamental tenets of the Mormon Church. The Mormon Church believes that there is not only a heavenly father, but that there is also a heavenly mother as well. Further, Mormons believe bonds formed in the present life will last throughout eternity. In essence, Mormon marriages do not cease "when death do we part". All male members of the church are priests, though there is a substantial church hierarchy, and church status is gender based. Further, Mormons believe that births are a manner in which spirits can enter the real

world. As James Coates put it, "big families mean that more spirit babies find their earthly start; polygamy meant that even more spirits were freed" (Coates 1991:81).

While polygamy is believed to have been practiced by Joseph Smith and a handful of church leaders since the church's inception, it was not until July 12, 1843 that Smith told a gathering his closest followers of his desire for the church to return to the polygamous marriage practices like those of Biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Van Wagoner 1989). It was less that a year later that Smith, along with his brother Hyrum were murdered in a jail cell in Illinois while waiting for trial on charges that resulted from his promotion of polygamy (Foster 1981). Following Smith's death, Brigham Young took over leadership of the Church and in the late 1840's, he led the Mormons across the United States to settle in Utah. It wasn't until August 29, 1852 that Brigham Young announced to the world the Mormon belief in polygamy was the ideal marriage form in the eyes of God (Foster 1981). Young is quoted as explaining the function of plural marriage as:

*"God never introduced the Patriarchal order of marriage with a view to please man in his carnal desires, nor to punish females for anything which they had done; but He introduced it for the express purpose of raising up to His name a royal Priesthood, a peculiar people"*  
(Van Wagoner 1989:89)

From its inception, Mormon polygamy resulted in great disapproval among the general American public. The Edmunds-Tucker Bill that made non-publicly recorded marriages a felony became law in 1887. Shortly after this, in 1890, the President of the Mormon Church decreed:

*"Inasmuch as laws have been enacted by Congress forbidding*

*plural marriages, which law have been pronounced constitutional by the court of the last resort, I hereby declare my intention to submit to those laws, and to use my influence with the members of the Church over which I preside to have them do likewise...And now I publicly declare that my advice to the Latter-day Saints is to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the laws of the land."* (Van Wagoner 1989:140)

A further indication of the Church's change in views is evident in the 1904 proclamation that Mormon Church members participating in polygamous relationships would be permanently excommunicated from the church, previously married persons excepted (Van Wagoner 1989). Today, the Mormon Church is perhaps one of the most ardent anti-polygynous groups. Present-day Mormon Church leaders regularly assist law enforcement officials in the identification and arrest of polygamists. Despite this, numerous groups have splintered off the main Mormon Church with the purpose of allowing polygamous marriages. These "Fundamentalist" groups still practice and preach the merits of polygamy, albeit in an "underground" manner. I was able to locate only one study of contemporary Mormon fundamentalists practicing polygamy (Altman and Ginat 1996). Due to the sample size of their study (27 families), direct comparison to the findings for nineteenth century Mormon polygamy is not practical due to possible over and under representation in Altman and Ginat's selective small sample. However, Altman and Ginat note that in some instances (divorce rate, frequency of plural marriages, frequency of sorroral marriages), the findings in their study are similar to the findings of the studies based upon nineteenth century Mormon populations. However, they caution against implying that their results are indicative of all modern day fundamentalist Mormon polygamous groups.

### **Level of Participation**

The number of participants in Mormon polygamy during the nineteenth century was quite low considering it was the church's "ideal" marriage form. Smith and Kunz (1976) found that 28 percent of the males in their sample of nineteenth century Utah Mormons had more than one wife. Of these polygamous males, 68 percent had only two wives, 20 percent had three wives and the remaining 12 percent had four or more wives. Other studies show a somewhat smaller level of participation in polygyny. Ivins (1956) found that among the 6,000 Mormon families in his study, only 15 to 20 percent of the families were ever involved in polygamy (cited in Altman and Ginat 1996). Further, there were geographical variations in level of involvement in polygyny, Embry (1987, cited in Altman and Ginat 1996) found incidences of polygamy among nineteenth century Mormons to vary between 5 and 67 percent across different communities. It is not clear whether this reflects total involvement, male and female populations, or simply male involvement. Though in a review of such studies, Altman and Ginat (1996) indicate that the likely number of Mormon polygamous families in the nineteenth century was probably between 15 and 25 percent, discounting the variations geographically and temporally.

The modern practice of polygamy is difficult to ascertain due to its illegality in the United States. Altman and Ginat (1996) estimate that there are between 20,000 to 50,000 Americans belonging to Mormon fundamentalist groups still espousing the nineteenth century Mormon principle of polygamy. However, in interviewing leaders of two of the groups (Church of Latter-day Apostles and the United Fundamentalist Church) the leaders of the groups estimate between 20 and 30 percent of the families practice polygamy. Among the Church of Latter-day Apostles, seventy-eight percent of the polygamous families have only two wives. If these figures for

overall involvement in polygamy are accurate, the percentage of present-day families participating in polygamy is roughly similar to that found among nineteenth century families that practiced polygamy when it was the doctrine of the greater Mormon Church. No information was provided as to why the rates of the modern practitioners of the principle were so low considering they belong to a splinter group whose presumed major difference with the "official" Mormon church is the practice of polygamy.

### **Male Participants**

Thus, what type of male participated in the church sanctioned and encouraged polygamous marriages? Linda Mealey (1985) conducted a study evaluating the effect of socioeconomic status variables of wealth, church rank, and kinship ties and their predictive abilities in determining the type of marriage practice men become involved in. Mealey found that wealth was the most important aspect in determining the age at which a male would first marry. The manner in which the male accumulated their wealth is not demonstrated in any of the studies reviewed. Thus the question as to whether the wealth was inherited or accumulated through an individual's work can not be answered. Young (1956) found that nearly two-thirds of the males in his study gained their income through ranching and farming, while the remaining third worked in manufacturing, merchandising, skilled craft, and professional occupations.

The most important factor to gain additional wives was church status. In this variable, Mealey (1985) found that the taking of additional wives was statistically significant during the time period immediately following promotion in church rank. Additionally, she found that kinship ties were important in establishing high church rank. Thus, the effect of polygamy for Mormons of this time period was in essence a resource defense polygyny. The church hierarchy increased their

reproductive success by having both an economic and ideological edge over lower level church members, as well as incorporating their own kin into the church hierarchy. Further, Mealey suggests that female choice seems to have favored plural marriage of higher church officials, thereby gaining higher social status than would be available if they were to marry a low ranking, and subsequently poorer male.

The findings of Faux and Miller's (1984) analysis on the development of Mormon polygyny support the findings of Mealey. Faux and Miller looked at the twenty-nine members of the church hierarchy during Joseph Smith's reign and found that ten of them were "pioneers" in polygyny, and that eight of the ten were directly related to Smith. Further, they found that the initial appointments to the hierarchy were not random appointments. Rather, appointments came as a result of biological relationship to Smith. Additionally, of the fifteen permanent excommunications from the church, only three incidents involved persons related to Smith (Faux and Miller 1984). These findings lead Faux and Miller to conclude that "biological relationships may have contributed to the solidarity of the hierarchy" (Faux and Miller 1984).

Pace (1982) furthers the apparent disparity in the types of men that were "allowed" to practice polygyny. Pace first states that "only men considered spiritually worthy" by high ranking church officials were permitted to marry more than one wife. Secondly, higher level church officials urged subservient, yet still high-ranking officials, such as bishops to marry polygamously. Finally, Pace argues that there was an attempt by church officials to limit polygamous marriages to only those who able to support additional wives and children. No reference is given by Pace to support his claims of church influence in the practice of polygamy, but in light of Mealey's findings they seem appropriate. Faux and Miller (1984) citing Arrington and

Bitton (1979:199-200) state that "a man did not merely decide to take an additional wife; he was asked to do so by church authorities on the basis of religious and economic qualifications".

### **Female Participants**

As previously stated, according to church doctrine, polygamy was the preferred manner of marriage. There is no evidence that females were physically coerced into polygyny, but as will be shown they were coerced, in a manner of speaking, in terms of ideology. As each Mormon male was a priest, and only males received church status, the only manner in which women may be viewed by God is through marriage. In essence, females and children gained their status for the afterlife through their husbands (Iverson 1984). As a result, marriage was an important rite of passage for females and plural marriage was a manner in which the church offered each female a potential to reach this aspiration. However, it was an ideological acceptance of church doctrine, as "the believing Mormon woman felt that it was her responsibility to accept the principle of plural marriage because it was a commandment; she and her husband would be condemned if they did not obey" (Embry 1984:57), that brought females into plural marriage. It should be noted that men were obliged to ask permission of their existing wives before marrying additional wives (Embry 1984). Thus, females were in a catch twenty-two, in that if they refused, they risked losing status in the eyes of the church and if they accepted, then they would have to share "their" husband. It should be remembered that only a minority of Mormons was involved in polygamous marriages, and as Mealey (1985) demonstrated, the most involved males were high-ranking church officials. From this, one might assume that due to their high church status, the wives of these polygamous high ranking church officials would be some of the most staunch supporters of polygamy.

Faux and Miller (1984) contend that females who entered polygynous marriages were doing so as a manner of increasing their sons' potential reproduction. They argue that when polygyny is dominated by nonrandom lineages, a plural wife can increase her reproductive fitness of her sons. The sons of higher status males, will have an advantage to sons if she had she married monogamously (lower status husband).

No information was found on the number of females who were raised in polygamous families and how many entered plural marriages. Altman and Ginat (1996) in their study of contemporary polygamous Mormons families indicate that the daughters enter into polygamous marriages more often than sons who take additional wives.

### **Age of Marriage**

The age of marriage for females is quite similar across the board regardless of "wife number". In general, females, regardless of wife number, married during their late teens or early twenties. Mealey (1985) found that kinship ties have a great effect on the age of when females get married. She found that females related to members of the General Assembly of the Mormon Church were married four and a half years earlier than those who are not related (18.44 vs. 22.83 years). Further, these women married men with higher church status than those with no relation in the church hierarchy.

The result of this pattern of similar marriage age between wives is a growing variation in age between husband and incremental wife number, with later wives being much younger than their husbands. The redundant marriage of females in their early twenties is in effect increasing the ability of males, to increase their reproductive success by mating with younger females. Thus, they are producing more children than they would be able to in monogamous marriages, thereby enhancing

their reproductive success and their stature in the eyes of the church.

As Mealey (1985) has already shown, wealth is the most important factor in determining the age when males get married. However, there is virtually no difference in the age of marriage for monogamous males and first marriage of future polygamous males. Embry (1987, cited in Altman and Ginat 1996) found that the majority of first marriages for males, both monogamous and future polygamists, occurred during their early 20s (28% between ages 15 to 20, 59% between ages 20 and 25). Males who entered plural marriages typically waited between five and 10 years before gaining another wife (57% between ages 26 and 35). The addition of third and additional wives results in a greater age disparity (22% between ages 31 and 35, 28% between ages 36 and 40, 16% between ages 41 and 45, and 12% between ages 46 and 50).

### **Divorce**

The Mormon Church has strong feelings against divorce. Leaders such as Brigham Young publicly spoke out against divorce, though he did grant divorces. Campbell and Campbell found that as Church president, Young granted 1,645 divorces (cited in Van Wagoner 1989:92). Mormon pamphlets cited the only reasonable grounds for divorce was alienation by the husband (Kilbride 1994). It was quite rare for men to ask for a divorce. Ideologically, males were under a moral lifetime obligation to their wives, even ex-wives (Van Wagoner 1989). Rather, the request for divorce was only a female choice and the church was quite liberal in granting of such requests. Further, divorced women were not stigmatized as such and had little difficulty in remarriage (Kilbride 1994). This resulted in what Kilbride calls the opportunity for women to practice serial polygyny. In the absence of alienation as a cause, the only other manner in which a plural wife may leave her

husband is to marry a higher-ranking church member. In this case, if a woman wanted to "marry up" the church ladder, and the man wanted her, and her present husband agreed there were no official divorce papers drawn up because "it is right in the sight of God" (Brigham Young quoted in Van Wagoner 1989:93).

The overall divorce rates for polygynous marriages varied. Young (1954) found that nearly half of the polygynous marriages in his study of 110 families could be considered "highly successful"; twenty-five percent were "moderately" successful while the remaining families were not successful and resulted in numerous separations and divorces. Other studies indicate the divorce rate was actually quite high among Mormon polygamous families. A study by Quinn (1973) cited in Van Wagoner (1989) found that among seventy-two church leaders there were thirty-nine individuals who had eighty-one "difficulties" in their collective 321 marriages. The consequence of these difficulties was fifty-four divorces, twenty-six separations, and one annulment.

While no direct examination of divorce rates among monogamous Mormon marriages was found in my literature search, Altman and Ginat (1996) call attention to a study cited in Embry (1987) by Kunz. This study found that plural marriages of nineteenth century Mormons were three times as likely to result in divorce as their monogamously married counterparts.

There is some debate as to the comparability of divorce rates between Mormon polygamous and monogamous families. Altman and Ginat (1996) point out that since there were many types of marriage in the early days of the Mormon Church, such as spiritual wifery, proxy relationships, and marriages without full conjugal relationships or cohabitation. They wonder how these marriage types are to be counted, as they are clearly quite different from the marriages based upon procreation. Citing

Embry (1987), Altman and Ginat (1996) state that the highest levels of Mormon divorce in polygamous families occur at the beginning of the age of polygamy and the divorce rate decline towards the latter portion of the nineteenth century. This pattern of divorce may be due to the early participants original orientation of marriage as monogamous. During the latter nineteenth century, once polygamy was established, participants may have been more accustomed to living in plural marriages. In contrast to the divorce trend among Mormon polygamists, the national trend of divorce among monogamous marriages is just the inverse.

### Fertility

Mormons contend that one of the prime reasons for polygamy was to produce more children (Pace 1982). Based on this premise, it should be no surprise that Mormon families are quite large. Smith and Kunz (1976) found that women in polygamous marriages had only slightly lower fertility rates than those in monogamous marriages (7.46 vs. 7.82 births respectively). However, the number of children produced by the first wife in a two-wife marriage was larger than that found in monogamous marriages (9.20 births). Whereas, additional wives in two and three-wife marriages had lower birth rates in comparison to monogamous females.

Josephson (1993) also found evidence supporting this observation. In a study comparing the fertility of additional wives in polygamous families to the wives in monogamous families he found that there is a reduction in fertility ( $7.78 \pm 0.773$ ,  $n=40$ , vs.  $4.85 \pm 0.576$ ,  $n=33$ ,  $t=2.93$ ,  $p=0.005$ , two tailed t-test) on the part of the plural wives. However, he found that the reproductive success of the offspring was from polygamous marriages made up for this discrepancy. Children of polygamous women, both in regards to sons and daughters of polygynous women, averaged more children than those with monogamous

mothers ( $4.50 \pm 0.455$ ,  $n=164$ , vs.  $3.00 \pm 0.245$ ,  $n=316$ ,  $t=-3.15$ ,  $p=0.002$ ). Further, Josephson (1993) found no statistical significance in the age of death, age at marriage, or in the probability of marriage given a survivorship to age 25 between children of monogamous or polygynous families. This evidence indicates that while polygynously married females may hinder their own fertility, they are, in fact, enhancing the potential reproductive success of their children. No mention is made as to why the number of children born to the third generation offspring is markedly lower than the number of children born by the "grandparent" generation. It should be noted that there was substantial reduction in total fertility throughout the United States during the period of 1800 to 1900 (7.04 to 3.56) (Smith and Kunz 1976). However, Smith and Kunz found no evidence of family limitation practices among the Mormons in their marriage cohorts.

Heath and Hadley (1998) conducted a study that looked at offspring survivorship of polygamous marriages in relation to wealth. In their study, they divided polygamous males into categories of "wealthy" (net worth greater than \$5,000 from age 30 to death) polygamous males and "poor" (net worth never greater than \$500) polygamous males. They found that wealthy males had significantly more wives than the poor males (3.2 vs. 1.4 wives). They also found that wealthy males were much older at the time of birth of their last offspring (58.24 vs. 48.31 years of age). Again, this demonstrates the ability of the wealthy males to outcompete poorer males in terms of reproductive success.

### **Family Structure**

Despite the prevailing perception that many nineteenth century non-Mormons had towards polygamy (Denfey 1984), Mormons placed great emphasis on family life. The family structure of Mormon polygamists of the nineteenth century in many ways mirrored that of Mormon monogamous

marriages. When wives lived within the same community (Embry 1987, cited in Kilbride 1994), found that 60 percent of the wives did so), it was preferable that each wife maintain her own house. When it was not economically feasible for the male to provide each wife with her own house, a polygamous family would live together until the capital was accumulated to build the additional houses. In general, each family operated independently of the other. While the husbands in plural marriages generally provided the majority of economic resources through a variety of means. Young (1956) found that most males were involved in ranching or farming with many males supplementing this income by taking additional jobs (Embry 1987: 82, cited in Altman and Ginat 1996). In general, the husband allocated his resources to his "families" in one of two manners. Either he would distribute resources equally among his wives, or he would distribute resources proportionally by the number of children each wife had.

Despite the allocated resources given to them by their husband, many plural wives had to supplement this income by taking on jobs in addition to caring for their children. In some instances, due to the frequent absence of the husband (which was especially the case among higher ranking church officials, who as noted previously were the most likely male participants in polygamy) conducting church business in far away places, wives were required to contribute greatly to the families economic assets. Embry (1987, cited in Altman and Ginat 1996) found that twenty percent of the polygamous wives worked outside the home for periods of their marriage. Nearly half of the wives in Embry's study created a portion of their economic assets in the home by selling farm products, washing other peoples clothes, or taking in boarders. Consequently, plural wives in many cases were less dependent upon their husbands for economic or emotional support. This resulted in close bonding between mothers and children.

Embry's (1987) study found that "comparable but somewhat lower numbers of monogamous women" needed to supplement income by taking jobs outside the home (cited in Altman and Ginat 1996). This indicates that from an economic aspect, polygamously married women did not suffer greatly from having to share the economic resources of their husband. This may be due to what Mealey (1985) and Heath and Hadley (1998) found concerning the general greater wealth and status of the males that acquired plural wives.

Ideally, the husband would visit the home of each wife on a general schedule often creating a daily or weekly rotating schedule. In some instances, the male would visit the home of each wife every morning and evening to lead prayers (Embry 1984). In event of an emergency, the male was obliged to visit and assist the family as needed.

Romantic love was not a fixture of Mormon marriage of the nineteenth century, though it was a contributing factor in some marriages. Rather, love was for the church and its principles (Altman and Ginat 1996).

*"A successful polygamous wife must regard her husband with indifference, and with no other feeling than that of reverence, for love we regard as a false sentiment; a feeling which should have no existence in polygamy" stated Zina Jacobs Smith Young, plural wife of Brigham Young (Van Wagoner 1989:101).*

The relationship between co-wives in polygamous marriages is varied and difficult to quantify. In some instances wives got along quite well and shared in completing daily tasks. In other instances, jealousy over the amount of attention and goods allocation resulted in the distrust and dislike of co-wives. It was the first wife that generally had the most difficult time adapting to a

polygamous marriage. This was especially true among those during the early years of Mormon polygamy having had only known about monogamous relationships (Embry 1984). All wives however, had to rely on their religious beliefs as Zina Jacobs Smith Young's quotation above indicates. It was the belief and acceptance of the church doctrine of polygamy that was the manner in which wives coped with the difficulties that arose through having to share the attention of their husbands.

*"If anyone in this world thinks plural marriage is not a trial, they are wrong. The Lord said he would have a tried people... The woman who believes in celestial revelation could not be far off in accepting the principle of polygamy. They might have different attitudes in their living of it, but not in the divinity of it"-Sadie Richardson, first wife and childhood sweetheart of Charles Edmund Richardson (married four wives) (Embry 1984:58)*

To counter the potential dislike among co-wives, in some instances, if it was apparent that a plural wife was to be added into the family, the original wife would try to select a potential wife that she (the first wife) already liked (Embry 1984). One manner in which this was took place was for a wife to suggest to her husband that if he is to marry another women, that he marry one of her sisters. This act, in some cases did lessen jealousies, while in other cases, sorroral marriage did not achieve the anticipated results. Embry (1984) describes the situation of Edward Christian Eyring's marriage to two sisters: Caroline and Emma Romney. The sisters were raised in a polygamous family in which the first wife was given preference over later wives. In the Eyring family however, Edward treated both wives equally. This in turn made Caroline (the first wife) jealous over the "extra" attention that her younger sister received from their husband. Embry (1987, cited in Altman and Ginat 1996) found that

about 25 percent of the families she studied had sisters who were married to the same man. While in Pace's (1982) study of wives of polygamous bishops, only about 10 percent married sisters.

In essence, there were several effects of Mormon Church leaders such as Joseph Smith and Brigham Young's declarations and encouragement of the practice of polygamy among members of the Mormon Church. First, polygamy was a practice that enhanced the reproductive success of males in the church hierarchy. Secondly, while female choice is present in principle, the fertility of the additional wives was slightly reduced, yet the fertility of their offspring was higher than monogamously born

children. Thus, the actual practice of nineteenth century Mormon polygamy was a method the church hierarchy (males) used to increase their status in terms of economics, fertility, and spirituality in contrast to the majority of Mormon church members who were limited to being monogamous. The mental acceptance of polygamy by females may be directly linked to a strong belief in church doctrine that they accept the principle. This acceptance of the nineteenth century church doctrine encouraging polygamy is also the reason why splinter groups promoting the continued practice of nineteenth century Mormon doctrines have formed since the "official" Mormon Church's 1904 about-face in acceptance of polygamy as the ideal Mormon marriage.

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