

What Does the Bible Teach About Polygamy?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

Introduction:

- A. Some of the Patriarchs had multiple wives and even had children by concubines and female servants. We assume God approved of this in Old Testament times. It is a naïve and misguided assumption.

I. POLYGAMY ALWAYS DISREGARDS GOD'S MARRIAGE LAW

- A. When God ordained marriage as described in Genesis, there is a set form for marriage: one man for one woman in a stable, lasting, fruitful relationship of mutual support for one lifetime - Gen. 2:18
 - 1. "Helpmate" is singular, not plural.
 - 2. Gen. 2:21-24 - God created one woman for Adam, excluding polygamy.
 - 3. Marriage is to be a lasting union; God said that a man shall "cling" (Hebrew = דָּבַק = dabaq) to his wife (singular, not wives), and the two, (not three, four, or more) of them shall become one flesh.
- B. How are we to understand the polygamy (multiple wives) of the ancients such as Jacob, Moses, Gideon, David, Solomon, and many others?
 - 1. Does God approve of this? There is no evidence that He reacted to their seemingly adulterous and clearly polygamous behavior.
 - 2. The fact that they have several wives goes un-rebuked in scripture, and is narrated with little shock.
 - 3. Nathan the Prophet had many things to say in rebuke of David, but having multiple wives was not among them.
- C. Scripture teaches in various ways:
 - 1. Direct rebuke and condemnation, where sin is denounced and punished
 - 2. There is also an inductive way Scripture teaches, more through account and example than prescription or prohibition; and in this way, the Scriptures teach against polygamy.
 - 3. We learn by account and example how polygamy caused nothing but trouble, leading to division, jealousy, and murder.

II. POLYGAMY WAS COMMON AMONG OLD TESTAMENT MEN

- A. Lamech, a descendant of Cain, practiced polygamy - Gen. 4:19
- B. Abraham had more than one wife - Gen. 16:3-4, 25:6, called "concubines"
 - 1. Concubine - "Female slave who functioned as a secondary wife and surrogate mother, but has lower status than his wife or wives. The Hebrew word for concubine (pileges) is a non-Semitic loanword borrowed to refer to a phenomenon not indigenous to Israel."
(www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary)
- C. Nahor, Abraham's brother, had a wife and a concubine - Gen. 11:29, 22:20-24
- D. Jacob was tricked into polygamy - Gen. 29:20-30
 - 1. Later, he produced children through two servant women, making a total of four wives - Gen. 30:4, 9
- E. Esau took a third wife to please his father Isaac - Gen. 28:6-9

- F. Asshur, descendant of the royal line and founder of the city of Tekoa had two wives - 1Chron. 4:5
- G. The prophets Obadiah, Joel, Ishiah, and others “had many wives” - 1Chron. 7:3-4
- H. Shaharaim had four wives, two of which he “sent away” - 1Chron. 8:8-11
- I. Caleb had two wives and two concubines - 1Chron. 2:18, 46, 48
- J. Gideon the Judge had many wives - Judges 8:30
- K. Elkanah, husband of Hannah, had two wives - 1Sam. 1:1-2, 8 - 2:10
- L. David had 8 wives and 10 concubines - 1Chron. 1:1-9; 2Sam. 6:23, 20:3
- M. Solomon, violated the commandments in Deuteronomy 7:1-4 and 17:14-17, had 700 wives and 300 concubines - 1Kings 11:1-6
- N. Rehoboam had eighteen wives and sixty concubines - 2Chron. 11:21)
 - 1. He facilitated his sons in multiple marriages - 1Chron. 11:23
- O. Abijah, king of Judah, defeated Jereboam, had 14 wives 2Chron. 13:21
- P. Ahab had multiple wives - 1Kings 20:7
- Q. Jehoram, king of Judah, had multiple wives - 2Chron. 21:17
- R. Jehoiada the priest gave king Joash two wives - 2Chron. 24:1-3
- S. Jehoiachin, king of Judah, had more than one wife - 2Kings 24:15

III. DOES GOD APPROVE OF POLYGAMY?

- A. The silence of God does not connote approval.
 - 1. God permitted divorce under the Law of Moses, not during the Patriarchal age, because of the hard hearts of the Israelites - Matt. 19:8
 - 2. But to reluctantly permit does not constitute authority nor does it indicate that God is pleased.
 - 3. God teaches in more than one way in the Scriptures. Polygamy, whenever it is discussed more than merely in passing, always generated trouble.
- B. Jacob had four wives he clearly loved unequally: Leah (who he felt stuck with and considered unattractive), Rachel (his first love), Bilhah (Rachel’s maid) and Zilpah (Leah’s maid). Leah bore him 6 sons and a daughter. All of these sons by different mothers created tension. But the greatest tension surrounded Joseph, of whom his brothers grew jealous and hated. His father, Jacob favored him, since he was Rachel’s son. This led to a plot to kill him, but due to profit and Reuben’s intervention, he ended up being sold into slavery to the Ishmaelites. At the heart of this bitter conflict was a polygamous mess and the unspoken, but clear teaching, to avoid polygamy.
- C. Gideon had multiple wives and by them many sons. An account of terrible violence and death resulted from conflict among his sons competing for kingship and inheritance - Judges 9:1-5
- D. David had eight wives - Michal, Abigail, Ahinoam, Eglah, Maacah, Abital, Haggith, and Bathsheba, and 10 concubines. Trouble erupted in this blended family when Absalom (third son of David), whose mother was Maacah sought to subvert the line of succession and get it for himself. When his older brother Chileab died, only his half-brother Amnon stood in the way. The tensions between these royal sons of different mothers grew very hostile. Amnon raped Absalom’s full sister Tamar, and Absalom later had Amnon murdered for it - 2Sam. 13. Absalom fled and eventually sought to

overthrow his Father's power by waging a rebellious war against him. He is killed in the ensuing war, and David can barely forgive himself for his own role in the matter - 2Sam. 18:33. Adonijah tried to take the throne before David died of old age - 1Kings 2:15.

E. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Nothing but trouble came from it (1Kings 11:1-6). The tolerance of pagan religious practices encouraged by these wives, along with other policies led to great hostility and division in the Kingdom and led, after Solomon's death, to the northern Kingdom of Israel seceding from Judah. There was never a reunion and both kingdoms were eventually destroyed by surrounding nations. Polygamy was at the heart of this mess.

F. Abraham's dalliance with his wife's maid Hagar, while not strictly polygamy, led to trouble. Hagar bore Ishmael, at the behest of Sarah. But, Sarah grew cold and jealous of Hagar, and Hagar pulled away (Gen 16). She eventually returned and gave birth to Ishmael but later, when Sarah finally bore Isaac, Sarah concluded that Ishmael was a threat and had to go. She had Abraham drive her away - Gen. 21

1. The sons of his concubines would have tried to take away Isaac's inheritance - Gen. 25

G. The Bible teaches against polygamy by examples of its problematic nature.

1. While polygamy was not the only cause, and these things do happen outside polygamous settings. But polygamy clearly played a powerful role in these tragic accounts.

2. It appears that God tolerated polygamy in the Old Testament, like divorce, but nowhere does He approve it.

3. Matters were different in the sense that God permitted things He did not approve - Acts 17:30

4. Jesus taught a return to God's original plan for marriage - Matt 19:4-9.

5. Whatever one may argue with regard to the Old Testament's approach to marriage, Jesus made it clear that God wills that everyone return to God's original plan in the Christian Dispensation: One man for one woman for one lifetime in a stable fruitful relationship of mutual support.