

“MY INDIGNATION HAS GOT THE
BETTER OF MY INTENTION”:
A CASE STUDY IN LATTER-DAY
SAINT AND “GENTILE” FEMALE
FAMILY CORRESPONDENCE IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

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Although members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints shared many values with their Christian neighbors, the differences between Mormons and non-Mormons during the nineteenth century were enough to estrange even beloved family members. Peculiar Mormon practices intensified divisions between the Saints and Americans at large, especially practices such as their loyalty to prophet-leaders and plural marriage arrangements, as well as the intimidating political bloc that the Saints created. By the time they established a western mountain theocracy under Brigham Young, Mormons and their community were seen as foreign bodies so much that, in the popular imagination, they were distinguishable not only by alien practices but physical appearance.¹ For many Americans, Mormons were so wholly “other” that connecting deeply, or even casually, with them felt

1. W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 20; Lester E. Bush, “A Peculiar People: ‘The Physiological Aspects of Mormonism 1850–1975,’” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12, no. 3 (1979): 61–83.

challenging and uncomfortable.² This paper will examine these dynamics through the correspondence of Martha Telle Cannon, a Mormon, and her “Gentile” half sisters, Sarah Telle King and Tabitha Telle Sykes.

In the late nineteenth century, after years of silence, Sarah and Tabitha reconnected with Martha. The circumstances of their initial estrangement fit into the Mormon-versus-American narrative in many ways: when Martha chose to marry into polygamy in 1868, her half sisters cut off all correspondence. In her half sisters’ eyes, Martha’s decision to commit to plural marriage disqualified her from a relationship with them. Yet deeper examination of both their estrangement and reconciliation illuminates important details that challenge the notion that people reject Mormons solely on religious grounds. The letters of Martha Telle Cannon and her half sisters introduce a more nuanced view of Mormon and non-Mormon relationships. They reveal both historical and personal forces that motivated the sisters to maintain a distance from Martha, then later to reach out in reconciliation. As their correspondence shows, important personal factors, including emotional pain and trauma, may have been as relevant as the cultural elements that divided and reunited the sisters.

While scholarship on Mormon women (especially polygamous Mormon women) in the nineteenth century abounds, few works exist that directly address how Mormon and non-Mormon family members navigated their relationships with each other. Several biographies of Mormon women demonstrate these dynamics in part yet lack specific focus on what believing and unbelieving family members felt and how they treated each other.³ Numerous works examine Americans’

2. Mrs. Benjamin G. Ferris [Elizabeth Cornelia Ferris], *The Mormons at Home: With Some Incidents of Travel from Missouri to California, 1852–3. In a Series of Letters* (Dix & Edwards, 1856).

3. Paula Kelly Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club: From the Diaries of Mormon Pioneer Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women’s*

disgust at Mormons' violation of Victorian sexuality mores and the threat to American familial norms, yet to date, none adopt the specific interrelational lens that this study offers.⁴ While studies of anti-Mormonism have yet to include specific interfamilial perspectives, they are valuable to this particular study as they capture the climate in which non-Mormon and Mormon women addressed each other. Further, the letters between Martha, Sarah, and Tabitha Telle have never been examined by scholars. Only a few family historians—likely Martha's curious, white-haired descendants—have commented on the sisters' correspondence. The main focus of their commentary is the genealogy that the letters discussed.⁵ Analyzing private letters that the sisters never intended to be read publicly not only opens the door to the little-known world of feminine relationships between Mormon and non-Mormon kin but also enables us to understand the historical and emotional realities that motivated familial division and reconciliation.⁶

Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870 (New York: Vintage, 2017); Annie Clark Tanner, *A Mormon Mother: An Autobiography* (1976); Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Eliza and Her Sisters* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1991).

4. Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 30; Mary K. Campbell, "Mr. Peay's Horses: The Federal Response to Mormon Polygamy, 1854–1887," *Yale JL & Feminism* 13 (2001): 29; James L. Clayton, "The Supreme Court, Polygamy and the Enforcement of Morals in Nineteenth Century America: An Analysis of Reynolds v. United States," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12, no. 4 (1979): 46–61.

5. Julie Cannon Markham, "The Telle Book," *Julie and Ben's Genealogy Page* (blog), <https://bsmarkham.com/julie/tellebook.html>.

6. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (1975): 3.

Martha, Sarah, and Tabitha: The Telle Family

Sarah and Tabitha Telle were born to Josiah Lewis Telle and Tabitha Oakley in 1828 and 1837, respectively. After Tabitha Oakley died of malaria in Nauvoo in 1840, Josiah married Amelia Rogers. Five years later, Amelia gave birth to Martha. Thus, Sarah and Tabitha Telle are Martha's older half sisters. There were brothers as well, but they remained estranged from the three sisters' bond. In 1847, Josiah accidentally shot and killed Amelia,⁷ and the Telle family split apart. After the tragic death of her mother, eighteen-month-old Martha was adopted by her aunt and uncle Hester and George Beebe, who lived in Iowa. At this point, Martha began to be estranged from the rest of her family. Martha's aunt and uncle were devout Latter-day Saints, yet, despite their commitment to their faith, they did not follow the body of Latter-day Saints in their western exodus to Utah. Martha remained with her adopted parents in Iowa through her adolescence, pursuing an education and planning to eventually join the Saints in Utah. Although specific dates and details are not known, Sarah and Tabitha eventually traveled to New York to live with extended family and remained in New York through their adult years. These two sisters, although likely exposed to an early form of Mormonism, were never baptized or formally associated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

7. Julie Cannon Markham, "Biography of Martha Telle Cannon," *Julie and Ben's Genealogy Page* (blog), Nov. 2020, <https://bsmarkham.com/julie/Martha%20Telle/marthatelle.html>.

According to family records, Josiah kept a gun under his pillow at night in the case of intruders. One hot evening, Amelia left the house to get some fresh air while Josiah continued to sleep. As Amelia returned back into the house, Josiah mistook her for an intruder and opened fire. Amelia did not die immediately and was taken to the house of Emma Smith Bidamon to rest and heal. She eventually died from the wounds.

Saints. It is probable that they belonged to another Christian church. Despite the physical distance between Sarah, Tabitha, and Martha, letters indicate that they stayed in communication throughout Martha's childhood and adolescence.⁸

After graduating from the University of Iowa in 1865, Martha moved to Utah alone and began teaching. She was intent on being independent and planned on opening her own school. She was also determined to marry into polygamy. During a trip to Utah six years earlier, she learned that plural marriages were sanctioned by Church leaders and witnessed aspects of polygamy that were attractive to her.⁹ Martha's letters show multiple reasons for why polygamy appealed to her, such as believing that the practice was divinely appointed and that becoming a plural wife would ensure her and her children rewards in the afterlife. Further, it was not uncommon for women arriving to Utah alone to marry into polygamous families—surely the prospect of marrying into a prominent, established family was attractive to a young transplant seeking protection and stability. She also could have been drawn to the advantages of communal living, especially as she had no family in Utah and would be able to depend on an instant extended network of "aunts" and half siblings for her children. So when George Q. Cannon, one of the most prominent LDS men in Utah, proposed to Martha in February of 1868, she accepted without hesitation. On March 16, 1868, at age twenty-two, Martha married George Q. Cannon, age

8. George Cannon to Sarah Telle King, Mar. 29, 1880, George Q. Cannon correspondence, Brigham Young University Special Collections, MSS 7426, 3, 1-18-49.

9. Julie Cannon Markham, "Biography of Martha Telle Cannon."

forty-one, becoming his fourth wife and entering into a warm kinship with his three other wives.¹⁰

Upon hearing about Martha's polygamous marriage to George Q. Cannon in or around March of 1868, her half sisters ended communication with her. The reason behind the abrupt cutoff was no mystery to Martha—in fact, she might have anticipated losing the support of her family in this way. But even anticipation could not dull the pain of losing the ties of beloved kin: the loss of these relationships cut her deeply and became the “chief cause of [her] sorrow” during adulthood.¹¹ As Martha's children grew, she felt the isolation from her family more intensely and longed for more information about her ancestors—for her own comfort and to pass on to her children.¹² So, in 1880, when Martha's oldest half sister, Sarah, wrote to George at his post as a congressional delegate in Washington, DC, asking to be connected with Martha once more, George “promptly and kindly” responded to Sarah and gave her Martha's address.¹³ On March 29, 1880, after a

10. Relationships between sister wives are commonly assumed as being contentious. From surviving documents and firsthand accounts from the Cannon family, the relationships between Martha and her sister wives are described as warm and communal. Surely there were episodes and seasons of difficulty between them; however, such events were never recorded, even in accounts from all of Martha's children, who were not hesitant to criticize other aspects of polygamy. Out of all of George's wives, Martha seems to have been the most outspoken and strong-willed. Even then, we have no record of her complaining about her other sister wives. Her only recorded complaints related to her relationship with George.

11. George Cannon to Sarah Telle King, Mar. 29, 1880, George Q. Cannon correspondence, Brigham Young University Special Collections, MSS 7426, 3, 1-18-49.

12. George Cannon to Sarah Telle King, Mar. 29, 1880, George Q. Cannon correspondence, Brigham Young University Special Collections, MSS 7426, 3, 1-18-49.

13. Sarah Telle King to Martha Telle Cannon, Mar. 31, 1880, George Q. Cannon family correspondence, Brigham Young University Special Collections, MSS 7426, 2, 1-15-43.

long silence between the sisters, Sarah wrote to Martha, requesting information about their estranged brothers, who were scattered across the Midwest and had infrequent contact with the sisters. Sarah's curiosity about Martha's life also emerged in her letter. She wanted to know what had become of her younger sister since moving to Utah and marrying into polygamy and requested that Martha share about her life "under such peculiar institutions and circumstances."¹⁴ On April 12, 1880, Martha responded to Sarah's letter. Addressing Sarah as "My Dear Sister," Martha expressed her delight at hearing from her, relayed news of their brothers, requested more information about their ancestors, and expressed her desire for their continued correspondence.¹⁵

Although only parts of Martha's April 12 letter survive, the contents of the missing pages are somewhat revealed by Sarah's reply to Martha on April 19. In addition to thanking Martha for the information about their wandering brothers and providing the genealogy of their father's family that Martha had requested, Sarah's response not only requested that in future correspondence Martha avoid "any allusion to the 'beauties' of the Mormon Faith" but also included a string of attacks on Martha's religion, character, and family.¹⁶ For example, in response to Martha's reference to biblical polygamy, Sarah rebutted that "old Jews and Arabs of ancient times" were not "very brilliant examples of either decency or respectability."¹⁷ Surely, the implied jab at Mormon

14. Sarah Telle King to Martha Telle Cannon, Mar. 31, 1880, George Q. Cannon family correspondence, Brigham Young University Special Collections, MSS 7426, 2, 1-15-43.

15. Martha Telle Cannon to Sarah Telle King, Apr. 12, 1880, Personal Collection of Espey Telle Cannon.

16. Sarah Telle King to Martha Telle Cannon, Apr. 19, 1880, George Q. Cannon family correspondence, Brigham Young University Special Collections, MSS 7426, 2, 1-16-44.

17. Sarah Telle King to Martha Telle Cannon, Apr. 19, 1880, George Q. Cannon family correspondence, Brigham Young University Special Collections, MSS 7426, 2, 1-16-44.

morality was not lost on Martha. Sarah insinuated that all motivations for polygamy were carnal and questioned the equality of Mormon women.¹⁸ Then, in a strike even more personal than her previous ones, Sarah took a stab at Martha's family life, asking what kind of familial relationships could thrive when a father (or in this case, Martha's husband, George) was "divided up into half a dozen households." She asked, "Where does he reside? And which particular dinner table is blessed with his paternal presence?" Then, snidely, she asked, "If he is sick, which wife takes care of him? Or do they take turns?" At the close of her attack, she asked Martha for forgiveness, adding that her "indignation . . . got the better of [her] intention." (We must ask what Sarah's true intention was, as she could have started her letter over or omitted her attack.) Nevertheless, her letter replanted seeds of division and distance between the sisters. Perhaps to Sarah, Martha's description on April 12 of her "peculiar circumstances" bordered on evangelism, and she felt the need to retaliate.¹⁹ Like many Mormon women in the nineteenth century, Martha believed wholeheartedly in polygamy, and her loyalty and conviction likely emerged in her letter. Whether out of defense against Martha's testimony or more personal motivations, Sarah felt the need to censure Martha's ideas and practices.

When Martha sent no reply to the April 19 letter, Sarah sent another to her in June of 1880.²⁰ Although this letter is not available in the archive, we can assume that it was an effort to reconcile with her sister. Despite Sarah's endeavors to connect with Martha, two years passed before Martha responded to Sarah, and although she blamed babies

18. Sarah Telle King to Martha Telle Cannon, Apr. 19, 1880, George Q. Cannon family correspondence, Brigham Young University Special Collections, MSS 7426, 2, 1-16-44.

19. George Cannon to Sarah Telle King, Mar. 29, 1880, George Q. Cannon correspondence, Brigham Young University Special Collections, MSS 7426, 3, 1-18-49.

20. Martha Telle Cannon to Sarah Telle King, Feb. 26, 1882, Personal Collection of Espey Telle Cannon.

and housework for her delay, her emotional pain was likely the main motivation. Martha confessed that she "read and reread [Sarah's letters from April and June of 1880] a number of times," and that doing so caused her "sorrowful feelings."²¹ Martha expressed gratitude for the genealogical information Sarah shared but could not agree with Sarah's interpretation of the tragic events concerning their father, Josiah Telle. In Sarah's narrative, she held the Mormons accountable for their father's misfortunes. In response, Martha argued,

That [father] was ever wrongly treated in any respect whatsoever [by the Church], I am quite ready to dispute. We know that those who enter our church are not forced to do so, and if they accept our principles in the spirit in which they are given they can see the true beauties of "Mormonism," and will never feel like withdrawing from the Church. There is where I and my father are unlike.²²

Although Martha was not present (or even alive) for many of her father's tribulations among the Mormons, she could not tolerate the idea that the Church or its people could have done anything to wrong him. Her loyalty to the Church was absolute. Admitting fault on the part of the Church that she was so devoted to would have been disorienting and faith-shaking. So, Martha sided with her faith over her family. Martha's disposition to defend her Church combined with Sarah's unbridled disgust at Martha's lifestyle created conditions inconducive to reconciliation.

Historical Context

Sarah's abhorrence at Martha's religion and lifestyle was not unique in nineteenth-century America. Attitudes toward Mormons were harsh during this time, especially because of polygamy's direct opposition to

21. Martha Telle Cannon to Sarah Telle King, Feb. 26, 1882, Personal Collection of Espey Telle Cannon.

22. Martha Telle Cannon to Sarah Telle King, Feb. 26, 1882, Personal Collection of Espey Telle Cannon.

Victorian sexuality and the American social order. In an 1882 address given in the Broadway Church in Norwich, Connecticut, Reverend L. T. Chamberlain claimed that the sins of polygamy outweighed the combined immorality of the whole nation outside the Utah Territory. According to Chamberlain, even Americans' "utmost offence against chastity and marriage [were] nothing when put beside it."²³ Chamberlain's claims were understandable based on the information he likely had received about polygamy; easterners' ideas about Mormon polygamy were in large part informed by the exaggerated accounts of "Gentile" travelers more interested in "titillating audiences back home than in accurately portraying plural marriage."²⁴ Rumors spread rampantly via newspapers and other mediums, and the juicier the stories, the better. During the late nineteenth century, almost one hundred novels and several hundred newspaper and magazine articles about polygamy—including the first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*—were published, laying the foundation for antipolygamy fiction over the next half century. These works painted vivid pictures of the barbarous marital practices of Mormons: tales of "blushing brides" whose virgin hopes were destroyed by their husband's "self-indulgence under the mantle of religious difference" made "thrilling and disturbing reading."²⁵ Sarah would have been familiar with such tales of oppression and abuse and likely felt intrigued and disgusted at those stories.

Polygamy gave American women like Sarah the rare opportunity to talk about sex. The combination of the sexually repressed society and a culturally sanctioned reason to discuss sex created an unprecedented space for conversation around these issues.²⁶ This

23. L. T. Chamberlain, *Mormonism and Polygamy* (published privately, 1882), 11.

24. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 82.

25. Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question*, 30.

26. Charles A. Cannon, "The Awesome Power of Sex: The Polemical Campaign against Mormon Polygamy," *Pacific Historical Review* 43, no.1 (1974): 61–82.

newfound opportunity is apparent in Sarah's letters to Martha. Sarah's initial questions about the peculiar "institutions" and "circumstances" of Martha's family arrangements did not explicitly address sexuality, and she probably assumed that Martha would not share any intimate details of her marriage with her. However, in learning about Martha's "circumstances," Sarah knew that she would be able to fill in some blanks about Martha and George's sexual relationship. Sarah's response in her second letter about polygamous husbands' familial rotations—especially her comments regarding "sharing households" and "taking turns"—alludes to her interest in and disgust at the polygamous sex that occurred among Mormons. Her response fits into a broader trend of Americans using polygamy to both religiously other and racially other Mormons, as W. Paul Reeve describes in his research.²⁷ Because of their "barbaric" marital arrangements, Mormons often occupied a space in the American consciousness akin to "Mohammadans" or "Turks."²⁸ Sarah's initial inquiry, followed by disgust and disavowal, match the paradoxical nature of Americans' fascination with and revulsion to Mormon family arrangements.

While some American women may have appreciated the opportunity to talk openly about sex, the general consensus among Americans was still that sexual impulse was "alien and disruptive" and that the powers of sex were best employed when repressed.²⁹ According to William Alcott in *Physiology of Marriage*, "One incident of sexual indulgence per lunar month" was all that the "best health of the parties could possibly require."³⁰ Americans believed that the most dangerous of all man's desires was his sexual drive, and they feared that "any relaxation of sexual standards would lead to a complete breakdown

27. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*.

28. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 221–22.

29. Cannon, "The Awesome Power of Sex."

30. William A. Alcott, *The Physiology of Marriage* (Boston: Joseph P. Jewett, 1855), 118.

of the civilized order.”³¹ Because polygamy allowed for men to indulge their desires in an “abnormal way,” such men would be “consumed by unrestrained sensuality” and become “completely alienated from morality and virtue.”³² Polygamy also brought to light Mormonism’s tepid embrace of women’s sexuality. The prevailing belief in New England during the mid-nineteenth century was that women lacked carnal motivation and that their “passionlessness” gave them moral superiority.³³ Sarah must have felt disturbed at the thought that Martha’s husband was having sexual relations frequently with more than one wife and that Martha was a willing participant in these illicit relations. By the nature of Sarah’s attacking questions, she appears hyper-focused on this aspect of Martha’s life rather than viewing her sister in any other context or role. It is noteworthy that Sarah does not mention Martha’s children or motherly duties that were so frequently the topic of letters between female kin during this time. Rather, for Sarah, Martha’s conjugal arrangements eclipsed the rest of her life. Sarah was unable to see her sister as anything besides an oppressed religious zealot, stripped of agency and trapped in exciting yet immoral circumstances.

Martha, of course, viewed her sexual circumstances differently than most Americans assumed them to be. While Mormon women were conspicuously silent on the details of their sexual lives, they were outspoken defenders of chastity and sexual agency. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich points out, some practiced—“even if they did not yet preach”—forms of “sex radicalism,” the idea that a woman should choose her sexual partners and when she would have sex with them.³⁴ To those who declared Mormon plural wives as harem-dwelling

31. Cannon, “The Awesome Power of Sex.”

32. Cannon, “The Awesome Power of Sex.”

33. Nancy Cott, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 2 (1978): 219–36.

34. Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females*, xiv.

victims "dominated by lascivious males with hyperactive libidos,"³⁵ Martha may have defended her sexual agency and virtue. Chastity was "strenuously inculcated" in Latter-day Saints, and the Church "most indignantly repudiated . . . all idea of sensuality as the motive of [polygamous] unions."³⁶ Interestingly, Mormons during this time generally thought of sexuality as much a part of one's potentiality as was charity or benevolence.³⁷ Orson Pratt, an original member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles,³⁸ taught that God was the author of sexual love, and that sexual love would exist in the afterlife.³⁹ Parley Pratt, another member of the Quorum of the Twelve, explained that the marital act was not solely for the purpose of procreation but "also for mutual affection, cultivation of [Godlike attributes], and for mutual comfort and assistance in this world of toil and sorrow."⁴⁰ Not all Mormons were able to translate such ideas about sexuality so comfortably into polygamous arrangements. Many individuals within the Church initially found polygamy repulsive and struggled to accept that such arrangements could be divinely sanctioned. However, by the late nineteenth century, polygamy became such a central tenet of Mormonism that members believed that one could not achieve the highest level of heaven without marrying polygamously.

In addition to challenging American sexual norms, polygamy also posed a threat to women's social roles and responsibilities. In

35. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 82.

36. Howard Stansbury, *Exploration and Survey of the Valley of the Great Salt Lake of Utah, Including a Reconnaissance of a New Route Through the Rocky Mountains* (Philadelphia, 1852), 137.

37. Cannon, "The Awesome Power of Sex."

38. Joseph Smith organized a Quorum of the Twelve Apostles after the manner of Jesus' original quorum. This organization continued under the leadership of Brigham Young and exists today.

39. Orson Pratt, *The Seer* (1852), 155–58.

40. Parley Parker Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1855), 173.

nineteenth-century America, women were expected to help maintain “domestick purity” and support what “remain[ed] of religion in [their] private habits and publick institutions.”⁴¹ Women carried the call to raise the standard of character in men and to guard against the dangers of “impudence and licentiousness” for all people.⁴² This identity and calling gave American women power in public and private spaces. Religious identity empowered women to assert themselves by enabling them to call on an authority beyond the world of men.⁴³ So while women remained somewhat powerless in the political sphere during the nineteenth century, their religious influence gave them a strong, consistent voice. American women like Sarah believed that polygamy jeopardized this hard-earned power, for where women lost virtue, they also lost their voice. But Sarah’s motivations seemed to extend beyond values and power: through Sarah’s letters, we see that she possessed even more personal reasons for her strong feelings against her sister and the LDS Church.

Indignation: Personal Context

In many ways, Sarah’s life was shaped by misfortunes she labeled to be at the hands of the Latter-day Saints. By sharing her father’s history, which Martha had requested, she revealed her own traumatic relationship with the Church: Sarah’s letter described how after her parents, Josiah Telle and Tabitha Oakley, “fell in with the Mormons,” they were swindled out of all their savings by Church leaders, including “Jo Smith and his apostles, . . . Jos Smith himself borrowing a thousand dollars which he was never able to repay, if indeed he ever meant to, which is doubtful.” Upon arriving penniless to Nauvoo, Sarah’s family were among those

41. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 148.

42. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 148.

43. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 148.

who became ill with malaria, and Sarah's mother and her younger brother Lewis, only a baby, died "for want of proper care, which . . . was impossible to obtain, as everyone around [them] was sick and destitute." Sarah was only twelve when her mother and brother became sick, and as the oldest child and daughter, she likely felt an immense responsibility to care for them as their health faded. She also must have been devastated to lose her mother at such a young age. Following the death of his wife and son, Josiah returned to New York and "disposed of his [living] children among their mother's relatives." Following this, Josiah returned to Nauvoo, where he would die poor and alone. As Sarah finished the account of her father's life, she concluded:

Of course, it is impossible, in the brief and imperfect sketch I have made, to convey to you a thousandth part of the misfortunes which follows upon my father's conversion to the Mormons. The death of my mother, the loss of property, the alienation of my father, the separation of brothers and sisters who have grown old strangers to each other. The sickness, suffering, and misery all attributable to that cause. Can you wonder that I have no respect or even tolerance for the doctrines propagated by Jos Smith and his successors?⁴⁴

Sarah's personal loss at the hands of the Latter-day Saints was tremendous. Enduring the excruciating pain of losing both parents within a matter of years, followed by moving to Iowa to join distant family members at the significant age of twelve, would have created intense emotional trauma for young Sarah. Sarah was willing to reach out in correspondence with her sister, yet her deep emotional injuries blinded her from seeing her sister separately from the people and institution that had robbed her of so much. Sarah's rejection of Mormonism, and by extension her sister, was born from an amalgamation of moral and personal outrage.

44. Sarah Telle King to Martha Telle Cannon, Apr. 19, 1880, George Q. Cannon family correspondence, Brigham Young University Special Collections, MSS 7426, 2, 1-16-44.

Reconciliation: "My Heart Has Been True to You"

Like Sarah, Tabitha cut off correspondence with Martha after hearing about her polygamous marriage to George in 1868. Tabitha may have been outraged by the men who sanctioned such marital arrangements or felt confused as to why her own sister would degrade herself to such a position. She may have even hoped that the abrupt loss of familial support would dissuade her younger sister from marrying into polygamy. Whatever her motivations for cutting contact, the silence between the sisters lasted twenty-five years, extending nine years after Sarah's death in 1884. We don't know when Martha wrote to Tabitha to break the long silence, but by Tabitha's response, we know that Martha initiated the reconciliation. The purpose of Martha's letter, at least in part, was to get information about her paternal grandparents. Finally, in 1893, at age fifty-six, Tabitha sent a response to Martha, who was then forty-seven years old. Softened by time and regret, Tabitha was ready to reconnect with Martha.

Tabitha's response included the genealogical information that Martha requested, yet the majority of her letter addressed the sisters' broken relationship. Tabitha's desire to reconnect with her sister was more powerful than her disdain for Martha's lifestyle, and she paved the way to reopen their relationship. Tabitha began her letter with a humble plea for forgiveness for "the unkind and unsisterly manner in which [she] closed [their] correspondence" and confessed that for twenty-five years, her mistake weighed heavily upon her conscience. During that time, Tabitha "resolved times without number" to write and ask for forgiveness for that "thoughtless, inconsiderate, impulsive act of [her] youth."⁴⁵ Then, in detail, Tabitha described how much and often she thought of Martha during the polygamy trials of the 1880s, when George went into hiding and Martha and her children sought refuge in

45. Tabitha Sykes to Martha Telle Cannon, June 27, 1893, Personal Collection of Julie Markham.

Colorado to escape the federal prosecutors. Tabitha related that during this time, her heart was "full to overflowing with anxiety and sympathy" for her sister.⁴⁶ While it is impossible to know how much Tabitha knew about Martha's specific situation during the polygamy trials and raids, her "anxiety and sympathy" imply a certain level of understanding of the suffering her sister endured. Surely, even Tabitha's delayed empathy helped to mend Martha's wounds and draw the sisters closer together.

Tabitha's daughter, Anna (Annie) Marion Sykes, also began writing to Martha upon the sisters' reconciliation. Annie's letters to Martha were genuine and kind. For example, after the death of Martha's husband in 1901, Annie wrote,

I have been through so much trouble in the last few years in the illness and death of both father and mother, that I know how to sympathize in sorrow of this kind, for I know well what the heartache is. . . . In this [loss] you surely have and always will have, the comfort of looking back to your husband as a man to be proud of, whose life was one long success, and an honor to himself and all who belonged to him. I am not one to whom a difference in faith is of vital importance. It is the *life* I look at. And for Mr. Cannon, and his active and honorable career, I have always felt the greatest respect. I wish I might have met him.⁴⁷

One might assume that these were simply words of comfort made for a time of grieving. However, tenderness and respect are shown by both Annie and her mother before George's death throughout letters sent in 1893, 1896, 1900, and 1901. Further, the letters from Tabitha and Annie to Martha included multiple warm invitations to come and visit.⁴⁸ In 1896, Annie even extended an invitation to Mr. Cannon and Martha's

46. Tabitha Sykes to Martha Telle Cannon, June 27, 1893, Personal Collection of Julie Markham.

47. Annie Sykes to Martha Telle Cannon, Apr. 21, 1901, Personal Collection of Julie Markham.

48. Tabitha Sykes to Martha Telle Cannon, June 27, 1893, Personal Collection of Julie Markham.

children who were traveling in her “part of the world.”⁴⁹ Invitations for visits were quite common between kin during this era, not only between families in proximity but also families separated by more significant distances. But sincere invitations to those with such differences speaks to something greater than common practice.

On January 4, 1893, six months before Tabitha wrote her first letter to Martha, President Benjamin Harrison issued a proclamation that pardoned those living in polygamy on the condition that they abstain from unlawful cohabitation from then on. This move, combined with the LDS Church’s 1890 Manifesto announcing the end of polygamy, may have softened Tabitha’s and Annie’s feelings toward Martha. It may have felt easier to connect with Martha knowing that she would be leaving polygamy behind. Yet Tabitha and Annie were not ignorant of Martha’s continued marital status or arrangements. They mentioned Martha’s husband various times, expressed their high opinion of him,⁵⁰ and requested that Martha send a picture of herself and George.⁵¹ Warm communication between Annie and Martha continued even after George stated in an 1899 interview with the *New York Herald* that new plural marriages might be performed in Canada and Mexico.⁵² Tabitha was not alive to learn those details (she died in 1895), but Annie was likely aware of this interview with her prominent uncle. For many outside the Church, the 1890 Manifesto succeeded in showing that Mormonism had “honestly and forever” put its “greatest evil” away.⁵³

49. Annie Sykes to Martha Telle Cannon, Sept. 30, 1896, Personal Collection of Julie Markham.

50. Tabitha Sykes to Martha Telle Cannon, June 27, 1893, Personal Collection of Julie Markham.

51. Tabitha Sykes to Martha Telle Cannon, July 18, 1893, Personal Collection of Julie Markham.

52. Eugene Young, “Polygamy Is Reviving,” *New York Herald*, Feb. 5, 1899.

53. B. Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 153.

Yet as partial insiders with front-row seats to the actual events after the manifesto, Tabitha and Annie knew otherwise: George did not abandon Martha, and they continued to be married and live together. Still, their love and empathy flowed freely for Martha and her family.

Tabitha's and Annie's attitudes toward Martha and her religion seem to be much less mainstream than Sarah's, but closer examination reveals many positive interpersonal relationships that Mormons had with non-Mormon Americans. In an 1872 letter to Martha, George expressed that since arriving in Washington as a congressional delegate, he had been treated "with greater kindness and consideration than [he] could have expected."⁵⁴ George's treatment is especially noteworthy considering the political tension and moral outrage directed at Mormons during this time. Similarly, Elizabeth Wood Kane, wife of colonel and Mormon ally Thomas Kane, wrote her impressions of Mormons on an 1874 trip to southern Utah, where they visited for several months. Her account was less fantastical than others from the time, and she expressed admiration for Mormons' orderly lifestyle and religious devotion.⁵⁵ Although she felt that polygamy was unjust toward women, she held compassion for polygamous wives and argued that Congress should forbid further polygamous marriages but "legalize those that already existed."⁵⁶ In addition, Elizabeth Wells Randall Cumming, the wife of Utah's first "Gentile" governor, expressed understanding and warm feelings toward polygamists. As she wrote home to her sisters, she explained how her husband "lik[ed] some of the Mormons" and admired "their courage,

54. George Q. Cannon to Martha Telle Cannon, Apr. 18, 1872, George Q. and Martha Telle Cannon correspondence, 1872–1891, Brigham Young University Special Collections, MSS 7426, 1/2, 1-1.

55. Elizabeth Wood Kane, *Twelve Mormon Homes Visited in Succession on a Journey through Utah to Arizona* (Philadelphia, 1874), 10–18.

56. Wood Kane, *Twelve Mormon Homes*, 119.

intellect, [and] admirable horsemanship.”⁵⁷ Elizabeth also praised Mormons for their clean lifestyles and religious devotion. Not all she wrote about Mormons was flattering, but it is noteworthy that she was able to simultaneously acknowledge the negative and positive about a people who were perceived by most as barbaric. Those who had close associations with Mormons and could see that polygamy was not exactly the scandal that easterners made it out to be often expressed less harsh sentiments toward them.

Perhaps like Elizabeth Kane, Elizabeth Cumming, and George’s associates in Washington, DC, Tabitha and Annie were more exposed to the realities of polygamy than Sarah. They seem to have seen through (or simply compartmentalized) the sensationalism that dominated stories about Mormon women and polygamy and honored Martha’s humanity. Historian Spencer Fluhman argues that where Mormons have found acceptance, it has been through non-Mormon Americans’ ability to imagine them “apart from their religion.”⁵⁸ This hypothesis certainly applies to Tabitha, Annie, and Martha; Tabitha and Annie never mentioned Martha’s religion specifically (except to express tolerance for religious differences), and we have no evidence to assume that Martha described polygamy to them as she did to Sarah.⁵⁹ Rather, the majority of their communication centered around their relationship rather than Martha’s beliefs or opinions. Martha found acceptance not only through her family’s ability to imagine her apart from her religion

57. Elizabeth Wells Cumming to Anne Eliza Cumming, May 28, 1858, Alfred Cumming papers, University of Utah, MS 0630, 1-1.

58. J. Spencer Fluhman, *“A Peculiar People”: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 144.

59. This silence on Martha’s part may have been motivated by her exchanges with Sarah years earlier, which proved to be religiously adversarial. Martha may have intentionally omitted details about her religion to avoid the contention that erupted between her and Sarah.

but also through their ability to empathize with her suffering *because* of her religion.

Martha's loss of communication with her sisters as a young bride and continued loneliness, her oppression at the hands of the US government during the polygamy trials and raids of the 1880s, and the loss of her polygamous husband at such a young age (George was twenty years her senior) were all direct results of her being Mormon. The suffering caused by these events drew Tabitha and Annie toward her; Martha's pain humanized her. In contrast, Sarah's own emotional trauma blinded her to Martha's plight. She was unable to imagine Martha apart from the religion that took so much from her. These different interactions may in part be due to the disparity in Sarah's and Tabitha's childhood experiences. Compared to Sarah, Tabitha may have suffered much less (or remembered less) at the hands of the Mormons. Sarah was twelve when her mother and infant brother died of malaria in Nauvoo; Tabitha was only three. When their stepmother passed and they were sent to live with relatives, Sarah was nineteen; Tabitha was ten. Tabitha's age may have protected her from the relational and psychological scars created by their father's involvement with the Latter-day Saints.

An analysis of these sisters' letters reveals both the power of American prejudice and the bonds of female kinship. Sarah's view of her half sister remained congruent with typical sentiment toward Mormons in nineteenth-century America. Many of the prejudices apparent in her letters align directly with non-Mormon Americans' main arguments against Mormons. While Mormonism repulsed the majority of American society during the nineteenth century, Tabitha and Annie were able to feel compassion toward their family members who practiced polygamy, especially as they viewed their Mormon kin apart from their religion and empathized with their pain due to religious persecution. The sincere emotional ties between Mormon and non-Mormon family were strengthened by the power of empathy. Conversely, personal agendas (such as evangelizing from either side), personal trauma, and

popular views of Mormon immorality created grounds inconducive to connection. The relationships between Martha Telle Cannon and her half sisters provide historians with a fascinating case of both persecution against and compassion toward Latter-day Saint women in the nineteenth century. Their lives prove the damaging pervasiveness of cultural stigmas and intergenerational trauma and the connecting power of empathy.

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