

OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING ON POLYGAMY

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INTRODUCTION

Polygamy has been an issue with which Christians have struggled since the first century.¹ However, a consensus was reached on the issue after several centuries:

Orthodoxy in Western Europe, or for that matter in the Christian world as a whole, has been fiercely opposed to polygamy in any shape or form since at least A.D. 600, and has shown itself particularly ruthless in suppressing the hated monster whenever it raised its head in their own ranks.²

Throughout the Middle Ages and Reformation periods, the issue was not of major importance, since European society was largely monogamous, at least in theory. However, with the dawning of the great age of foreign missions, the issue has come to prominence again. This is demonstrated by the number of articles in the bibliography of this paper which come out of an African context. While Europeans and North Americans do not face this issue much, it is an issue faced regularly in missions contexts, particularly in underdeveloped areas, “Among the subjects that need careful evangelical theological attention for guidance of Christ’s church in Africa, polygamy stands high.”³

Polygamy takes various forms.⁴ One form is polygyny, in which a man has more than one wife at the same time. It is also called “simultaneous polygyny.” This is the definition usually meant when the term “polygamy” is used. It is the type usually practiced in Africa. A second form is consecutive polygamy or serial monogamy, in which “one spouse after [is taken] in a sequence involving divorce and remarriage.” The third form, polyandry, is rare, and involves a woman marrying more than one husband at the same time. For the purposes of

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¹Leopold A. Foullah, “A Socio-Theological Evaluation of Polygamy,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 19 (January 1995): 74.

²John Cairncross, *After Polygamy Was Made a Sin: The Social History of Christian Polygamy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), xiii.

³Foullah, 74.

⁴The following discussion is adapted from Foullah, 75.

this paper, only the first form, simultaneous polygyny, is in view for the term “polygamy.”

This paper will examine the issue from an Old Testament perspective. The explicit teaching, that which is given in the form of commands and law, will be exegeted in detail. The implicit teaching will also be consulted. That is, the examples of polygamy will be analyzed in order to draw certain conclusions about the morality and the effects of the practice.

The teaching of Jesus will also be used as a source of instruction. Though this material is from the New Testament, Jesus made it clear the instructions He was giving about marriage were based on the Old Testament. Therefore, the teaching on polygamy in the gospels is appropriate for an examination of the subject from an Old Testament perspective.

In contrast, the statements in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 on the subject will not be examined in any detail, for several reasons. First, the text of those passages makes no explicit reference to the Old Testament. Second, these passages apply only to bishops, elders, and deacons (regardless of whether “bishop” and “elder” are the same office). These positions did not exist in the Old Testament period. The purpose of this paper is not to examine the qualifications for church officers, but only the requirements for Christians in general. Third, on the narrow issue of polygamy, 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not in serious dispute. Whatever additional meaning “the husband of one wife” may have, it certainly means that an overseer or deacon is not allowed to have more than one wife at the same time! Therefore, 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 will not be consulted again until final conclusions are drawn and applications made.

POLYGAMY: EXPLICIT OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING

The following passages teach directly on the subject of polygamy. Jesus’ teaching on the subject is not properly speaking a direct reference to polygamy, nor is it from the Old Testament. Therefore it will be examined under a separate heading.

Exodus 21:10

This passage commands that if a husband takes another wife in addition to the one(s) he already has, he may not reduce his material

support for the needs of his first wife. “It means, say the commentators, the wife’s fair share of luxuries, not mere subsistence allowance, which any slave would get.”⁵ The verse does not directly speak on the morality of polygamy. The verse acknowledges the reality of polygamous marriages in Israelite society, as well as the fact that the practice would continue. Yet polygamy is neither condemned nor condoned, but merely conceded. However, the verse does imply that there will be special problems and temptations associated with the practice. The problem in this case is partiality and willful neglect of a spouse. Though it must be added that the mere fact that a practice needs regulation does not make the practice inherently sinful (monogamous marriage was also regulated).

Leviticus 18:18

This verse is more controversial. The more common interpretation is to take *אִשָּׁה אֶל-אֵת אִשָּׁתָּה* to mean “a wife to her sister.”⁶ With this translation, the verse would then be a prohibition of simultaneous polygamy with two women who are sisters, as was done by Jacob. With this agree Keil and Delitzsch⁷ and Wenham.⁸ The other view is that of Murray, supported by Payne.⁹ According to Murray, the word “sister” here is actually idiomatic for another woman, regardless of relationship. Therefore the word should be translated “a woman to another.”¹⁰ Therefore, this verse is prohibiting not just two sisters having the same husband, but two women, regardless of relationship, having the same husband. If this interpretation be true, all forms of polygyny are hereby prohibited.

Murray cites the following support for this view. First, the Hebrew reads in such a way at other places in which sisters are not in view.

⁵R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 167.

⁶John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 251.

⁷C[arl] F[riedrich] Keil and F[ranz] Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 1, *The Pentateuch: Three Volumes in One* (n.p., n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 416 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

⁸R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., eds., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, The Book of Leviticus*, by Gordon J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 257-58.

⁹J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.; reprint, Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 331.

¹⁰Murray, 252.

Second, certain lists of prohibitions and curses do not list polygamy with sisters. Third, Murray assumes that the prohibition of marriage with a deceased husband's brother (the relationship of this prohibition to Levirate marriage is not entirely clear)¹¹ implies a prohibition of marriage with a deceased wife's sister. Therefore, any further such prohibition is unnecessary.¹²

Now one must sort through the support for the two sides. First, it must be said that the meaning of "sister" may allow for the meaning "other" or "another woman." Yet surely the plain meaning is simply "sister." On purely linguistic grounds, the edge would go to those who take it that way.

Second, the prohibiting of marriage to sisters fits well with the previous verse. It also fits well with the entire passage starting with 18:12. Murray counters by asserting that the previous passage ends with 18:17, and that verse 18 begins the next section.¹³ As support for this, he notes that verse 20 deals with adultery, and verse 18, dealing with polygamy (in his opinion), a closely related sin (also in his opinion), fits well when viewed in that manner. However, even if one agrees with such an argument (and this writer does not), it is hard to see how polygamy can be closely identified with the sin described in verse 19. Relations with more than one wife and relations with a menstruous woman bear little relation to each other. On the basis of context, the argument, once again, favors those who take the verse to refer narrowly to polygamy with living blood sisters.

Third, Murray's argument that the prohibition against polygamy with living sisters is not mentioned again in Scripture is weak. Such a practice was probably extremely uncommon anyway. In the dark days of Israelite apostasy adultery and fornication with a wife and her sister may have been commonplace (and that it not to assert that it was). However, marriage in such a case would have been almost unknown. To turn this argument around, if the law had contained an outright prohibition on polygamy (which is mentioned quite a few times, even after the law was given), why was it not mentioned? Why were David, Solomon, later kings of Israel and Judah, or even the judges not rebuked for polygamy,

¹¹Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Holy Bible, in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 2, *Genesis-Numbers* by R. Laird Harris (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 599.

¹²Murray, 256.

¹³*Ibid.*, 254.

if in fact the law forbade it? Once again, the evidence points to the narrow application of the “Neither shalt thou”

Fourth, Murray’s assumption that the prohibition on a woman marrying her dead husband’s brother carries an implicit prohibition on marrying a dead woman’s sister carries little weight. First, it is not at all clear how this argument is at all relevant. The point Murray is trying to make here is based on Leviticus 16:16, which prohibits a man from marrying his deceased brother’s widow. Therefore, Murray reasons, there is an implicit prohibition of a woman marrying her deceased sister’s widower. Because this command is implicit in Leviticus 16:16, Leviticus 18:18 must be talking about something else.

Murray seems to assume here that the Law would never make the same prohibition twice, even if spoken in somewhat different terms. One wonders how he could have come up with such a conclusion. Murray also appears to insist on near-perfect symmetry between the marriage laws for men and the marriage laws for women. Based on this assumption, he asserts that the law allowing husbands to divorce their wives in Deuteronomy 24 also made implicit allowance for women to divorce their husbands. This is a dubious idea completely without supporting evidence. In fact, the very idea that a prohibition for one sex necessarily implies a prohibition for the other is without merit. Even if it had merit, there is no reason it could not have been clarified with an additional verse.

When examined, Murray’s suggestion falls flat. None of his supporting evidence works, and none of his refuting arguments work. The traditional interpretation of Leviticus 18:18, the one which takes the text at face value, is the best. If this is the closest one can come to an outright biblical prohibition of polygamy (except for church officers), the explicit case against polygamy is very weak indeed.

Deuteronomy 17:17

The next passage on polygamy is Deuteronomy 17:17. This verse is in the middle of a longer passage on laws relating to (then-hypothetical) Israelite kings. Among other restrictions, the king is not to “multiply wives unto himself.” Both the relevance (which is time- and place-dependent, 17:14) of this verse to the contemporary situation and the meaning (which is not) must be clarified.

Application

As to relevance, the passage is directed at kings. As in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, this limits the scope of the application. The reason for the prohibition is that the king's "heart turn not away" from the LORD. The wisdom of this explanation is easily seen in the lives of Israel's two greatest kings: David, in 2 Samuel 11; and Solomon, in 1 Kings 11. It may be argued that, though the explicit reference is to kings, there is an implicit application to all. However, this cannot be demonstrated from the context.

It may also be argued that there was no need to have an additional command for commoners, since kings were the only men who could afford multiple wives. However, this contradicts subsequent Israelite history. There were several men mentioned in scripture who were polygamists but not kings. Among these were Gideon (Judg 8:30), Jair (inferential, Judg 10:4), Ibzan (also inferential, Judg 12:9), Abdon (again inferential, Judg 12:14), Elkanah (1 Samuel 1:2), and possibly Boaz.¹⁴ If God had intended Deuteronomy 17:17 as an absolute ban on polygamy, these men did not get the message. Though polygamy was not unknown among Israelite non-royalty, "the majority of Hebrew men were not financially able to maintain more than one wife anyway, so polygamy, though acceptable, was not prevalent."¹⁵ Yet the fact remains that this command was to a specific, tiny segment of society for a specific, known purpose.

Meaning of "Multiply"

Even if the application of this verse be limited, what does it mean within that limited application? More specifically, how many does רבה, the word translated "multiply" mean? Does it mean "one and only one" or is it a general restriction not to have too many? One must examine the usage of the word in this passage and in the rest of Scripture.

Within Deuteronomy 17:16-17, the word is used for horse, wives, and silver and gold. In that light, can the word mean that the king must limit himself to one wife? If so, then consistency would seem to demand

¹⁴Pamela S. Mann, "Toward a Biblical Understanding of Polygamy," *Missiology* 17 (January 1989): 16.

¹⁵Michael R. Cosby, *Sex in the Bible: An Introduction to What the Scriptures Teach Us about Sexuality* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 17.

that the king also limit himself to one horse and one piece of silver and one piece of gold! Surely one cannot place such a rigid constraint on the meaning of the word.

Throughout the Old Testament, the verb רבה is used often, in various contexts and stems. In the hiphil, as used here, it means to make numerous or multiply.¹⁶ To forbid the king to cause to רבה wives to himself need not mean that he must limit himself to one. It is commonly suggested that the purpose of this restriction was to keep the king from marrying foreign wives, thus bringing foreign gods into Israel.¹⁷ Even if this verse does apply also to Israelite wives (and this writer believes it does), it cannot be taken as an absolute limitation to only one wife.

Deuteronomy 21:15-17

In this passage, the last explicit command regarding polygamy, the issue concerns the sons of the respective wives of one husband. Specifically, the passage discusses a situation in which a man has two wives, one loved and the other hated, and the firstborn be the son of the hated wife. In such a case, the man may not take away the rights of the firstborn from the true firstborn and give them to the son of the wife he loves. Strictly speaking, this passage is not about polygamy itself, but the children which result from the practice.

However, that does not mean the passage has nothing to say about the practice. One will recall the patriarchal passages which illustrate this text from the negative position (these passages will be discussed later in this article). The very fact that the passage discusses a polygamous situation in which one wife is loved, the other hated illustrates an inherent danger in polygamy. The situation with Leah and Rachel is the most obvious example in the Bible, but this is surely a common experience in polygamous marriages.

Of course, unloved wives exist in monogamous marriages as well. Yet the pain of being an unloved wife and sharing the marriage bed with the wife one's husband loves would certainly intensify the pain of the situation. Therefore, this passage, as the others, does not state or even

¹⁶Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 3; s.v. "רבה" by Andrew E. Hill (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1038.

¹⁷E.g., R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard, eds., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, The Book of Deuteronomy*, by Peter C. Craigie (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1976), 256.

suggest that polygamy is prohibited. However, it certainly does imply that there are many problems associated with the practice which are not problems for monogamous marriages. Polygamy encourages intra-family fighting, jealousy, and individual heartache.

Explicit Teaching on Polygamy: A Summary

From these passages can be gathered some general teaching on the practice. Polygamy is shown to be problematic economically, emotionally, legally, and spiritually. Nevertheless, the Old Testament stops far short of condemning the practice, much less forbidding it. To see the whole counsel of God on the issue, one must look at the examples of polygamy to see what they have to teach us, as well as the New Testament teaching. Only then will one have a complete picture of what the Word of God says to Christians today.

POLYGAMY: IMPLICIT OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING

There are at least sixteen men whose polygamy is a matter of Old Testament record.¹⁸ One author, a missionary to Sierra Leone writing an apologetic for polygamy, lists fifteen of them, of which six she describes as having a positive effect.¹⁹ It should be emphasized that the fact that though a situation may produce positive effects, the situation was not necessarily a positive good. Each one will be examined to see how the Bible presents these examples, whether good or bad.

Lamech (Gen 4:19)

Lamech, the sixth from Cain (inclusive), is the first recorded bigamist. Mann lists his polygamy as having a positive effect because, based on 4:20-22, “creative children resulted.”²⁰ However, most conservative commentators see Lamech differently, presenting Lamech and his family, based on his arrogant and murderous sword-song, as defiant and godless.²¹ Whatever his children may have accomplished,

¹⁸Orville J. Nave, *Nave's Topical Bible: A Digest of the Holy Scriptures* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 960.

¹⁹Mann, 16.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹E.g., Alfred Edersheim, *Bible History* (Wilmington, DE: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d.), 11.

Lamech and his family certainly were not good moral examples. In fact, the “deviant lineage of Cain”²² appears to have ended with Lamech’s children. The Cainite line, because of its wickedness, was destroyed with the flood (with the possible but unlikely exception of Noah’s daughters-in-law, whose pedigrees are not recorded).

Abraham (Gen 16)

Abraham is the next polygamist in the Bible. The sorry affair with Hagar plagues Israel, the Church, and the world still today. If Abraham had kept himself for his original wife alone, his seed of promise would have been spared much heartache. Whether Hagar can be counted as a full wife or a concubine, the results of Abraham’s lapse show the harmful familial results of his bigamy.

Esau (Gen 26:34; 28:8-9)

Esau, a “profane person” (Heb 12:16), took Hittite wives, which grieved his parents. Seeing this, he took a daughter of Ishmael, Mahalath (or Bashemath, Gen 36:3) as third wife. Mann records this third marriage as positive because Mahalath was “God-fearing.”²³ Yet there is nothing in the text to suggest that was the case. On the contrary, she was the daughter of a “wild man,” the progenitor of an ungodly line. The following observation is appropriate:

[Esau marrying Abraham’s granddaughter was] a step by which he might no doubt ensure the approval of his parents, but in which he failed to consider that Ishmael had been separated from the house of Abraham and family of promise by the appointment of God; so that it only furnished another proof that he had no thought of the religious interests of the chosen family, and was unfit to be the recipient of divine revelation.²⁴

Obviously, Esau’s marriage to Mahalath is no endorsement of polygamy, and only adds further vividness to the negative portrait Scripture is painting of it.

²²Anthony O. Nkwoka, “The Church and Polygamy in Africa: The 1988 Lambeth Conference Resolution,” *Africa Theological Journal* 19 (1990): 145-46.

²³Mann, 16.

²⁴C[arl] F[riedrich] Keil and F[ranz] Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1, pt. 1, *The Pentateuch*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 281.

Jacob (Gen 29:30)

The problems associated with polygamy in the life of Jacob hardly need mentioning, “These narratives [i.e., Abraham’s and Jacob’s polygamy] . . . do not fail to bring out the darker side of polygamous life.”²⁵ The deceit, the jealousy, the idolatry, the immorality, and the cruelty shown by Jacob’s father-in-law, wives, and sons was stopped only by the gracious forgiveness of Joseph (Gen 50). Yet tribal infighting continued to be a problem until the carrying away of the northern kingdom. Jacob’s married life could be called the classic case study of the evils associated with polygamy.

Ashur (1 Chr 4:5)

This is a reference to a man of the tribe of Judah. Nothing is mentioned of him except the names of his wives and children. He does not affect the argument over polygamy positively or negatively.

Gideon (Judg 8:30)

Gideon’s polygamy is another sad example of a man whose usefulness was limited and his legacy blotched by polygamy. Gideon’s seventy sons were murdered and Israel torn my civil war as a result of jealousy among his sons. The Abimelech war put Israel into a spiritual and military tailspin from which it did not recover until the monarchy.

Elkanah (1 Sam 1:2-8)

Though Mann lists the effect of this episode as both negative and positive,²⁶ it can hardly be used as support for polygamy. The evil effects of the practice are obvious. The two wives competed against each other based on their ability to produce children. Elkanah shows favoritism to one wife over another.

It is quite a strong statement on the evils of polygamy that the word for co-wife is here translated “adversary” (KJV; NASB, NIV: “rival”). “It is significant that the common Semitic name for ‘second wife’ is צַרָּה,

²⁵E[dward] G[oeffrey] Parrinder, *The Bible and Polygamy: A Study of Hebrew and Christian Teaching* (London: S.P.C.K., 1958), 15.

²⁶Mann, 16.

the root meaning of which is ‘show hostility toward,’ ‘vex.’”²⁷ A co-wife is a “vexer,” significant in light of the fact that in Semitic cultures polygamy was a part of life. Hannah’s vexer certainly lived up to her role, probably in part because she saw that her husband loved her vexer more than he loved her. Peninnah’s vexing caused terrible grief to Hannah, such that she refused to eat. An event which was supposed to be joyful in the LORD thus became the time of greatest grief for righteous Hannah, all brought about by polygamy. One wonders how many more such cases existed in Israel and exist in the world today, with no relief brought by the divine grant of a child. The problem seems to have been compounded by a lack of understanding on Elkanah’s part.

David (1 Sam 25:39; 2 Sam 3:2-5; 5:13; 1 Chr 14:3)

It is ironic that Mann, based on 2 Samuel 12:8, lists David’s taking more wives in 5:13 as having a positive effect.²⁸ She does this on the assumption that God was blessing David. Yet the fact that God was blessing David even as he was taking more wives and concubines does not mean that the wives and concubines were part of God’s blessing. “[This instance] undoubtedly show[s] God’s conditional concession to man’s carnal desires.”²⁹

In fact, David’s taking more wives (and presumably concubines) was in direct disobedience to the command in Deuteronomy 7:17 that the king was not to multiply wives unto himself. Even before David started taking more wives and concubines in 5:13, he already had at least seven wives. While it is not exactly clear how many wives constituted “multiplying,” in is intuitively obvious that seven wives is enough for any man. He could have had a different one every day of the week!

The fact that God gave David Saul’s wives and would have given him more (12:8) also does not imply the blessing or even the approval of God on David’s actions. The statement is made in the wake of the Bathsheba and Uriah affair. David has been guilty of adultery, theft, and murder. The LORD is saying here that he would have given David more wives if he had asked for them, but that would have been short of God’s best for David. However, in light of what David has just done by stealing

²⁷George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. “Marriage” by O[tto] J. Baab (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 280-81.

²⁸Mann, 16.

²⁹Nkwoka, 147.

something which he had not asked for, he has done great damage to his and God's kingdom. Therefore, God would have rather given him more wives than see him do the wickedness and damage he has just done. Here is no divine blessing on David's polygamy.

The subsequent history of David's children is illustration enough of the evil and tragic effects of David's being a very negligent family man. David's son raped David's daughter. David's son murdered another of David's sons. The murderous son then led a near-successful revolt against his father, sleeping with his father's wives in the process. Two other sons struggled for the throne, leading to deaths and depositions of talented men, including the death of the son who lost the power struggle.

Solomon (1 Kgs 11:1-8)

The victorious son followed his father's family practices to an extreme. The result was tragedy, also to an extreme. Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. One wonders how many Israelite men had to do without wives in order to gratify Solomon's lust, or how much tax revenue was wasted to maintain such a harem. One wonders also how many children he had and what family problems were created by such a mess. Certainly he could not have been a very good father to them, as shall be discussed shortly.

Solomon's wives turned his heart from following the LORD, with the results that the kingdom was torn in two and his son kept the smaller portion. Israel never again regained the glory enjoyed under David and Solomon, nor will do so again until her King, who has only one Bride (contra Omoregbe),³⁰ returns in power and glory.

Was this tragedy caused by polygamy alone, or by polygamy with foreign wives? It is impossible to tell exactly how much of the tragedy was caused by the number of the wives and how much by the foreignness and idolatry of the wives. However, one thing is certain. If Solomon had obeyed God's command in Deuteronomy 17:17, he would have saved himself, his family, and his kingdom from much evil and grief.

³⁰Joseph Omoregbe, "Is Polygamy Incompatible with Christianity?" *African Ecclesial Review* 21 (December 1979): 368.

Rehoboam (2 Chr 11:18-23)

The effects of Solomon's polygamy, his resultant idolatry, and presumably his negligence as a father is demonstrated in the life of his son. Rehoboam's foolishness (1 Kgs 12:1-20) and wickedness (2 Chr 12:1, 14) reduced the kingdom to a shadow of its former self. In two generations the seeds of David's polygamy had matured into a twisted tree with bitter fruit. Rehoboam also continued the marriage practices of his fathers, along with the household strife attendant in such arrangements (11:21).

Abijah (2 Chr 13:21)

Ironically, Mann lists Abijah as one whose polygamy had good effects.³¹ This is strange when one examines his life. Abijah did become strong and married fourteen wives. However, the effects of these fourteen wives are not known, except for the fact that Abijah's successor, Asa, was a generally righteous king. The mere fact that the wives are mentioned in conjunction with a strong king does not justify polygamy.

It is also rather strange that Mann lists only the Chronicles account of Abijah's reign, not the Kings account (where he is called "Abijam"). It is true that 2 Chronicles 13:21 accounts one righteous act to him. Yet "the author of Kings dismisses Abijam with very few words, none of them encouraging."³² Apparently the only reason the LORD allowed him to keep his throne was for David's sake, presumably to perpetuate the messianic line. Aside from a single event in which he acted righteously, he seems to have done nothing praiseworthy. He is hardly a role model for polygamists. One wonders if Mann is simply ignorant of the biblical facts or deliberately vague about them.

Jehoram (2 Chr 21:14)

The vagueness appears to become greater and less excusable with this next king. Mann comments simply "vague reference in Elijah's letter" and the effect of his polygamy she leaves blank.³³ At least one of

³¹Mann, 16.

³²John J[ames] Davis and John C. Whitcomb, *A History of Israel from Conquest to Exile* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 365.

³³Mann, 16.

these marriages which “contributed to his spiritual demise was his marriage to Ahab and Jezebel’s daughter, the wicked Athaliah.”³⁴ Jehoram was one of the most evil kings in the history of Judah, perhaps second only to Manasseh, and Manasseh repented of his evil. Jehoram murdered his brothers, worshiped pagan abominations, and compelled all Judah to do so. Once again, this man hardly provides support for polygamy.

Joash (2 Chr 24:3)

This example of polygamy (actually bigamy) is not so easily condemned as the others, but neither does the Bible praise it. All that is known about Joash’s marriage is that it was arranged by righteous Jehoiada and that it included two wives. Joash served the LORD while Jehoiada lived; but after his death he turned from the LORD and eventually slew Jehoiada’s son, a sin for which he paid with his own life. The giving of two wives by a righteous high priest is hardly evidence that this was a good practice (David, a man after God’s own heart, violated God’s command not to multiply wives). Nothing good or bad is mentioned about the marriage. Mann lists the effect of this case of polygamy as “Positive,”³⁵ but Joash’s later life is certainly no endorsement of the righteous effects of the practice.

Ahab (2 Kgs 10:1)

Ahab’s having seventy sons implies that he had many wives. The fact that “there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness” (1 Kgs 21:25) says much, in light of the fact that he is being compared to other Samarian kings. A wantonly wicked king, he was also a polygamist. The direction of causality, if there is any causality, is not stated, but wickedness and polygamy are associated with the same man.

Jehoiachin (2 Kgs 24:15)

Nothing is known about Jehoiachin’s wives, except that he had more than one. He reigned for only three months, and was so evil that

³⁴Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *A History of Israel from the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 335.

³⁵Mann, 16.

Jeremiah prophesied that none of his descendants would occupy the throne (Jer 22:30). The reference to his wives is almost incidental, but the context is of disobedience and calamity.

POLYGAMY: JESUS' TEACHING

The New Testament does not discuss the issue directly, but Jesus does seem to discuss it tangentially. In Matthew 19:3-9 and Mark 10:2-12 Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees about divorce. He teaches them from the second chapter of Genesis, the creation of man and woman and the establishment of marriage. The teaching in question is the following:

He which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave 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 (Matt 19:4-6).

Does this statement address the issue of polygamy? If so, does it forbid it?

Regarding the relevance of the statement, Jesus was answering a question about divorce, not polygamy, "Christ was never confronted with the question of polygamy."³⁶ Yet that does not preclude the possibility of his setting forth a principle that speaks to two somewhat related issues. The fact that the question was about divorce, based on Deuteronomy 24, does not preclude the possibility that Jesus would teach principles which would apply to marriage in other ways. Jesus takes the Pharisees behind the divorce issue, to the foundational facts of marriage discussed in the creation account. Therefore it should not be surprising that the Master discusses issues which apply to polygamy as well as divorce.

Jesus begins by speaking in general terms about the creation of male and female. He then goes on to say that a man (singular) will leave his father and mother and will cleave to his wife (singular). So far we have one man and one woman, but not necessarily an exclusive relationship; for this could conceivably be repeated between one man and more than one woman.

However, Jesus then quotes Genesis 2:24 that they shall be one flesh, but He adds the word "two" to the phrase. This is significant. One could

³⁶Omogbe, 364.

still argue that a man could be one flesh with two different women at the same time, but this is strained, for several reasons. First, both the creation account and Jesus speak of “male” and “female” (Gen 1:27; Matt 19:4) which are singular nouns. Second, “man” and “wife” (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:5) are both singular nouns. Finally, and most important, is the “one flesh” principle. If a man is one flesh with one woman, and he is one flesh with another woman at the same time, then both women are one flesh with the same man at the same time. Logically, the women are then one flesh with each other. Yet a woman cannot be one flesh with another woman. Such a concept is not only contrary to scripture (Rom 1:26-27), but it violates the principle of 19:4-5 that male and female are to be one flesh. This one flesh union exists between members of the opposite sex, not the same sex. For this reason, though it is not expressly stated, it appears that polygamy violates the basic purposes and principles for marriage laid out at creation in Genesis 1 and 2, and expounded by Jesus in Matthew 19 and Mark 10. “The origin of marriage (Gen 2) implies an equality between the marriage partners which can only be fulfilled in monogamous marriage.”³⁷ “This oneness expresses God’s plan ‘in the beginning.’”³⁸

APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the issue of polygamy scripturally. A complete picture would also examine the issue sociologically. That is the work of the missiologist, not the exegete. However, some observations, recommendations, and concluding remarks are in order. It must be emphasized that these recommendations are based on biblical arguments alone. The sociological arguments are relevant, and could well modify these recommendations or change them altogether. This is not to say that sociology should dictate to the Bible, or that sociology should be allowed to permit what the Bible forbids, “Christian praxis is mainly based on scriptural facts rather than scholarly arguments.”³⁹ However, sociological considerations may occasionally make it necessary to forbid what the Bible may not specifically forbid.

³⁷David Gitari, “Rethinking Polygamy: Jesus Spoke against Divorce, not Polygamy,” *Other Side* 24 (April 1988): 42.

³⁸Patrick Iteka, “Polygamy and the Local Church,” *African Ecclesial Review* 23 (February-April 1981): 106.

³⁹Nkwoka, 147.

From what the Bible explicitly states concerning the issue of polygamy, there is no clear condemnation, “There are no Old Testament laws against polygamy. . . . In the New Testament, polygamy is never explicitly forbidden, except for the leaders of the Church.”⁴⁰ In fact, the Old Testament, with the exception of Genesis 2 (expounded by Jesus Christ in the New Testament), seems ambivalent on the issue. The New Testament appears to have the statements closest to an outright ban on the practice. These include Matthew 19, Mark 10, and 1 Corinthians 7:2. This last is not discussed in this paper, but states, “Let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.” All of the nouns in this verse are singular. The restrictions in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not said to be binding on ordinary church members, but on church officers. The requirements for such would logically be more stringent than that for other members.

If the explicit teaching on the issue is inconclusive, what of the implicit teaching? This writer would maintain that there is no case of polygamy in the entire Bible which the Word of God presents in a positive light. Every case except one quasi-statistical reference in a genealogy (i.e., 1 Chr 4:5) either clearly had dire consequences, or is presented within a context of sin and rebellion against God. However, while this is certainly a strong recommendation against polygamy, it is not a prohibition.

The basic positions Christians have taken on adultery can be summed up as follows:

- a) Polygamy is simply a sin, comparable with adultery.
- b) Polygamy is an inferior form of marriage, not sinful where it is the custom but always unacceptable for Christians.
- c) Polygamy is a form of marriage less satisfactory than monogamy and one which cannot do justice to the full spirit of Christian marriage, but in certain circumstances individual Christians can still put up with it, as they put up with slavery, dictatorial governments, and much else.
- d) Polygamy is one form of marriage, monogamy another. Each has its advantages and disadvantages; they are appropriate to different types of society. It is not the task of the Church to make any absolute judgement [*sic*] between them.⁴¹

⁴⁰Bernard T. Adeney, “Polygamy: How Many Wives in the Kingdom of God?” *Transformation* 12 (January-March 1995): 2.

⁴¹Adrian Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa* (London: S.P.C.K., 1973), 73; quoted in Mann, 22.

Traditionally, Christian missionaries have taken positions “a” or “b.” However, based upon biblical considerations alone, as discussed in this paper, “c” appears to be the better alternative.

At the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, the decision was made that on the new converts should be placed “no greater burden than these necessary things.” Is monogamy a necessary burden to place on a man with more than one wife if he married them before his conversion, is treating them well, has children by them and they want to remain with him? Surely remaining polygamous is better than divorcing his wife, effectively making her a widow and her children orphans. As an African polygamous Christian so eloquently stated:

Christ forbade divorce, but not polygamy. The Church forbids polygamy but demands divorce. How can I become a Church member, if I want to be a Christian? For me there is only one way, to be a Christian without the Church.⁴²

This line of thinking, that Jesus condemned divorce more roundly than polygamy, seems to be common among African theologians. However evil polygamy may be, the cure of divorce would be worse than the problem.

Such a position does not require the church to allow the man to marry more wives once he has joined the church. That could be made a requirement of membership. Polygamists could keep present wives but not add any more, an approach practiced by Baptist and Methodist missions in New Guinea.⁴³

To allow a polygamous man to join the church is not the same as allowing a church member to take a second wife. Jesus’ words on marriage are strong enough to justify forbidding Christians from taking any more wives. Such should be expected to keep God’s ideal for marriage, because they have been born again and taught the Bible, so that their lives and conduct should be characterized by holiness. Yet the man who was a polygamist before salvation cannot be expected to heed God’s word about marriage. There are sins for which a church should bring censure on the saint for committing, which the church should readily reflect Christ’s love in leaving to God in the sinner who repents. Therefore, it seems appropriate and prudent to prohibit polygamy for

⁴²Walter A. Trobisch, “The Church and Polygamy: A Dialogue with Omodo,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 19 (January 1995): 73.

⁴³Robert Holst, “Polygamy and the Bible,” *International Review of Mission* 56 (April 1967): 205.

already-monogamous Christians. New Christians, not required to divorce their present wives, would be prohibited from taking additional wives.

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Polygamy has been a persistent problem in Africa for the Christian missions which brought the Gospel to the continent. Much has been written on this subject as evidenced by the extensive bibliography of this article. Though polygamy has been a divisive issue, the early missionary societies were remarkably united on their common approach to polygamy. Since monogamy is the biblical ideal of marriage, the pioneering missions raised a barrier to any polygamist being baptized and admitted into church membership, though the missions readily welcomed them into the Body of Christ. So, polygamy was permitted by God in the Old Testament but it was not his design. It often leads people astray and caused dissension within households where multiple wives are present. It does not properly represent the relationship between Christ and his bride the church (Ephesians 5:25-27).. He does not have multiple brides, he is one bride. Although polygamy was permitted in the Old Testament, the married man had the responsibility of providing and protecting the wives that he married. This avoided the problem of a single woman having a child who was unable to provide and care for herself and the child. It was God's design that a man and a woman be faithful to each other during their life span together. One of the things I wonder most about, is why on earth Old Testament laws are so different from the teachings of Jesus and Paul and later practices in Christianity? Muslim scholars insist that these are all the same religion, but that the Bible or Christian practices and teachings have been falsified.