

Polygamy

I. Definitions

Polygamy (literally “many marriages”) means one is married to more than one person at a time. In common use *polygamy* almost always refers to a man with more than one wife. However, the term technically can refer to either a man with more than one wife *or* a woman with more than one husband. Polygyny refers to a man married to two or more women. Polyandry refers to a woman married to two or more men. Bigamy is the criminal offense of marrying one person while still legally married to another. Bigamy differs from polygamy in the sense that bigamy usually implies deception about one’s marital status when marrying another person. Some have suggested that the practice of serial cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage in the United States is a form of polygamy, but I believe calling this practice polygamy blurs helpful distinctions between the categories of general sexual immorality and polygamy.

II. Biblical Passages Utilized by Advocates of Polygamy

Some people in church history have suggested there is direct or implied permission for polygamy in the Old Testament.

A. Old Testament Patriarchs and Kings

A common argument in favor of polygamy is based on the simple fact that many men in the Old Testament were polygamists.

1. Lamech, the first recorded incident of polygamy. (Genesis 4:19-24)
2. Jacob (Genesis 29)

Jacob was tricked into having two wives.

3. David (2 Samuel 5:13-16)
4. Solomon (1 Kings 11)
5. Rehoboam (2 Chronicles 11:21)

B. Exodus 21:7-11

When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she is not to leave as the male slaves do. If she is displeasing to her master, who chose her for himself, then he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners because he has acted treacherously toward her. Or if he chooses her for his son, he must deal with her according to the customary treatment of daughters. If he takes an additional wife, he must not reduce the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife. And if he

does not do these three things for her, she may leave free of charge, without any exchange of money. Exodus 21:7-11 (HCS)

Walter Kaiser argues forcefully that Exodus 21:7-11 is not a tacit approval of polygamy. At issue in the text is law that pertains to a girl who is sold by her father, not for slavery, but for marriage. Kaiser says, "Should the terms of marriage not be fulfilled, it is to be considered a breach of contract, and the purchaser must allow the girl to be redeemed; she must not be sold outside the family (vs. 8)."¹ He begins by arguing that verse 8 should not be translated "If she is displeasing to her master, who chose her for himself." Instead, Kaiser says the more accurate translation is, "If she displease her master, so that he does not betroth her to himself, he shall not allow her to be redeemed." In this case, the girl is being rejected for marriage. This influences Kaiser's next point relating to first 10 which the HCS translates as "he takes an additional wife." As Kaiser says, "[Such translations] imply that he therefore has two wives at the same time; but verse 8 had already noted that the "other woman" had been rejected for marriage. The true meaning is: "If he marry another woman instead of her."² Finally, Kaiser suggests that the term translated "marital rights" in verse 10 actually is a reference to "oil" or "ointments." If Kaiser is correct, verse 10 simply emphasizes the need to provide the basic sustenance of life to the first girl.

C. 2 Samuel 12:7-8

Nathan replied to David, "You are the man! This is what the LORD God of Israel says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you and your master's wives into your arms, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah, and if that was not enough, I would have given you more.'" 2 Samuel 12:7-8 (HCS)

Some have taken this passage to mean that God gave Saul's wives to David and, thus, God is approving of polygamy. However, a closer reading of Scripture indicates something other than conjugal relations with Saul's wives is intended by the text. Saul is only recorded as having two wives: Ahinoam, the mother of David's wife Michal (1 Sam. 14:50) and Rizpah, Saul's concubine (2 Samuel 3:7). Thus, if David had indeed taken Michal as his wife, then he would have been committing a form of incest condemned in Leviticus 18:17. This strongly mitigates against reading 2 Samuel 12:7-8 as a divine endorsement of polygamy. Kaiser also notes that even though David's wives are enumerated frequently after Saul's death, Saul's two wives are never included in the lists.³

Further confusion is added by the unfortunate translation of verse 8 which says Saul's wives were given "into [David's] arms." Such a translation leads to a sexual understanding of the relationship with Saul's wives. The New American Standard comes

¹ Walter Kaiser, *Exodus*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 430.

² Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 184.

³ *Ibid.*, 188.

closer to the intended meaning of the passage and translates verse 8, “I also gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your **care.**” Kaiser concurs that this is a more accurate translation and comments, “We conclude that the expression of the divine donation of all that was Saul’s means nothing more than the fact that everything was placed under the control of David much as a conquering king exhibited his full victory over a subjugated nation by taking control of the defeated king’s household.”⁴

III. Polygamy and World Religions

A. Islam

Muhammad had many wives and concubines, though the exact number is debated. It is certain that his marriage to his first wife, a wealthy older woman named Khadija, was a happy union, and all evidence indicates Muhammad was in fact a faithful husband during their twenty-five year marriage. However, after Khadija died, Muhammad took many wives for himself and was an avowed polygamist. Apparently, Surah 33:28 is a special dispensation for Muhammad to take a harem: “O Prophet! Say unto thy wives: If ye desire the world’s life and adornment, come! I will content you and will release you with a fair release.” Allah was also concerned about the conduct of Muhammad’s wives: “O ye wives of the Prophet! Whosoever of you commiteth manifest lewdness, the punishment for her will be doubled, and that is easy for Allah. And whosoever of you is submissive unto Allah and His messenger and doeth right, We shall give her her reward twice over, and We have prepared for her a rich provision” (Surah 33:30-31). While there is no agreement, authors suggest between nine and eighteen women were in Muhammad’s harem.

While Muhammad had a large harem, all other Muslim men may “only” have up to four wives. Surah 4:2-3 clearly says:

Give unto orphans their wealth. Exchange not the good for the bad (in your management thereof) nor absorb their wealth into your own wealth. Lo! That would be a great sin. (3) And if ye fear that ye will not deal fairly by the orphans, marry of the women, who seem good to you, two or three or four; and if ye fear that ye cannot do justice (to so many) then one (only) or (the captives) that your right hands possess. Thus it is more likely that you will not do injustice.

Muslim author Shaukat Omari comments on this passage and says, “From the above, we see that a Muslim man is allowed to marry up to four wives at any time. He is, however, required to maintain a high standard of equality and treatment of his wives.”⁵ Omari goes on to say that Muslim men do not have to get the permission of their first wife before marrying other women because, “Very few women would voluntarily consent to share their husbands with other wives.”⁶ Polygamy is legal in most Muslim countries.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Shaukat Omari, *Islam in Light of the Final Testament and Traditions* (Karachi, Pakistan: Taurus Publications, 1992), 129.

⁶ Ibid., 132.

B. Latter Day Saints: Soteriological Polygamy

Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, practiced polygamy and taught that the practice of polygamy was an essential aspect of salvation. Thus, I describe Mormon polygamy as “soteriological.” I will provide a brief summary of some key aspects of polygamy in LDS history and theology.

The Book of Mormon, the earliest work attributable to Joseph Smith, actually contains an injunction against polygamy. Jacob 2:23-24 says:

But the word of God burdens me because of your grosser crimes. For behold, thus saith the Lord: This people begin to wax in iniquity; they understand not the scriptures, for they seek to excuse themselves in committing whoredoms, because of the things which were written concerning David and Solomon his son. Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord.

If one assumes, as I do, that the Book of Mormon is a work directly attributable to Joseph Smith and not an ancient revelation from God, then this passage is evidence that Smith was wrestling with the idea of polygamy early in his own theological development.

The first edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, printed in 1835, also includes a strong denunciation of the practice of polygamy: “Inasmuch as this church of Christ [LDS] has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy: we declare that we believe, that one man should have one wife, and one woman, but one husband, except in the case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again (101:4).” According to Gerald and Sandra Tanner, this denunciation of polygamy was included in every edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants* until 1876, when it was removed by the Utah-based LDS church. At that time, Mormon leaders inserted section 132 to the *Doctrine and Covenants*. This latter insertion affirms the plurality of wives and polygamy.

Section 132 of the *Doctrine and Covenants* is dated as a revelation given to Joseph Smith at Nauvoo, Illinois on July 12, 1843. I will quote Smith at length:

Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Joseph [Joseph Smith], that inasmuch as you have inquired of my hand to know and understand wherein I, the Lord, justified my servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as also Moses, David and Solomon, my servants, as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines—Behold, and lo, I am the Lord thy God, and will answer thee as touching this matter. (1-2)

God commanded Abraham, and Sara gave Hagar to Abraham to wife. And why did she do it? Because this was the law; and from Hagar sprang many people. This, therefore, was fulfilling, among other things, the promises. Was Abraham, therefore, under condemnation? Verily I say unto you, Nay; for I, the Lord, commanded it. (34-35).

And again, as pertaining to the law of the priesthood—if any man espouse a virgin, and desire to espouse another, and the first give her consent, and if he espouse the second, and they are virgins, and have vowed to no other man, then is he justified; he cannot commit adultery for they are given unto him; for he cannot commit adultery with that that belongeth unto him and to no one else. And if he have ten virgins given unto him by this law, he cannot commit adultery, for they belong to him, and they are given unto him; therefore is he justified. (61-62)

For LDS theology, the doctrine of polygamy is/was closely tied to the “Law of Eternal Progression.” At its heart, LDS theology teaches that faithful Mormons may become gods with their own planets. Ron Rhodes nicely summarizes Mormon theology when he says, “Mormon prophets and apostles teach that God the Father was once a mortal man who continually progressed to become a God (an *exalted* man)—and the rest of mankind can become gods like him by adopting and faithfully adhering to Mormonism.”⁷ The goal is for a Mormon man to have millions of “spirit children” with his goddess wife or wives in order to populate their own realm. One should note carefully that the Law of Eternal Progression as described here is taught by the largest Mormon body, the LDS church. Various Mormon splinter groups reject or affirm these ideas based on the level of authority they place on revelations given later in the life of Joseph Smith.

Apparently, Joseph Smith’s practice of polygamy caused great marital stress between himself and his first wife, Emma Smith. I say this because Section 132 of the *Doctrine and Covenants* includes a special message from God to Emma Smith:

And let mine handmaid, Emma Smith, receive all those that have been given unto my servant Joseph, and who are virtuous and pure before me; and those who are not pure, and have said they were pure, shall be destroyed, saith the Lord. . . . And I command mine handmaid, Emma Smith, to abide and cleave unto my servant Joseph, and to none else. But if she will not abide this commandment she shall be destroyed, saith the Lord; for I am the Lord thy God, and will destroy her if she abide not in my law. (52, 54)

Essentially, “God”—speaking through Joseph Smith—tells Emma to accept Joseph’s practice of polygamy. If she doesn’t, she will be destroyed. To the average rational person, this text reads like a case of spiritual abuse: A philandering husband appeals to “God” in order to justify adultery.

Second generation Mormon leaders followed Smith’s example and the practice of polygamy was very common in Utah. Notably, Brigham Young had many wives and on one occasion said, “The only men who become Gods, even the Sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy.” (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 11, p. 269) As Utah’s population increased, the acceptance of polygamy became a roadblock to admission into the Union. Therefore, on October 6, 1890 LDS president Wilford Woodruff declared an end to official endorsement of polygamy. Various Mormon splinter groups still practice

⁷ Ron Rhodes, *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 61.

polygamy, most famously the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints centered near both Colorado City, AZ and El Dorado, TX.

IV. Biblical and Theological Response

Writing in *The Encyclopedia of Biblical and Christian Ethics*, Toon reflects a common understanding of the OT and polygamy when he says, “Like divorce, polygamy was allowed by God as the second best choice. Laws were provided to control its practice and to protect the women involved.”⁸ It is not uncommon for people to claim the Bible is not as explicit on the subject of polygamy as one would hope. C. D. McConnell says that the range of theological views concerning polygamy is as follows:

1. Polygamy is a legitimate form of marriage.
2. Polygamy is a lesser form of marriage than the Christian ideal.
3. Polygamy is an unacceptable form of marriage for Christians.
4. Polygamy is a sin which is a type of adultery.⁹

In contrast to opinions which assert the Bible is somewhat ambiguous about polygamy, I believe a rigorous analysis of the topic reveals that God’s standard is heterosexual, monogamous marriage. Any deviation from this is sin and less than His will.

A. The Creation account establishes monogamy as God’s standard.

The Creation account of Genesis 2 clearly sanctions marriage as the union of one man with one woman. Notice that in Genesis 2:24, a man leaves his father and mother to cleave to his “wife,” not his “wives.” The idea of becoming one flesh implies a special bonding between two people in the conjugal union. Polygamy is a serious violation of this principle because a man tries to bond with many women in a way God only intended for monogamous marriage.

B. The Teaching of Jesus opposes polygamy.

Jesus Christ reiterated that monogamy is God’s standard in Matthew 19:4-6.

C. The Teaching of Paul opposes polygamy.

Paul emphasized that each woman was to have her own husband, *not husbands*, and each husband was to have his own wife, *not wives*. (1 Corinthians 7:2)

⁸ P. Toon, “Polygamy,” in *The Encyclopedia of Biblical and Christian Ethics*, R.K. Harrison, ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 314.

⁹ C. D. McConnell, “Polygamy,” in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 931.

D. The Bible documents the destructive nature of polygamy.

Though the Bible does not sanction polygamy, the practice is described in numerous places. Bill T. Arnold says, “Yet the Bible nowhere specifically condemns polygamy. Rather, it often narrates the unfortunate effects of the practice.”¹⁰ These destructive results or patterns include:

Lamech: Lamech was the first recorded incidence of polygamy in Genesis 4:19-24. He was a man noted for his ruthless behavior. Kenneth Matthews emphasizes the manner in which Genesis presents Lamech as a man of low character: “The first alarming evidence of Lamech’s moral decline is his inauguration of polygamy, a dismal departure from the divine norm (Genesis 2:23-24). Although Genesis does not condemn the patriarchs for their practice of polygamy, it is transparent from Genesis itself that such practices resulted in painful consequences.”¹¹

Abraham: Sarah encouraged Abraham to sleep with Hagar in order to produce a child. In this case, Hagar is more like a concubine than a second wife, still a violation of the one-flesh principle in marriage. The result was jealousy and infighting between Sarah and Hagar.

Jacob: Jacob had two wives and two concubines, though his initial entrance into polygamy was deceitfully “arranged” by Laban. While it is true that this polygamous marriage resulted in the twelve tribes of Israel, the family was also rife with favoritism, deception, jealousy and betrayal.

David: David’s polygamous marriages resulted in incest and civil war.

Solomon: Solomon’s polygamous marriages resulted in religious apostasy.

Bill Arnold summarizes the practice of polygamy in the OT and says, “It was not widespread among the ancient Israelites, where it was the exception rather than the rule. Wherever it was practiced among the Israelites, it may be seen as an accommodation to the surrounding cultures.”¹²

Someone may possibly argue along these lines: “Yes, those polygamous marriages had lots of problems, but I’ve known plenty of monogamous marriages with problems as well!” The difference is that from a Biblical perspective monogamy is presented as a sacred ideal and the blessings of faithfulness in marriage are emphasized in multiple places. While the Bible never glosses over the difficulties that may exist even in a very good marriage, the assumption is that monogamy is the only arena in which these problems can reach an effective solution. Monogamous relationships, like Ruth and

¹⁰ Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 95.

¹¹ Kenneth Matthews, *New American Commentary: Genesis 1 – 11* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 285.

¹² Arnold, *Encountering Genesis*, 95.

Boaz, are celebrated for strength and faithfulness. In contrast, polygamy is a flawed model which will never be able to produce the sort of healthy conflict resolution possible in monogamous marriage. Polygamous relationships never receive the same praise as monogamous marriage and are never celebrated as a model to be emulated.

E. Leviticus 18:18

You are not to marry a woman as a rival to her sister and have sexual intercourse with her during her [sister's] lifetime. Leviticus 18:18 (HCS)

Leviticus 18 gives a litany of sexual practices which are unacceptable for God's people. Most notably, incest receives strong moral disapproval. In this context, Leviticus 18:18 strongly condemns a man who takes two sisters as his wives. Furthermore, John Murray argues that the text should simply be translated not as taking "a wife to her sister" but rather "one wife to another." This interpretation understands Leviticus 18:18 to be a prohibition of all polygamy.¹³ Students should note that Gordon Wenham says that while the Hebrew text could be translated in the manner Murray advocates, the context, which is an extended discussion of incest, favors the translation of "sister."¹⁴

F. The Inheritance Law Assumes Polygamy is Problematic

The inheritance law recognizes that the primary moral criticism of bigamy is that one man cannot love two women equally. Kenneth Matthews comments on this passage and says, "In Mosaic legislation it was assumed that polygamy produced troubling home life" (Deuteronomy 21:15-17).¹⁵

G. The Primary Hermeneutical Mistake of Polygamists

The primary hermeneutical mistake of polygamists is to confuse the description of a practice in Scripture with Divine approval of the practice in question. One must take great care when making doctrinal or ethical conclusions based on historical narratives in the Scripture. Doctrinal or ethical conclusions based on the historical narratives must be guided by the norms found in the didactic passages of Scripture. Every didactic passage of Scripture which addresses marriage assumes heterosexual and monogamous marriage as God's standard. For example, the numerous warnings about adultery in Proverbs only make sense from the standpoint of monogamy, not polygamy. Furthermore, Paul's teaching about marriage in Ephesians 5 only makes sense when understood from the perspective of monogamy.

¹³ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 252-253.

¹⁴ Gordon Wenham, *Leviticus*, in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 258, n. 27.

¹⁵ Kenneth Matthews, *Genesis 1 – 11*, 285.

H. What Should We Do If a Polygamist Comes To Faith in Christ?

Many missionaries have been faced with the dilemma of converts who were already polygamists before becoming Christians. What counsel should we give in these circumstances? The issue of polygamy is one part of the larger question, “How do missionaries interact with a culture? How do we know which aspects of the culture to affirm and which aspects to reject?” The Lausanne Covenant offers a good summary of how to approach this dilemma and says, “Culture must always be tested and judged by Scripture (Mark 7:8, 9, 13). . . . The gospel does not presuppose the superiority of any culture to another, but evaluates all cultures according to [the Gospel’s] own criteria of truth and righteousness, and insists on moral absolutes in every culture.”

Donald McGavran suggests that since there is no Biblical proscription against baptizing polygamists, those who have taken plural wives *before conversion* could be baptized. But the church should disallow polygamy among Christians.¹⁶ Toon reflects a similar position when he says, “While a Christian ought not to become a polygamist, a person converted while a polygamist may commit the lesser evil by maintaining rather than dismissing his extra wives and their children.”¹⁷

I suggest that one may approach a polygamist convert in a more direct manner. Since polygamy is clearly inconsistent with God’s plan, a better approach may be to encourage conjugal faithfulness to the first wife while maintaining the financial needs of other women. Should the opportunity present itself, the other wives may be allowed to enter into monogamous marriages of their own. Future generations of converts would then be held to an even higher level of accountability.

I. Dr. Branch’s Concluding Thoughts

Polygamy is inconsistent with God’s standard for marriage, leads to the exploitation of women, in some cases at least is an attempt to sanction adultery, contradicts every didactic passage of Scripture concerning how to have a successful marriage, and is simply sin. Historically, advocates of polygamy have been associated with world religions or sects which reject orthodoxy and elevate subjective revelation above the objective truth of the Bible. If someone claims to be a Christian and willfully enters a polygamous relationship, they should be disciplined by a local church. The Supreme Court’s expansive view of sexual liberty in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) virtually assures us that laws prohibiting polygamy will be challenged in the next few decades.

¹⁶ Donald McGavran, *The Clash Between Christianity and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Canon, 1974), 79-80; cited in David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 121-122, n. 9.

¹⁷ Toon, “Polygamy,” 314.