

# **“What IS The Teaching Of The Bible On Polygamy?”**

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## **Monogamy or Polygamy**

God instituted matrimony when in the garden of Eden He made a wife for man, brought her to him, and blessed their union to be one flesh. Monogamy is implicit in the Bible account of bringing Adam and Eve together, since God created only one wife for Adam. Adam, whose mind was perfectly tuned to the mind of the Creator before sin entered in, understood that monogamy was God’s will for marriage too.

“And Adam said, this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” – Genesis 2:23-24

Yet polygamy was adopted by sinful man quite early after the Fall of man into sin. Lamech, of the generations of Cain, i.e. the children of darkness, took to himself Adah and Zilah (Gen. 4:19-24) and his sinful ways are openly boasted of in the Song of Lamech. Polygamy is plainly contrary to the institution of marriage as God intended it, but this did not stop the practice of it in the world after the Fall. Polygamy became a sin of weakness, also, among some of the people of God in the Old Testament until the days of the Captivity, a sin which the Lord, as it were, tolerated, just as He endures with much long-suffering the many shortcomings, faults, and failings of His children of the New Covenant.

## **Marriage – A Social Development?**

One modern commentator states: “Polygamy was practiced from the time of Lamech... It would seem that God left it to man to discover by experience that His original institution of monogamy was the proper relationship.”<sup>1</sup> This writer infers that early man had little knowledge of God’s intention concerning monogamous marriage and that society decided on monogamy after much trial and error. But the truth is that man knew God’s will concerning monogamous marriage from the beginning. (Natural Law) However, man’s conscience in this matter became clouded and dulled because of sin. The development of society corrupted the divine institution of marriage, rather than finding its way to it. The children of the world practiced polygamy out of a nature rebellious to the ordinances of God. Polygamy became a status symbol of power, wealth, virility, and kingship. (Instead of having three sports cars in the garage, early man would have three wives in the harem.) And we can say that polygamy degraded the dignity of womanhood, profaned God’s ordinances, and brought new complications of sin upon the human race.

## **Christian Doctrine Stands Against Polygamy**

Polygamy is prohibited by Scripture and all Christian churches. Monogamous and lifelong marriage is the only form of marriage recognized by Jesus as instituted by God for all times. Our Lord Jesus gives us the complete Word on this subject Himself

“The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto Him, Why did Moses command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Bible Dictionary*, Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1962, Article on Marriage, Page 787

them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.” – Matthew 19:3-8

Although the Bible records many instances of polygamous marriage in the Old Testament, it does not thereby sanction polygamy as being an acceptable practice for that time. As we shall see, it is always shown in a bad light. And it was expressly forbidden in the Levitical Law that was given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai.

“Neither shalt thou take a fellow wife to be a rival to her, to uncover her nakedness (have sexual relations).” Leviticus 18:18

The Civil Law of Moses did indeed set up regulations for polygamous marriages. This is in no way a sanction for them, but a regulation of them so that law and order be maintained. Through this law the sinful ways of mankind were controlled and kept in check to some extent. That is the purpose of civil law – to keep abuses in check.

“If a man have two wives, one beloved, and another hated, and they have born him children, both the beloved and the hated; and if the firstborn son be hers that was hated: Then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath, that he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, which is indeed the firstborn: But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his.” – Deuteronomy 21:15-17

The Civil Law of Moses regulated polygamous marriages as it permitted also divorces not sanctioned by the Moral Law, and for the same reason, “because of the hardness of your hearts” (Matt. 19:8). The recognition and regulation of polygamy and of divorce does not carry with it the sanction of the Moral Law. “A thing may be legally right, but not morally.”<sup>2</sup> We are ever to remember that it is God who instituted marriage, not society or man. Marriage is not an institution that can be changed or altered as society changes. It is God who establishes the marriage bond between man and woman, and He alone has the right to regulate this bond. This is emphasized because a change in the definition of marriage and who regulates it can make it sound as if polygamy is acceptable. Even modern Christian dogmaticians attempt this:

“Marriage is the state in which men and women can live together in sexual relationship *with the approval of their social group*. Adultery and fornication are sexual relations that society does not recognize as constituting marriage. This definition is necessary to show that in the Old Testament polygamy is not sexually immoral, since it constitutes a recognized married state.”<sup>3</sup>

No matter how much one may try to discountenance polygamy in the Old Testament by pointing to the different customs of that age, the fact remains that the customs of an epoch can never nullify the holy immutable Will of God, and all customs of the kind in question violate God’s ordinances. Finally, Moses had expressly stated that socially-accepted, worldly customs concerning polygamy not be followed when Israel would possess the Promised Land. Proclaiming the Will of God, Moses stated that if Israel would choose a king, he should not “multiply wives to himself.”

“When thou art come unto the land which the Lord Thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me... Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away; neither greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.” – Deuteronomy 17:14,17

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<sup>2</sup> *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, E.W.A. Koehler, 1952, Page 286

<sup>3</sup> *The New Bible Dictionary*, Eerdmans’ Pub. Co., 1962, Article on Marriage, Page 786

## Examples of Polygamy in the Old Testament

The Old Testament clearly shows that polygamy brings trouble into the home as a result of this particular sin. The first recorded polygamous marriage in Scripture sets the tone, showing that this arrangement is the product of the world and the flesh. Ada and Zillah had agreed to be together the wife of one and the same man, Lamech. Those who might have had Prof. Gerhke perhaps remember “The Gorgeous One” and “The Tinkling One.” Actually Ada means “a gorgeously adorned woman” and Zillah “one whose approach can be recognized at a distance by a jingling of her jewelry.” Supposedly, these are two emancipated woman who are involved in a new way of living together. Do they have more freedom? No! Since there are two wives for one man, that man plays off the one against the other. Lamech does not subject himself to them, but instead thunders a rampant song of murder into their ears. That polygamy is a social innovation of the world is further seen in Judith and Bashemath, the Hittite wives of Esau. Esau’s parents were heavy of heart over this polygamy, “which was a grief of mind unto Isaac and Rebekah.” – Gen. 26:35. Esau’s multiple marriage therefore represents a breach of faith. He knew very well that such marriages ran counter to the holy calling with which his people had been sent from the Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan. Yes, polygamy is an arrangement of the world and the flesh. We see this also in the concubinage of Hagar with Abraham. Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar, is called “he that is born after the flesh” by St. Paul in Galatians 4:29. Sarah, herself, gave Hagar to Abraham because she was childless. The desire to have an heir caused this patriarchal couple to take matters in their own hands. And yet this whole affair constituted a sin before God. Therefore it is not surprising to note that trouble accompanied this human arrangement. Hagar hardly becomes a mother before she is found chiding Sarah. Later, when Sarah has also become a mother, jealousy arises between these two women. Discord penetrates down to their children for Ishmael teases Isaac. Argumentation begins between Abraham and Sarah. All this happened because they followed the socially acceptable multiple marriage custom of that day. Historical records tell us that since children were important to carry on the family name, a matter that was even more pressing to Abraham and Sarah because of God’s promise, a childless wife might allow her husband to have children by her slave. This was legal, we are told, in Mesopotamia according to the Code of Hammurabi. This socially acceptable practice is the basis for the actions in this regard by Abraham and Sarah. Later Rachel and Jacob would do the same thing (Gen. 30:1-8), though Jacob went further and accepted Leah’s maid also, even though Leah had already born him children (Gen. 30:9). Polygamy, then, was the root cause for much of the trouble that we read about in the patriarchal families.

The Bible does not gloss over the family problems that came about because of polygamous marriages. It was natural that the husband would be drawn to one of his wives more than the other (or others). Abraham loved Sarah – he did not have the same feeling for Hagar. Thus also Jacob, who was tricked into polygamy by Uncle Laban, loved Rachel more than Leah. The family strife in the house of Israel, centering first in the hatred and envy of Joseph and later in the tribal revelries, begins with Jacob’s polygamous relationship. Family strife and a “baby war” ensues because Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. The twelve sons of Israel have four different mothers. Leah was the mother of Rueben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulon, and Dinah. Rachel’s maid Bilah was the mother of Dan and Naphtali. Leah’s maid Zilpah was the mother of Gad and Asher. Rachel was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. This business of a husband showing more affection for one of his wives over the other (or others) is repeated in the marriage of Elkanah. Elkanah loved Hannah more than Peninnah, and at public festivities he accorded the higher honors to his dearer wife. Elkanah preferred Hannah in spite of her childlessness. (I Samuel 1:1-8) Family jealousies between the wives understandably arise because of polygamy, as with Elkanah’s two wives, one of whom is adversary to the other.

Family jealousies also extend to the children as we have already seen in regard to Esau and Ishmael, Joseph and his brothers. Ishmael teased and taunted little Esau. Joseph’s brothers plotted Joseph’s death but changed their mind and sold him to Ishmaelite traders on their way to Egypt. Let us look at some examples of brothers of polygamous marriages actually carrying out the murder of their brothers. Consider the after-effects of Gideon’s polygamous marriage. With the defeat of Midian and peace throughout the remainder of Gideon’s life, the final picture of Gideon is of a peaceful old age, with many wives and sons, among them being the

notorious Abimelech. Abimelech was born to Gideon by a Shechemite concubine. He secured the aid of his mother's family in murdering all of his seventy brothers, except Jotham, the youngest who escaped. Abimelech assumed the title of king, but is mortally wounded by a millstone thrown by a woman, and to save his honor he commanded his armourbearer to end his life. (Judges 8:29-9:57) Then there is the struggle for the throne after King David's death. After Solomon, the son of Bathsheba, was crowned king, Adonijah, David's eldest living son by Haggith, sought Abishag, a beautiful young Shunammite concubine of King David's old age, to be his wife. Solomon interpreted this as an attempt on the throne, and had him executed. (I Kings 2:12-24) Solomon interpreted Adonijah's request for Abishag as a threat to the throne for by social custom a man's concubines became the inheritance of the heir. Here we run up against this idea that polygamy was a status symbol of power, wealth, virility, and kingship. If Adonijah had married Abishag, this might have given him some political clout. Remember that Absalom, Adonijah's full brother, took the concubines of his father David, after David had retreated from Jerusalem. Oh, what sins are committed when there is a struggle for power and wealth!

David and Solomon copied Oriental monarchs in taking many wives and concubines. And in this something else was added to polygamy. Among these wives were "many strange women." This is especially true of Solomon. Not only did Solomon have many wives, but, what was worse, "many strange women," heathen women. These women brought along their own false gods and built worship sites for them. High places to Chemosh and Moloch were erected on the Mount of Olives, causing one of the summits to be dubbed the Mount of Offence even to the time of Jesus. Thus the people of Israel were enticed to worship other gods. For that very reason the Lord had warned against uniting in marriage with those who did not worship the true God. (Ex. 34:16; Deut. 7:3-4) Because of polygamy and other vanities, the united kingdom of Israel would be torn into pieces and Solomon's successors would keep only a small portion of his kingdom. The point had been made that if Israel would choose a king he should not, "multiply wives unto himself." (Deut. 17:17) God's holy immutable Will is that only one man and one woman live together in holy matrimony. "They twain (two) shall be one flesh." (Gen. 2:24; Matte 19:4-6)

### **Can an Old Testament Polygamist Be Saved?**

We come now, as we always should, to the matter of sin and God's grace in Christ. Is it possible that some of these Old Testament polygamists mentioned above are saved? Are their souls with God, assembled around the throne of grace in glory? The answer is "Yes." Hebrews Chapter 11 numbers Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, and David among the heroes of faith. ("By faith Abraham..." v.17, "By faith Jacob..." v.21, "By faith Gideon and David..." v.32) Hear what the inspired writer says about them and others:

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth... Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises..." Hebrews 11:13,33

Yes, these heroes of God had faith! The children of God in the Old Testament had no other faith and were taught no other way of salvation than we Christians in the New Testament. (1) They knew that they were sinners in the sight of God, transgressors of His commandments; the sin offerings were mute confessions of the people's sins. They, as we, knew that they had committed sins of omission, sins of commission, sins of weakness and sins of ignorance. (2) Every Israelite also knew that he could not expiate his sins and merit God's favor, but that, if he was to be acceptable with God, his sins must be forgiven for the sake of Him who would become a Sacrifice for them. God cancels sins, blots them out, and remembers them no more. For this reason the prophet Ahijah can declare this analysis by God, Himself, on David's life:

"And yet thou hast not been as my servant David, who kept my commandments, and who followed me with all his heart, to do that only which was right in mine eyes." – I Kings 14:8

The Old Testament believers were saved by the righteousness of Christ. When the pure and white garment of Christ's righteousness is appropriated through faith worked by the Holy Spirit, God looks at the believer through the work of Christ. Thus God sees David as one who kept His commandments, although we read about David's polygamy, adultery and murder. We know of David's worldly desires and ways, but by the righteousness of Christ David is judged as one who followed God with a pure heart, doing what was right in God's eyes. Yes, the repentant sinner is truly blessed! As they and we confess our sins of omission, sins of commission, sins of weakness and sins done out of ignorance, God is faithful to His promise of forgiveness and "the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." (I John 1:7) Abraham, David, and other saints, who fell into the sin of polygamy, have their transgressions forgiven and sins covered, for as Isaiah writes: "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson they shall be as wool." (Isaiah 1:18) Since God for Christ's sake cancels our sins, blots them out, and remembers them no more, we can understand why the apostle Paul writes what he does about Abraham and David in his letter to the Romans, Chapter four:

"For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin." – Romans 4:3-8.

We end this paper that deals with the question: "What is the teaching of the Bible on polygamy?" by hearing from a polygamist about what the Bible says about repentance and forgiveness. We close with the inspired words of the great ancestor of our Lord, a saint in light, King David. And may his words find a prominent place in our hearts!

"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile. When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin." – Psalm 32:1-5.