

# **B. H. Roberts and the Woodruff Manifesto**



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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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 travail. 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 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. Learnin[g] 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 wh[ich] 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;<sup>3</sup> I thought of that of others. I remembered what sacrifices my wives had made for it;<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Our information seemed to agitate Bro. J. H. Smith some what; Bro Lyman was unruffled by it; Bro Cannon took it with easy grace.<sup>7</sup> 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 earnestly 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 impl[i]cit[l]y. 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 extacy [*sic*] such a few mortals encompass; and if these bright drops of joy can be possessed 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.

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1. Edward Leo Lyman, "The Mormon Quest for Statehood, (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Riverside, 1981), p. 294; see also Kenneth W. Godfrey, "The Coming of the Manifesto," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5 (Autumn 1970): 11–25.

2. This passage is found in the B. H. Roberts Diary, undated but written in 1893, B. H. Roberts Papers, Manuscript Division, Special Collections Department, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

3. To 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 Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* [Salt lake City: Bookcraft, 1980], pp. 160–98.)

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

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

6. Disgruntlement 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).

7. When 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.” Abraham H. Cannon, as mentioned earlier, knew of the previous First Presidency discussions to halt new plural marriages (*Ibid.*, 10 July and 30 September 1890).