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“They Do Things Differently There”: Understanding a Polygamous, “Foreign Country”

By Barbara Jones Brown

My perception of the Mormon practice of polygamy has been evolutionary. My desire to comprehend it comes from a need to understand not only the faith I espouse, but also my very being. Polygamy is in my DNA. My maternal, third-great grandfather, Willard Richards, was one of Mormonism’s earliest polygamists, and my fraternal, third-great grandfather one of its most prolific—Christopher Layton had ten wives and sixty-five children.

When I was a child my dad sometimes told me about our polygamous ancestors. Somehow polygamy did not seem that surprising or strange to me then. “Just a different, old-fashioned way of marriage,” I thought in the simplicity of my young mind. When I matured, either because I understood more or because I was then entrenched in twentieth-century American society, polygamy became bizarre and even repulsive to me. How could anyone—particularly women—want to live such a lifestyle? Though “plural marriage” is an indelible part of my church and family history, as a modern, monogamous woman I look at it as an outsider.

I recently completed a biography of a centenarian named Lorna Call Alder. Lorna’s father, Anson Bowen Call (“Bowen”), served for twenty-nine years as the bishop of Colonia Dublan, one of several Mormon colonies in northern Mexico. Though polygamy was illegal in Mexico, in the 1880s Mexican officials agreed not to prosecute Latter-day Saint polygamists in their country if the Mormon colonists would live their marital practices quietly while contributing to Mexico’s economy. Over the next quarter of a century, thousands of Latter-day Saints, including the Calls, moved south of the border to live “the principle of plural marriage.”¹

As I researched the Call family history, I was often surprised by what I found. Some

discoveries challenged my preconceptions. Like nineteenth-century and modern critics, I believed that the primary motivation behind polygamy was the sexual desire of its male practitioners. But as I studied the history of Mormon polygamy, I learned that the “celestial marriage” spoken of in Section 132 of the LDS Doctrine and Covenants meant not just “eternal marriage,” as I had been taught in Sunday School, but eternal, *plural* marriage, and that “he that abideth not this law can in nowise enter into [God’s] glory, but shall be damned.”² Believing these words came from God through the mouth of a prophet, the Latter-day Saints had a strong spiritual motivation to live polygamy that went beyond the physical.

I also learned that women could be just as anxious as men to enter into plural marriage. Before Bowen’s first wife, Theresa Thompson, agreed to marry him, she made sure he was planning to live the law of celestial marriage. So desirous were Bowen and Theresa to inherit the glory of God that they were willing to make tremendous material and emotional sacrifices for it. “I’m thankful that we had the privilege to enter into the higher laws of the Gospel, although it was like taking the very heart-strings out at the time,” Theresa wrote Bowen after they left behind their home and family in Utah and Bowen married a second wife, Hattie Cazier, in Mexico. After Hattie’s untimely death a few years later, Bowen, satisfied that he and his two wives had fulfilled their spiritual obligation, wanted to return to Utah. But Theresa insisted they remain in Mexico so that Bowen could take another wife and the Calls could continue to live the principle.³

Before my research I also assumed that jealousies and competition between plural wives must have been inherent. But in the Call family I found instead a spirit of uncommon affection and companionship. A second reason for Theresa’s wanting to stay in Mexico was her refusal to leave Hattie’s grave site. “That mound of earth out there is a dear spot to me,” she told Bowen,

“and I shan't leave it.” Most tellingly, Theresa took Hattie’s surviving child, Clella, into her heart and raised her as her own.

Theresa became just as close to Bowen’s third wife, Dottie Pratt. When Bowen was gone in the evenings fulfilling his responsibilities in the bishopric, Theresa and Dottie would sometimes put the younger children to bed, tell the older children, “We are going for a moonlight walk,” then head into the night, arm in arm. Often they would visit a friend or someone ill. Bowen once jokingly teased them, “Well it looks like I am left out and you two are the lovers.”

Theresa and Dottie also shared the yoke of domestic responsibilities. In 1901, Bowen was called on a six-month mission to Star Valley, Wyoming. By then Theresa had seven children to care for, but Dottie, who had only two, shared in the child-rearing, making Theresa’s burden light. Working together, the two women also ran the family farm and a cheese and butter business out of their home. “Not only did they provide for the family,” wrote Theresa’s daughter, “but when Bowen returned they gave him \$25 to buy a plow.” Was it a hint?

When Dottie was struck by appendicitis a few years later, she called Theresa to her deathbed and asked her to raise her two little boys. “I know I won’t have to worry,” Dottie told Theresa, “because you will treat them just like your own the way you have treated Clella.” Once again, Theresa took in the children of her “sister wife” and raised them as her own, even weaning her own toddler so that she could nurse Dottie’s seven-month-old baby.⁴

Another surprise for me was learning that Bowen did not court his intended plural wives. When he felt he should take a fourth wife, for example, he simply prayed to know who it should be. When the name “Julia Abegg” came to him, he sought Theresa’s approval before asking Julia’s parents for permission to speak to their daughter of his intentions. Permission granted, he spoke to Julia—practically for the first time—proposing marriage. She accepted, and a few

months later they were married. There was no dating, no getting to know each other, no pre-nuptial romance. Not only that, but she was seventeen, he thirty-nine. I know that when I was seventeen, thirty-nine-year-olds were old men. How could she bring herself to marry him? Surely she could not have loved someone so much older, someone she hardly knew, someone who divided his affections with another woman old enough to be her mother. Seeing their relationship through my twenty-first century lenses, I assumed theirs was a loveless marriage until I learned of their love letters, exchanged even into their old age. “Heaven has come down to earth to me,” Julia wrote Bowen not long before she died. “What could I wish for more only that we continue faithful. . . . God bless you dearest, for I love you.”⁵

This year’s Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture by Kathleen Flake, “The Emotional and Priestly Logic of Plural Marriage,” both confirmed and helped me better understand what I had been seeing in my own research. The Calls, I learned, were not the exception among polygamous Mormon families.

I was tickled to hear that Elizabeth Kane, a nineteenth-century, firsthand observer of polygamy, shared some of my own preconceptions of polygamy and experienced some of the same surprises, even though I was observing from a century away. Time and distance made me an outside observer, but Kane was an outsider, too, affected by the influences of her American society, a society that, in Flake’s words, “saw trends of high romance and low tolerance for Mormonism.”

According to Flake, by 1850 marriage in the United States had been in flux for a long time. The American Revolution of some seventy-five years before had not only overturned political hierarchies, but also a hierarchal system within marriage, leading to a complete transition to romantic marriage. Before that time, marriage had existed to promote economic

wealth or survival, and love was a happy *effect* of marriage. The idea that two people should marry for love came into force within fifty years of the Revolution. The romantic words of Dora Greenwell's 1861 poem came to embody America's ideal, Christian marriage:

Two birds within one nest;

Two hearts within one breast;

Two spirits in one fair,

Firm league of love and prayer,

*Together bound for aye, together blessed.*⁶

Steeped in the ideals of this society and monogamously and happily married to Thomas L. Kane, Elizabeth Kane came to Utah in the winter of 1872 with a critical eye. But she also had an open mind. She expected to find that those in polygamous marriages had rejected romantic love as the ideal or purpose of marriage. Kane was surprised by what she found—the polygamous relationships she observed actually contributed to her ideal of marriage, and romantic love *was* there. In fact, she was surprised to see that after twenty years of wedlock, there could still be married lovers. Kane's observation reminded me of my own surprise when I realized that love, including romantic love, *was* the effect of Bowen and Julia's polygamous marriage, and that they continued to tenderly express their love for each other until she died thirty-four years after their wedding day.

Along with romantic love, Flake continued, Kane also observed a sense of parity and filial love among all marital partners. She was surprised when one wife was deeply bereaved as she eulogized her "sister wife," and dumbfounded when she saw tender intimacy between the wives themselves. Within each home is a female friend who shares the same concerns as one's self, Kane observed. What Kane saw showed more than a mere renunciation of jealousy. Again I

related to Kane, thinking of my own surprised observation of Theresa's refusal to move away from Hattie's grave site, of Bowen's teasingly calling Theresa and Dottie "lovers" because of their closeness and moonlit walks, of the sister wives' gladly sharing each other's burdens, of Theresa's lovingly raising the children of Hattie and Dottie.

Flake noted that Kane also observed polygamous women had more independence than their monogamous counterparts. It was more than economic necessity that caused this independence. Men were responsible for expanding "the kingdom of God," while women were charged with holding down the membership at home, independently. Was this a burden or a benefit? The women Kane met saw it as a benefit. One woman who entered into plural marriage after twenty-eight years of monogamy described herself as freer, able to do herself independently things she could never have done before, and as a separate individual from her husband. While Bowen was away, serving a mission afar or serving the local flock, polygamy brought his wives companionship and allowed Theresa and Dottie, two small-town, nineteenth-century females, to become independent, successful businesswomen while raising a large family, a feat almost unheard of among their monogamous counterparts.

Another nineteenth-century observer of polygamy was not as favorable in her assessment. Fanny Stenhouse, a Latter-day Saint who lived in polygamy for some time before abandoning the practice and the church, said that having to share a husband's affections, to not "rule in your husband's heart" was what was most lacking in plural marriage. The end of polygamy, Stenhouse said disparagingly, was not the indissoluble union of two souls but rather the increase in children.

Kane, Flake said, saw what Stenhouse did not. In Mormonism, Kane observed, the power to give birth was considered the power to redeem, not merely to reproduce. Latter-day Saints

believed a priest was one who has the ability to access the powers of heaven. Celestial marriage made childbearing a priestly act, placing women in a priestly structure. Men were given the power to “re-birth” individuals through administering baptism and other ordinances that were to culminate in eternal life. According to Flake, those who flourished in plural marriage were assured by their being secured in this reciprocity of priestly order. Each gender served in its course.

Though many polygamous marriages were not successful, Flake helped me understand that, in stark contrast to the Victorian ambitions for marriage verbalized by Stenhouse, those who did thrive in polygamy did not desire to rule in each other’s hearts. They had larger ambitions—becoming kings and queens, priests and priestesses, ruling in the house of the Most High God.

So where does all this leave me in my struggle to grasp Latter-day Saint polygamy? Though I remain critical of certain aspects of plural marriage, I suppose, ironically, that all my study and understanding have brought me back nearly to where my perceptions began as a child. My forebears’ practice of polygamy no longer seems bizarre or repulsive to me as it did when I reached adulthood. I have come to relate to L. P. Hartley’s proverbial saying, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” Though polygamy will probably always seem somewhat strange and foreign to me, I realize now that it was not strange or foreign to those who faithfully lived it. I perceive that they lived it for their deeply held spiritual beliefs.

Today my feeling towards earlier Latter-day Saints who practiced polygamy is similar to that expressed by historian B. Carmon Hardy when he dedicates his book, *Solemn Covenant*, “to those courageous women and men who, responsive to their leaders and in defiance of a hostile nation, bent bodies and emotions to the assumed redemptive powers of ‘celestial marriage’—expectant souls whose trial-ridden lives have been too much forgotten by a later generation

obedient to a different call.”⁷

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¹ B. Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), 175-76.

² Doctrine and Covenants 132: 27.

³ Mary Theresa Thompson Call to Anson Bowen Call, November 27, 1896, in *Missionary Diary (Excerpts), Papers and Correspondence of Anson Bowen Call and Mary Theresa Thompson Call, 1895 to 1913*, a family-produced anthology (n.p., n.d.); Anson Bowen Call, “Life Story of Anson Bowen Call,” in *A Collection of Stories and Events in the Life of Anson Bowen Call* (Lorna Call Alder, 1998), 6.

⁴ Mildred Theresa Call, “Life Sketch of Mary Theresa Thompson Call,” in *A Collection of Stories and Events in the Life of Anson Bowen Call* (1998), 92-93.

⁵ Julia Call to Anson Bowen Call, in *A Collection of Stories and Events in the Life of Anson Bowen Call* (Lorna Call Alder: 1998), 51.

⁶ Dora Greenwell, “Home,” *Poems, by the author of ‘The patience of hope’*, (Alexander Strahan and Co., 1861), 151.

⁷ Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), v.