



4-1-2008

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Mark V. Olsen and Will Scheffer, creators

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Recommended Citation

Bean, Kent R. (2008) "*Big Love*, season 1 (2006) and season 2 (2007) by Mark V. Olsen and Will Scheffer, creators," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 47 : Iss. 2 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol47/iss2/17>

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Mark V. Olsen and Will Scheffer, creators. *Big Love*,
season 1 (2006) and season 2 (2007).

HBO Pictures

Reviewed by Kent R. Bean

I understand the inherent difficulties in writing an analysis about a series that deals with polygamy—and not polygamy in some distant time or place, but polygamy in present-day Utah. The practice of polygamy is such a difficult question precisely because it seems so premodern, and we Latter-day Saints have done such a fantastic job of embracing the conditions of modernity. (As a youth, I remember a fireside speaker referring to ours as a “space-age” religion, contrasting it against other religions whose doctrines hampered them from modernizing.) Some might object to a review of *Big Love* in *BYU Studies* because the series does not represent the Mormon image, and therefore it should not be discussed in a publication dedicated to Mormon issues.

Two clarifications will hopefully answer this objection. First, this is not a review proper. I am not reviewing *Big Love* as a television critic and giving it a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Quite frankly, the entertainment value of the show is irrelevant. This review is an analysis of the series’ images and possible cultural impact. (Briefly: yes, the show is entertaining, but it does contain offensive material such as sexual situations and occasional harsh language.)

Second, while some might define *Mormon* exclusively as one who belongs to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormon image is broader than that. In *Big Love*, there are scenes that feature fundamentalist polygamists in southern Utah discussing Joseph Smith, the golden plates, Brigham Young, the trek west to Utah, and the mainstream Church’s decision to abandon polygamy. Despite the fact that we may want to control or contain the Mormon image, *Big Love* necessarily shows that others, such as HBO or actual polygamists, will lay claim to that image for their own purposes.

The dramatic impetus of the show revolves around the fact that Bill Henrickson (Bill Paxton) and his wives seem quite normal—except, of

course, that they are polygamists. One wife, Barb (Jeanne Tripplehorn), is rather controlling, but not in a mean way. Another wife, Nicki (Chloë Sevigny), has a shopping compulsion and seems rather cold and manipulative. The third wife, Margene (Ginnifer Goodwin), is young and inexperienced, and either over- or underdramatizes any event. Great pains are taken to make them and their problems seem plausible. If the creators of *Big Love* had made the series into a freak show of sorts—a *Sopranos*-esque series with polygamists engaging in blood feuds—I feel quite confident in saying that the series would have been short-lived. The series works because of the surprising *normalcy* of Bill and his wives.

That normalcy is made clear in two ways: by contrasting the Henricksons against (1) fundamentalist polygamists and (2) Latter-day Saints. In season 1, Bill is locked into battle with the “prophet” of “the compound,” a polygamist community located somewhere not too far south of Salt Lake City. Roman Grant (Harry Dean Stanton) loans Bill enough money to get his first hardware store going. Bill, however, expands to a second store and does not want to pay Roman any more money. The venal Roman cannot abide the thought of lost income, so he and Bill lock horns.

Roman is the quintessential example of the fundamentalist polygamist: he rules with an iron fist and is clearly interested in power, not God’s righteousness. He has numerous wives and is “pre-sealed” to a fifteen-year-old despite his seventy-six years. The people on his compound all wear western-style clothing to the wrist and ankle. Paradoxically, far from providing a clear argument against polygamy, this negative image only normalizes the Henricksons. Indeed, the Henricksons’ middle-class, bourgeois lifestyle seems quite rational in contrast.

Indeed, the contrast of Bill and his wives against Roman throws the entire term *fundamentalism* into question. This is a troubled term, given that the Church has officially repudiated the term *fundamentalist Mormon* on its website by declaring, “Since those who practice polygamy cannot be members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is incorrect to refer to them as ‘Mormon fundamentalists.’”¹ In this review I refer to such people as *fundamentalist polygamists*. I am using the term categorically; that is, the term denotes a specific category and is the equivalent of *fundamentalist Christian* or *fundamentalist Islamist* in the sense that these people are clearly outside of the mainstream, both by their choice and by the mainstream’s insistence. But in *Big Love*, Bill and his wives clearly are *not* fundamentalists. While they pray and engage in religious ordinances, their lives are not inundated with religion as are Roman’s and his followers. Except for Nicki, they dress in modern clothing, much of it more revealing

than that worn by endowed Latter-day Saints. They watch TV, listen to iPods, and are well educated. And, as far as can be ascertained from the series, they have bought into the American dream as much as anyone.

The other image that serves to normalize the Henricksons is that of Latter-day Saints. I was surprised by the misrepresentation of Latter-day Saints in *Big Love*, given that the series went to great pains to portray the Henricksons with such care, and the writers were clearly familiar with Latter-day Saints and Utah culture (words and phrases like “LDS,” “garment line,” “seminary,” “choose the right,” and others are dropped with ease and without explanation). The Henricksons’ daughter works at a fast-food joint with an LDS girl who tries to befriend her. The non-LDS girls mock the LDS girl for her standards, and she responds with belligerence. She is initially portrayed as self-righteous and narrowminded, although, admittedly, as the series progresses, we see her character become more caring.

One of Bill’s wives, Margene, is befriended by her next-door neighbors, an LDS couple. Margene is desperate for some adult contact and at first enjoys their company. But they seem more intent on converting her and “solving” her problems by getting her a husband (they think she’s a single woman) than in simply being her friend and allowing the friendship to develop organically. I found these scenes uncomfortable because they rang strangely true, despite their oversimplification.

The most egregious stereotype is that of two Mormon elders sent by a well-meaning neighbor to Nicki. They stand erect, as if a ruler went down their backs. They are incredibly persistent in their attempts to gain entrance into her door, and she rebuffs them just as insistently. They return a while later to declare that they know she is a polygamist. “The polygamist lifestyle is wrong, ma’am. We would like to show you the way back to the one true church.” She denies the accusation of polygamy, but asserts that she needs no changing. The elders look at one another and turn from her doorstep. But before leaving they begin to take down her address in their notebook. Nicki yells, “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing! You’re writing my house off for all eternity!” They respond, “You’re in sin. We’re marking you down as uncooperative; not repentant. But we’ll continue to pray for you.” As they mount their bikes and ride away, Nicki yells after them, “Go on and pray for yourselves!” The entire scene is demeaning and laughable. I certainly cannot imagine two elders acting this way, as if they were neo-McCarthyites on a mission to ferret out polygamists in Utah. Latter-day Saints are shown to be paranoid and intolerant at even the hint of polygamy.

The series builds our sympathies around the Henricksons, since we spend most of our time with them. And in our postmodern age of tolerance for all, one is prompted by *Big Love* to wonder why they cannot simply be tolerated. Indeed, in an early episode, Roman Grant vocalizes just this sentiment to a reporter. After his son says, “Don’t forget the gays,” Roman explains that if the Supreme Court finds it appropriate to grant rights to gays, why not to all people? Of course our sympathies are not with Roman, but once he vocalizes this sentiment, it is out there to be considered. And since the Henricksons seem to be such nice people, well, why not?

Yet *Big Love* is not free from its own deconstruction. Barb’s sister says at one point, in an angry confrontation with Barb and Nicki, that polygamy was quaint in the 1900s, but today it is abhorrent. She is portrayed as a small-minded bigot, but I could not help but wonder if the onset of modernity did not make her right. In looking at the Henricksons, even if we put aside all arguments of hurt feelings and mean neighbors, we are still left with a father who is stretched so thin among work, feuding with Roman, and satisfying his three wives that he has little time for his children. Indeed, his three wives are so caught up in their jealousies with one another and vying for Bill’s attention that they cannot give to their children the kind of care that they need. For example, Bill’s daughter Sarah (Amanda Seyfried) goes to a wild drinking party with an acquaintance. (Interestingly, she is rescued from the party by her Mormon coworker who had earlier tried to talk her out of going.) Bill’s son Ben (Douglas Smith) has to ford the rapids of puberty on his own. He even begins to go to seminary to get help with his impure thoughts. But when his girlfriend exerts pressure on him, he relents and loses his virginity. His parents—all of them—are blissfully unaware of his plight.

Simply put, maybe Roman’s version of polygamy—*compound* polygamy, shutting oneself off from the world and living in a controlled environment—is the only way to juggle modernity with the practice. Of course, as *Big Love* makes clear, compound polygamy is an abhorrent solution. And while we may sympathize with Bill and Barb and Nicki and Margene, maybe certain principles, even “average” polygamy, cannot be reconciled with the modern world.

Kent R. Bean (kent.bean@snow.edu) received his PhD from Bowling Green State University in American Culture Studies. He currently teaches English at Snow College in Ephraim, Utah. He is the Film and Television Review Editor for *BYU Studies*.

1. “Myth-Conceptions’ about the Church,” November 20, 2006. <http://news-room.lds.org>.