

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABOUT POLYGAMY?

Because a number of prominent Biblical figures did indeed practice polygamy, some have reasoned it must be a godly principal and should not be criticized or prohibited. By the same logic, cases could be made for the validity of drunkenness (Noah, in Genesis 9:20-21), lying (Jacob, in Genesis 27:22-24), and murder (David and Paul, in 2 Samuel 12:14-24 and Acts 7:59-8:1). Since all humans with the exception of Christ Himself are sinners (Romans 3:23), not everything done even by prophets, patriarchs, and kings was a good or godly example.

God's real design for marriage is seen clearly in Genesis 2:18, 24, and 25. Adam was given one and only one wife. The original scene was one of total innocence and purity. Had a plurality of wives been God's intent, the Garden of Eden would have been the perfect showcase for it, silencing forever the critics of polygamy. But precisely the opposite is true. No less than Jesus provides unmistakable confirmation in Matthew 19:4-5:

. . .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 father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?

Genesis 4:19-24 is the first mention of polygamy in the Bible. Significantly, the context is one of violence and vengeance rather than righteousness.

Had God meant for us to recognize polygamy as a holy and healthy principle, certainly He would have so indicated in His Law. An important purpose for ancient and modern laws is regulative. Therefore, Old Testament Law did regulate the existing practice of polygamy. Nowhere does the Law of God commend or command polygamy.

Over the centuries God has provided guidance to His people through such human leaders as Old Testament kings and New Testament pastors. Of the former we read, "Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away. . ." (Deuteronomy 17:17). Of the later it is stated, "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour. . ." (1 Timothy 3:2). Lest we mistakenly suppose this standard applies only to leadership, the Apostle Paul continued to instruct the young pastor, Timothy, ". . .Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation [literally, manner of life], in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." (1 Timothy 4:12). He was to model a lifestyle for all believers to follow.

The Bible figuratively refers to the Lord as being married to His people. In the Old Testament Israel is His wife (Isaiah 64:5-6). In the New Testament, the church is His bride (Ephesians 5:31-32). In each case it is meticulously expressed there is only one wife or bride. Finally, set in the end of time, are the words, ". . . Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife" (Revelation 21:9). We are not to imagine more than one; it is "the bride" (singular). Perhaps the grandest of all divine purposes for the marriage of a earthly man to an earthly woman is its sacred portrayal of God's exclusive and intimate relationship with His people. Only marriage between one man and one woman figuratively preserves the sanctity of that unspeakably holy union.

Lloyd A. Larkin
Baptist Mid-Missions, Emeritus