

Nevertheless, Mormons and those who call themselves Mormon Fundamentalists (or FLDS) believe in the same holy texts and the same sacred history. Both believe that Joseph Smith, who founded Mormonism in 1830, played a vital role in God's plan for mankind; both LDS and FLDS consider him to be a prophet comparable in stature to Moses and Isaiah. Mormons and Mormon Fundamentalists are each convinced that God regards them, and them alone, as his favored children: "a peculiar treasure unto me above all people." But if both proudly refer to themselves as the Lord's chosen, they diverge on one especially inflammatory point of religious doctrine: unlike their present-day Mormon compatriots, Mormon Fundamentalists passionately believe that Saints have a divine obligation to take multiple wives. Followers of the FLDS faith engage in polygamy, they explain, as a matter of religious duty.

There are more than thirty thousand FLDS polygamists living in Canada, Mexico, and throughout the American West. Some experts estimate there may be as many as one hundred thousand. Even this larger number amounts to less than 1 percent of the membership in the LDS Church worldwide, but all the same, leaders of the mainstream church are extremely discomfited by these legions of polygamous brethren. Mormon authorities treat the fundamentalists as they would a crazy uncle—they try to keep the "polygs" hidden in the attic, safely out of sight, but the fundamentalists always seem to be sneaking out to appear in public at inopportune moments to create unsavory scenes, embarrassing the entire LDS clan.

The LDS Church happens to be exceedingly prickly about its short, uncommonly rich history—and no aspect of that history makes the church more defensive than "plural marriage." The LDS leadership has worked very hard to persuade both the modern church membership and the American public that polygamy was a quaint, long-abandoned idiosyncrasy practiced by a mere handful of nineteenth-century Mormons. The religious literature handed out by the earnest young missionaries in Temple Square makes no mention of the fact that Joseph Smith—still the religion's focal personage—married at least thirty-three women, and probably as many as forty-eight. Nor does it mention that the youngest