

“I Would Rather Take Poison”

A Genealogy Tale, and a Tale of Faith

In the pursuit of my genealogy hobby, I often interact with members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – known more commonly as Mormons. Genealogical research is a religious obligation for Mormons. This is connected to their practice of baptism for the dead. Mormons believe that they can be baptized by proxy for deceased persons who were never baptized as Mormons during their lives on earth. Mormons therefore do genealogical research to identify their ancestors and other relatives of earlier generations. When the names of these forebears are known, living Mormons undergo a proxy baptism in their name and on their behalf, so that the souls of these deceased persons can have an opportunity to advance spiritually in the next world in ways that are possible only for those who are baptized into the Mormon Church.

Because of their interest in genealogy, Mormons often write family histories that recount the life experiences of their ancestors. One such family history was written in 1989 by Wanda Woodard Morzelewski (1918-2005), of Sandy, Utah. In this narrative, Mrs. Morzelewski includes the story of her great-grandparents, John and Elizabeth (Ward) Kirkham. John and Elizabeth were immigrants from England, and converts from Anglicanism to Mormonism.

John Kirkham – the son of Joseph and Sarah (Gardner) Kirkham – was baptized in Long Sutton, Lincolnshire, England, on 25 March 1802. Elizabeth Ward – the daughter William and Ann (Burton) Ward – was born in the nearby town of Spalding, Lincolnshire, on 27 November 1804, and was baptized there on 25 September 1805. John Kirkham and Elizabeth Ward were married in Spalding on 1 January 1828. They had 11 children, born and baptized in Spalding, as follows: *George*, born on 1 March 1829; *Jonathan*, baptized on 6 April 1830; *Ann*, born on 29 May 1832; *Sarah*, born on 11 September 1834, baptized on 17 September; *Elizabeth*, born and baptized on 7 October 1836; *Emma*, born on 24 January 1838, baptized on 31 January; *Mary*, born on 13 April 1839, baptized on 19 April; *Charlotte*, born on 14 May 1841, baptized on 6 June; *John*, born on 20 June 1843, baptized on 18 July; *Reuben*, born on 13 October 1844, baptized on 10 Nov; and *Benjamin*, born on 17 January 1846, baptized on 8 February. The Kirkhams were married in the Church of England, and all their children were baptized in the Church of England. Mrs. Morzelewski’s narrative states that “Three of the children, Emma, Charlotte, and John, died as infants; and a fourth, Elizabeth, lived to be only three years old.”

Mrs. Morzelewski describes the family’s departure from England, and arrival in the United States, in these words:

In the year of 1850, the Kirkham family emigrated to America. They sailed from Liverpool, England, on September 3, 1850, on the “North Atlantic,” with Henry Cook as its Master. Among the passengers listed were: John Kirkham age 48, carpenter; Elizabeth Kirkham age 46; George Kirkham age 20 [*sic*]; Jonathan Kirkham age 21 [*sic*], carpenter; Ann Kirkham age 18; Sarah Kirkham age 16; Mary Kirkham age 11; Reuben Kirkham age 5; Benjamin Kirkham age 4. The ship arrived at New Orleans, Louisiana, November 1, 1850. ... From New Orleans, the Kirkham family traveled up the Mississippi River to St. Louis, Missouri.

The narrative goes on to state that while the Kirkhams were living in Saint Louis, their daughter Ann “met Thomas Briggs,” and that “After some courtship they were married on March 27, 1853.” This was a momentous meeting and marriage, as far as the later history of the Kirkham family is concerned.

Like the Kirkhams, Thomas Briggs was an immigrant from England. But unlike the Kirkhams – at least at this point in their lives – Thomas Briggs was a Mormon. In an autobiographical account that Thomas Briggs himself later penned, he reported that in 1848 his parents had converted to Mormonism while still in England. Mormon missionaries had been working in England since 1837. Many English Mormon converts, after their conversion, immigrated to America, which they had now come to see as the location of the new “Zion.” This is what Thomas Briggs, his parents, and two sisters did in 1851, with the intention of making their way eventually to Utah. They arrived in New Orleans, and then traveled up the Mississippi River to Saint Louis – as the Kirkham family had done the previous year. And it was in Saint Louis that Thomas met and later married Ann Kirkham.

Thomas had already been baptized into the Mormon Church on 29 January 1849 – while still in England. Through his influence, Ann Kirkham converted to Mormonism, and was herself baptized into the Mormon Church on 18 March 1851. Her parents, John and Elizabeth Kirkham, also converted to Mormonism during this time. They, too, were baptized as Mormons in 1851. Regarding his wife and most of her family, Thomas Briggs later recalled: “I thanked the Lord that I was instrumental in bringing them into the church...where they have received their blessings in the Temple of the Lord.”

Mrs. Morzelewski picks up her narrative at this point, and speaks of the removal of the Kirkham and Briggs households from Missouri to Wisconsin:

In October of 1853, the two families left St. Louis, Missouri, to go to Baraboo, Wisconsin. They had been told that there was cattle and land available. They all felt it would be to their advantage to go. George Kirkham was planning to go but said he would take the next boat, which he did, but that was the last they heard from him. The trip to Baraboo proved to be very difficult. When they arrived in Iowa they were unable to get over a set of rapids as the water was so low. It was necessary to unload the freight and put it on flat boats to be hauled up the river to Montrose, Iowa. ... It took three days to get over the rapids. It was bitter cold and no shelter [was] available. They finally reached Galena, Illinois, [which was] the end of the water trip. From there they hired a man with a team of horses and a wagon to take them to Baraboo, Wisconsin. When they arrived at Baraboo they found they had been deceived about the conditions. The land was very sandy and the people were not able to sell what little they had raised. They checked around and found conditions to be much better at Hebron, Wisconsin, a place 100 miles to the south. Thomas and Ann Briggs moved to Hebron and the following spring the Kirkhams followed. They found the conditions much more favorable and to their liking to Hebron.

But Hebron was not to be their final place of residence. The narrative adds that “During the winter of 1861-62 the two families made plans to go to the mountains in the spring.”

For quite a while, it had indeed been the hope of the Kirkham and Briggs family to move someday to the Salt Lake Valley in Utah – described by them as going “to the mountains.” Their Mormon faith inspired this wish. But when this plan began to be finalized in the winter of 1861-1862, one member of the Kirkham household – John and Elizabeth’s 22-year-old daughter Mary – rejected this plan, at least for herself, in a very dramatic way. Mary had never been baptized into Mormonism, and had no intention of converting at any point in the future either. She also had absolutely no desire to move to the heartland of Mormonism in western America. Mrs. Morzelewski’s narrative continues by observing that

It was at this time that Mary Kirkham said she would never go to the mountains. She had been associating with the people of the Catholic faith and they had set her mind against Mormons. She said rather than go, she would take poison. This changed the departure date for the Kirkhams.

Thomas Briggs also described these events in his autobiography:

In the winter of 1861 and 1862, we made all preparations to go to the mountains in the spring. Father Kirkham thought he would not be able to go, as his daughter Mary said that if he went to Salt Lake City she would end her life.

Mary's older sister Sarah Elizabeth, who had married Robert Down Cox in 1857, was likewise never baptized as a Mormon – although Sarah's refusal to embrace her parents' new faith was apparently less dramatic than Mary's. Their older brother Jonathan had not embraced Mormonism at this point in time either, although he did eventually receive a Mormon baptism on 17 October 1872.

Mrs. Morzelewski's narrative continues, and reports that

Thomas and Ann [Briggs], with their children, started for Salt Lake City, Utah, in April of 1862. It is believed that Mary never did go to Utah. Thomas and Ann entered the Salt Lake Valley on September 4, 1864. It is not known for sure when the Kirkhams arrived in the valley, but it was within the next few years. ... The Kirkhams were in Bountiful, Utah, by April 25, 1869, as that is the year Benjamin was baptized.

The Briggses did start out for Utah in April of 1862, but encountered some obstacles and turned back. They then lived for a time in Springfield, Illinois, before starting out again for the Salt Lake Valley the following year. Upon their arrival there, Thomas and Ann Briggs settled in Bountiful, Utah. When Ann's parents joined them in 1868, they also settled in Bountiful. "John Kirkham, wife and son," were among the travelers in Captain Chester Loveland's wagon train to Salt Lake City in the summer of 1868. John and Elizabeth's youngest child Benjamin was baptized into the Mormon Church in Bountiful on 25 April 1869. Their son Reuben (who became a famous painter) had also come to Utah in 1868, and had been baptized into Mormonism in September of that year. Elizabeth (Ward) Kirkham died in Bountiful on 22 April 1872. Her husband John Kirkham died there in July of 1882. They are buried together in the Bountiful Memorial Park (the Bountiful City Cemetery).

Mrs. Morzelewski, writing from the perspective of the Utah Mormon Kirkhams, states in her family history that "It is believed that Mary never did go to Utah." What that majority branch of the family believed was true. This feisty and spunky young woman who had befriended some Roman Catholics in Wisconsin, and who had declared that, "rather than go, she would take poison," did not ever go to the Mormon "Zion," and never did become a Mormon. Although she had been encouraged by Catholic friends in her rejection of the claim that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the "restored" and only saving church, Mary did not herself become a Catholic. Instead, in Wisconsin, she married the son of an Evangelical Protestant minister.

Mary Kirkham's husband was (Timothy) Dwight Taylor, who had been born in Litchfield, Connecticut, on 14 March 1832, the son of the Rev. Vernon Dyke Taylor and his wife Catherine Maria Woodruff. Vernon was a Congregational, and later a Presbyterian, clergyman. During his years of active ministry, he served pastoral or home missionary calls in Elizabethtown, New York; Litchfield, Connecticut; Essex, New York; Amenia, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; Comstock, Michigan; Buffalo, New York; Cleveland, Ohio (again); and Parma / Huntsburgh, Ohio. Vernon was married three times. *The Pioneer Families of Cleveland* tells a part of his story, with a focus on events that transpired while he was serving as the chaplain of the Bethel seamen's mission in Cleveland:

Rev. Vernon Dyke Taylor, a Presbyterian clergyman about 36 years old, came to Cleveland from Connecticut in 1835, and took charge of the Bethel – a chapel for seamen. He was an earnest worker wherever stationed. His previous church had been in a constant revival during the seven years he had been its pastor. He was the son of Amos Taylor, and born

in Hinesburg, Vermont. ... Rev. Mr. Taylor was married in Vermont to Miss Charlotte Hall Curtis, who died in Connecticut in 1830, leaving three children. He married, 2nd, Catherine Maria Woodruff, of a well-known Connecticut family, who accompanied her husband to Cleveland. She died two years after her arrival, aged 27 years, leaving two young children. The family of little ones attended school, and were very much taken with their teacher, a Miss Susan Judd, daughter of William and Sarah Root Judd. ... Her parents [had] removed from Northampton, Mass., to a town south of and near Cleveland. Miss Judd was a graduate of Williston Ladies' Academy of her native city, and with her family passed through Cleveland on their way to their new home. She remained here and taught in a private school. It was before the days of the public school system. The premature death of Mrs. Catherine Woodruff Taylor, leaving a household of children with no relative in the city to assist the father in caring for them, appealed to Miss Judd's tenderest sympathies, and at the urgent solicitation of Mr. Taylor she married him and became a beloved step-mother to the family, one whose memory was revered by them.

Dwight was five years old when his mother Catherine died. His full brother Edward Payson Taylor (who later served as an officer in the Union Army during the Civil War) was two years older. As the foregoing account indicates, in later years they joined their three older half siblings (Cornelius Hector, Ella Eliza, and Mary Louise) in revering the memory of their step-mother Susan – who, it would seem, had lovingly helped to raise all of them in such a way as to make few if any distinctions of affection between these five step-children and the two children (William Henry and Charlotte Elizabeth) whom she herself bore to Pastor Taylor.

In 1860, Dwight was living in Marquette, Michigan. After his marriage to Mary Kirkham, he and Mary lived for a time in Racine County, Wisconsin, and then in Warren, Illinois. They later moved to Oregon, Ogle County, Illinois, where they remained for many years. Their children were: *Catharine Elizabeth* – poignantly named, it would seem, after her two grandmothers – born in Racine County on 16 September 1864; *Nellie E.*, born in Wisconsin about 1867; *Gussie*, born in Illinois about 1869; *Edward P.*, born in Illinois about 1874; *Eli Dwight*, born in Oregon in December of 1875; *Laura Echo*, born in Illinois in January of 1878; and *Frank C.*, born in Oregon on 2 October 1882. (Timothy) Dwight Taylor died in 1900, and Mary (Kirkham) Taylor died on 11 March 1921. They are buried together in the Mount Pleasant Cemetery at Paynes Point in Ogle County.

Catharine Elizabeth Taylor, the daughter of (Timothy) Dwight Taylor and his wife Mary Kirkham, married John Clark Mattison on 20 February 1886. John Mattison had been born in Granville, Washington County, New York, on 9 April 1862, the son of Clark Kendrick Mattison and his wife Sarah Maria Northup. John and Catharine had five children: *Charles Edward*, born on 27 November 1886 (died at the age of three months); *Clark Valentine*, born on 14 February 1888; *Mary Pemelia*, born on 3 June 1890; *John Dwight*, born on 27 February 1893; and *Henry Albert*, born on 31 May 1896. Among the descendants of this family – and therefore also of Mary Kirkham, who would rather have taken poison than become a Mormon – was Mary Pemelia's grandson John Raymond Wilde, who was a Lutheran minister.

John Wilde served churches in Brewster, Massachusetts, and Sebastian, Florida. He married Diane Marie Falckenberg on 13 July 1985. When he died of cancer on 7 June 1990, he was seven days short of his 43rd birthday. His only child was a daughter Ruth Marie, who was two years old at the time of her father's death. Ruth's mother Diane married as her second husband Theodore George Gullixson – also a Lutheran minister – who adopted Ruth in 1994, and raised her as his own.

Ruth Marie Wilde Gullixson married Paul Morgan Edward Webber on 18 June 2010. Only a few months after she gave birth to their only child, John Wilde Webber, Ruth died, at the age of 24. She, too – like her (original) father – succumbed to cancer. After that, and while completing his

own preparations for the pastoral ministry, Paul raised John as a single father, until his marriage to Marta Kathleen Krause. And soon after their marriage, Paul, Marta, and little John went... “to the mountains.”

Paul now serves as the Pastor of Hope Lutheran Church in West Jordan, Utah, in the Salt Lake Valley. He is not there because he is a Mormon, seeking out a new “Zion”; but because he is a Christian minister – called to preach the gospel of Christ crucified for sinners to any who will listen. Some of his listeners might be Mormons. Some might even end up being descendants of John and Elizabeth Kirkham, who today do live throughout that region.

I think Mary Kirkham would be pleased. I doubt that she actually would have taken poison to avoid moving “to the mountains.” But she really did not want to go! And she never did. Mary would, however, likely not object to her direct descendant John Webber, his father Paul Webber, and Paul’s wife Marta – who is in many ways reprising the role of the beloved step-mother of Mary’s husband Dwight – having now gone “to the mountains” under these circumstances.

Later generations of the Kirkham family in Utah apparently did not know what ever happened to Mary. Many years after her death, one of her Mormon relatives either underwent a proxy baptism on her behalf, or arranged for it to be done. This ritual occurred on 9 June 1969. But Mary – together with her Christian descendants – certainly would not have believed in the validity of this Mormon baptism, just as she did not accept the legitimacy of the Mormon baptisms that her parents and siblings underwent during her lifetime.

Mary Kirkham had refused to become a Mormon in life, and she is not one in death. She was and is, rather, a true child of God through faith in Jesus, her divine Lord and Savior. As a confessor of Christ, she lived and died in the grace and forgiveness of her Redeemer. She received the only baptism she ever needed – in the name of the Triune God – at the Anglican parish church in Spalding, Lincolnshire, England, on 19 April 1839.

Mary’s Christian convictions were more important to her than the unity of her earthly family. God has, however, given her a family of descendants who remember her today, who honor her today, and who with her confess the faith of her one baptism into Christ.

Jesus is the loving Bridegroom of his church – the mystical body of all true believers. He has always remained faithful to his bride. And he has always worked, through the power of his Word, to preserve, renew, reform, strengthen, and extend his church – from the first Christian Pentecost until now. As the divine Head of his one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, Jesus will continue to do this work until he comes again in glory. We pray that he will work for the building up of his true and eternal church also through the ministry of Mary’s great-great-grandson-in-law, Pastor Paul Webber. In Utah. At “the mountains.”

– David Jay Webber
(father of Paul; grandfather of John)
29 January 2014 (slightly revised on 25 May 2016 and again on 21 July 2019)

“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3, ESV).