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Plural Marriage in St. George

A Summary and an Invitation

Davis Bitton, Val Lambson, Lowell C. “Ben” Bennion, and Kathryn M. Daynes

These three papers offer new insights into the importance of polygyny, or polygamy, in nineteenth-century Mormondom. The Bitton-Lambson article derives theoretical limits on the sustainability of polygyny, suggesting that, given the parameters observed in nineteenth-century Utah, a prevalence exceeding 15 to 20 percent of males and 25 to 30 percent of females is implausible. Bennion’s paper provides detailed information on how prevalent polygyny was in St. George and in its wide hinterland. It also includes a number of personal stories to shed light on who the settlers were, what motivated their move to Utah’s Dixie, and how their marital status fit into the makeup of the population. Daynes’s article compares the prevalence in St. George and Manti with sustainable levels over time. The picture painted by this trilogy is one of a thriving plural marriage system that approached the limits of what was mathematically possible. Naturally, there remains much room for further research.

St. George, of course, was only one small, albeit significant, part of nineteenth-century Mormon Country, which implies that research in other regions is overdue. These three articles began independent of each other. Bitton and Lambson began to apply their model to St. George about the same time (2002) that Daynes published her book about the changing patterns of polygamy in Manti. Two decades earlier, Bennion had published an article that compared the incidence of polygyny in Utah’s Dixie with its frequency in Davis County (north of Salt Lake) as of 1880. All four of us must credit Larry Logue for our selection of St. George, owing to the importance of his groundbreaking *A Sermon in the Desert* (1988).

Comparing St. George to many other locales seems essential to understanding the causes and effects of polygyny’s prevalence in Mormon society

more generally. We hope future research will address remaining questions, such as the following. How did the incidence of plurality in St. George compare to levels elsewhere in Dixie and the rest of Mormon Country? Would the procedure set forth by Bennion for examining the relationship between polygyny and the settlement of St. George apply to other communities? What motivated those who entered plural living, and was it different for those in St. George than for Mormons elsewhere? Did the dedication of the St. George Temple encourage the faithful to live the Principle? Was there an upsurge in plural marriages after the 1884 dedication of the Logan Temple? No upsurge occurred after the dedication of the Manti Temple, but that was just two years before the Church issued its 1890 Manifesto to end the practice.

Despite both narrative and statistical evidence that the incidence of polygyny peaked in the wake of the Mormon Reformation (1856–1857), present studies cover only Brigham City, Manti, and about eight wards in and around Salt Lake City. More community studies are needed. Census takers for 1860 and 1870 were probably not paid for their attention to detail, and names all too often prove difficult to identify without persistent effort. And with Church membership records either missing or incomplete, the accurate identification of families and the construction of reliable counts make such efforts most challenging.

Using the Bitton-Lambson model, we now understand polygyny's prevalence in relation to demographic sustainability for a small number of places, most notably St. George, but additional studies of a similar nature would fill in the portrait for which we have offered only an outline. Some of the questions asked require more quantitative data. Others need more qualitative analysis of diaries and other contemporary evidence. Much remains to be done to better understand the extent and effects of Mormonism's once most challenging principle. We invite other scholars to join in this endeavor.