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B. H. ROBERTS AND THE WOODRUFF MANIFESTO

Ronald W. Walker

Recent historical writing about President Wilford Woodruff's Manifesto on plural marriage has stressed its continuity with previous policy. For instance, historians have found that a year prior to its issuance the First Presidency had stopped new polygamous marriages and drafted a preliminary but uncirculated resolution stating the Church's new course of action. The latter has been labeled by a significant new Ph.D. dissertation as 'the greatest concession on plural marriage' made by the Church in 1890, including the more celebrated Woodruff Manifesto.\(^1\)

However, these events lay behind the scenes. As a result, many Mormons, including leaders, were surprised by the Manifesto. In the reminiscence below, Elder B. H. Roberts records his startled reaction.\(^2\) As a missionary, writer, polygamist, and for the past two years General Authority in the First Council of the Seventy, the thirty-three-year-old churchman had fiercely defended Mormonism's marriage system. To abandon his advocacy, B. H. Roberts required a spiritual striving equal to the struggles of many first-generation Mormons when the doctrine was first introduced.

While providing only a few details, the excerpt also suggests the reaction to the Manifesto of four members of the Quorum of the Twelve. Elders Francis M. Lyman and Abraham H. Cannon greeted the news with untroubled equanimity—for Elder Cannon the task was made easier by his foreknowledge of the First Presidency's new position. In contrast, Elders John Henry Smith and John W. Taylor shared some of Roberts's travails. Still unresolved many years later, Taylor's antipathy for the pronouncement eventually led him out of the Quorum and the Church itself.

It so happened that about this time I was returning from a somewhat extended tour thro southern Utah. At Milford I joined Elder[s] F[rancis] M. Lyman, J[ohn] H[enry] Smith, John W. Taylor and A[braham] H. Cannon all members of the Quorum of the 12 on their way to Salt Lake

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\(^2\)This passage is found in the B. H. Roberts Diary, undated but written in 1893, B. H. Roberts Papers, Manuscripts Division, Special Collections Department, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.
City from Kanab where they had been settling difficulties. We left Milford in the eve. and was due in Salt Lake [the] next morning at 10 a.m. But the train that left Salt Lake for the south, making the trip also in the night, was wrecked a short distance above Oasis and tore up the track for half a mile or more. Consequently we found when we woke up in the morning that we had not completed half the journey. Learning that we were only a few miles from the wrecked train (no one had been hurt), Elder Taylor and myself started for the scene of the disaster. A hand car loaded with section men & tools soon overtook us and we rode with them to the wreck. It was only a number of freight cars and flat cars loaded with steel nails that had been thrown from the track. The two passenger coaches were O.K. In these cars[,] Elder Taylor who entered them while I was lingering about on the outside talking with the passengers, found the Salt Lake [news]papers containing President Woodruff's Manifesto. As soon as I entered the car he called to me and showed me the paper containing the document, the headlines of which I read with astonishment. But no sooner had I read them, than like a flash of light all through my soul the spirit said— "That is all right," so it passed. Then I began to reflect upon the matter. I thought of all the Saints had suffered to sustain that doctrine; I remembered my own exile [to England], my own imprisonment;3 I thought of that of others. I remembered what sacrifices my wives had made for it; 4 what others had made for it. We had preached it, sustained its divinity from the pulpit, in the press, from the lecture platform. Our community had endured every kind of reproach from the world for the sake of it—and was this to be the end? I had learned to expect that God would sustain both that principle and his Saints who carried it out, and to lay it down like this was a kind of cowardly proceeding that the more I thought of it the less I liked it. I thought of Luther, of Zwinglius [sic], of Malancthon [sic] and most other men who only having fragments of the truth risked all their fortune and lives in support of them and won the admiration and respect of all the world; while we having a fulness of the truth must needs fly from it like a skittish jade 5 at a windmill because, forsooth, we . . . are threatened with imprisonment, disfranchisement and the confiscation of our property. Such is a specimen of the reflection which passed through my mind; Bro. Taylor seemed to share them to some extent and by the time the other brethren came up I was in quite an exasperated mood, and felt crushed and humiliated.6 Our information seemed to agitate Bro. J. H. Smith some what; Bro Lyman was unruffled by it; Bro Cannon took it

3To escape being convicted of unlawful cohabitation, B. H. Roberts had fled to Liverpool, England, where he edited the Millennial Star for two years. Upon returning to Utah, he surrendered to authorities and served a four-month sentence. (Truman G. Madsen, Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980], pp. 160-98.)

4B. H. Roberts had three wives: Sarah Louisa Smith, Celia Dibble, and Margaret Curtis Shipp.

5The term, no longer in extensive usage, denotes "a broken-down, vicious, or worthless horse."

6Disgruntlement with the Manifesto was not confined to Church leaders. Upon returning to Salt Lake City, Elder Cannon found "there is considerable comment and fault-finding among some of the Saints because of . . . [the] manifesto" (Abraham H. Cannon Diary, 26 September 1890, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah).
with easy grace.7 An engine was sent down from Juab and hitched to
the coaches that had remained on the track in the wrecked train and we
started for Salt Lake. I was in no humor for conversation, hence I left
the car in which the brethren were riding and took a seat by myself and
gave full freedom to reflection. Bro. Lyman hunted me up after a while
and talked with me on the subject of the Manifesto, but his reasoning
was vain. For every excuse he could bring up for its issuance I could
bring ten reasons (sufficient to my mind) why we should have held to
the principle even though it cost the very annihilation of the Church.

The matter continued to disturb me until conference approached.
Bro. Woodruff had signed the paper himself and I concluded that he
had determined to carry the responsibility alone, and I had begun to be
reconciled to the Manifesto on that ground. But during the Conference
I saw that movements were on foot to have the whole people support
it[,] a proceeding I viewed with alarm. When the crisis came I felt
heart-broken but remained silent. It seemed to me to be the awfulest
moment in my life, my arm was like lead when the motion was put; I
could not vote for it, and did not.

While, as I was saying, this matter continued a trial to me through
the year 1891, and plagued me much, but I said but little about it; and
by and by I began to remember the flash of light that came to me when
first I heard of it, and at last my feelings became reconciled to it.
Perhaps I had transgressed in pushing from me the first testimony I
received in relation to it, and allowing my own prejudices, and my own
short-sighted, human reason to stand against the inspiration of God
and the testimony it bore that the Manifesto was alright. When this fact
began to dawn on my mind I repented of my wrong and courted most
easternly the spirit of God for a testimony and gradually it came. I did
not understand the purposes for which the Manifesto was issued (I do
not to this day, Feb 10 1893) but sure I am that it is all right; that God
has a purpose in it I feel assured, and in due time it will be manifest.
The principle of plurality of wives is true I know and in connection with
all other truth will eventually prevail and be established on the earth;
but I do not pretend to say what God’s purpose is or what is to be
accomplished by it. It is a matter in which I trust the divine wisdom im-
pl[i]c[i]ly. God must be his own interpreter and in time will make it
plain.

This year for some unaccountable reason has been a year of deep
sorrow to me, and peculiar temptations. The flashes of light—heavenly
light—have been startlingly bright, made to appear so to me, perhaps,
by the thick blackness that has gathered about my horizon. But if my
sorrows have been many[,] my joys have been correspondingly keen,
and there have been bright moments of joy and extasy [sic] such a few
mortals encompass; and if these bright drops of joy can be possessed

7When the Quorum of the Twelve met several days later, both Elders Smith and Taylor continued
with their doubts. John Henry Smith frankly admitted not knowing if “the manifesto is quite right or wrong.”
John W. Taylor was more outspoken. “When I first heard of this manifesto,” he related, “I felt to say
‘Damn it,’ but on further thought I felt it was not right to be so impulsive. [However,] I do not yet feel quite
right about it.” Abrahma H. Cannon, as mentioned earlier, knew of the previous First Presidency discussions
to halt new plural marriages (Ibid., 10 July and 30 September 1890).
by drinking the draughts of ill between—then fill sorrow's cup to the brim and I'll drain it dry even to the dregs and never murmur. Give me the gleams of sunshine amid these renewing storms and I will stand uncovered to receive the latter in all their fury without a word of protestation.