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The Persistence of Polygamy, Scattering of the Saints, and Modern Polygamy in the United States

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The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy, edited by Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2010).

Scattering of the Saints: Schism within Mormonism, by Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2007).

Modern Polygamy in the United States: Historical, Cultural, and Legal Issues, by Cardell K. Jacobson with Lara Burton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Each of these three anthologies collects a variety of scholarly articles on the interrelated topics of Mormon schismatic groups, contemporary polygamy, and the history of plural marriage. Each book is geared not only to scholars but also to a general readership interested in such topics as part of the history of one's own family and faith, or—in the case of Jacobson and Burton's book—as part of one's responsibilities as legal, scholarly, policy-making, or social-service professionals. It seemed appropriate to combine these three recent publications into a poly-book notice.

First, the editors of *The Persistence of Polygamy* hope their collection will provide solid scholarly discussions about the kinds of questions Latter-day Saints have about polygamy's origin and practice. Thanks to the Internet, many Latter-day Saints are discovering questions that until recently they did not even think to ask, especially regarding the beginnings of the practice of eternal plural marriages during the life of Joseph Smith.

Bringhurst and Foster's book may succeed precisely because it is not a book of simple apologetics; it does not offer easy, unconvincing answers. The

editors and authors come from different backgrounds and offer various perspectives. For example, two chapters provide differing views as to whether people in Joseph Smith's time and place would have regarded his youngest plural wives as too young. Considerations of age difference and underagedness in marriage have always tended to evoke strong moral responses and continue to do so today. But the minimum age—and maximum age differences—for marriage have varied widely across times, cultures, and legal systems.

As highly charged as discussions of plural marriages have always been in America, it is worth pointing out that even practices unusual for their time do not automatically disqualify a historical figure from being held in high esteem, as evidenced by the near-universal reverence for Gandhi—who married a fourteen-year-old when he was thirteen. Later, in his seventies, he forbade men at his ashram from sleeping with their wives so that he could. As part of his unique ascetic discipline (often involving his eighteen-year-old grandniece), everyone remained unclothed yet totally chaste. Or so the Mahatma claimed when challenged about it. Joseph Smith's plural marriages and Gandhi's unusual practices are only becoming widely known in the Internet age, in part due to their followers' understandable traditional reluctance to discuss anything that might be misunderstood by people disinclined to consider religious motivations as legitimate.

Curiously, after years of serious and unsettling historical scholarship making a case for Joseph Smith fathering children by other women including other men's wives, the issue of whether any of Joseph Smith's plural marriages were physical and not just spiritual has re-emerged. DNA testing by Ugo A. Perego has eliminated most of the

known claims of Joseph Smith children born to any woman other than Emma.

Not every issue a reader may be interested in is covered in this book. The editors say *The Persistence of Polygamy* is the first in a three-volume series, so readers can hope that many issues will yet be addressed informatively and sensitively.

Second, *Scattering of the Saints* attempts a selective treatment of some of the major religious groups that trace their history through the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith. There are about a half dozen with more than a thousand members, a dozen or so with scores or hundreds, and perhaps hundreds that may represent only one pamphleteer or blogger. This is the first such attempt since Stephen Shields's 1982 much more encyclopedic *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*, which has long been the standard guide on the topic. While Shields's book still reigns as the most comprehensive, this new volume improves on Shields's work by incorporating advances in historical knowledge by including chapters written by members of the various groups themselves and by avoiding the RLDS tilt of Shields's work.

Supposedly you can't judge a book by its cover, but *Scattering* may be an exception. The cover art is a brilliant branching diagram showing dozens of groups splitting off from each other and the relationships between them. However, the chart omits the LeBaron and Collier polygamist groups' succession claim through Benjamin F. Johnson, whom they believe to be Joseph Smith's designated heir. Their claim bypasses the John Taylor/Lorin Woolley line that most other fundamentalists claim. This omission may reflect the editors' belief that the Benjamin F. Johnson succession claim was made up after the fact by leadership aspirants seeking a route around Woolleyite former

coreligionists with whom they had broken. Or this omission may simply demonstrate the difficulty of fully presenting such a multifaceted phenomenon as the many branching streams flowing from belief in Joseph Smith as a prophet.

Third, with the 2008 raid on the Yearning for Zion Ranch in Eldorado, Texas, and the 2006 capture of polygamist prophet Warren Jeffs, as well as with HBO's *Big Love* and Brady Udall's novel *The Lonely Polygamist*, contemporary polygamists are becoming one of the more familiar streams to have recently branched off the Restoration's Jordan. To the chagrin of both mainstream Mormons and fundamentalists of various stripes, the differences between Latter-day Saints committed to the cessation of plural marriage and those committed to its continuance are not always clear to outsiders. Neither are the legal, religious, historical, and sociological issues surrounding contemporary polygamy's practice. This can lead to shaky policy and poor law enforcement decisions. The editors of *Modern Polygamy in the United States* generally do not seek to dictate policy as much as provide useful information and analysis for those who do—and for anyone else seeking to understand this significant part of the human landscape of the American West.

Each of these three books provides much material for anyone seeking to better understand the practice of plural marriage in nineteenth-century Mormonism and its modern aftermaths. Collectively they also impart a wealth of information to enable readers to distinguish the teachings of mainstream Mormonism from the uses of polygamy today by those who are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

—Eric A. Eliason