

The Puzzle of Polygamy

Christians are frequently puzzled when they read in the Old Testament about Abraham, David, and Solomon practicing polygamy. Why did godly leaders have more than one wife?

In the twenty-first century that question has become more than just an academic issue. The practice of polygamy in the Bible seems to provide ammunition for use in the modern conflict over marriage. Why should the institution of marriage be limited to one man and one woman? If polygamy was acceptable among God’s people, then is there a Christian reason why marriage should not be further expanded? Why not include homosexual unions as well?

Before jumping to quick conclusions and contemporary applications, it is necessary to examine carefully what the Bible actually records about polygamy. (See the appendix to this study for Scripture references and observations.) Furthermore, the function of polygamy in ancient culture must be explored.

The Biblical Evidence

At the outset it should be remembered that providing a historical record of an action is not equivalent to endorsing that action. For example, throughout Judges sinful actions are recorded without commentary; the writer allows the various events to accumulate in repulsiveness and speak for themselves. Only at the end of the book does the reader find an ethical evaluation: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). The same can be said about the Old Testament record as a whole in its treatment of polygamy. It was practiced by some of God’s leaders, but that is not equivalent to endorsing it as good.

In the Old Testament there are only twelve men who are specifically said to have had more than one wife. Study of those men shows that polygamy was practiced by those in powerful positions; it was evidently not as prevalent among those who might be considered average Israelites.

Position	Tribal or Clan Leaders	Judges	Kings	Israelite
Individuals	Lamech, Abraham, Esau, Jacob	Gideon	David, Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah, Jehoram, Joash	Elkanah
Number	4	1	6	1

Furthermore, recorded observations about the characteristics of the men or the consequences of the polygamous relationships are lopsided toward the negative.

Observations	Positive	Negative	No Recorded Observation
Number	0	7	5

It should also be noted that Leviticus 18:18 prohibits one type of polygamy, and Deuteronomy 21:15-17 provides a legal regulation to make sure that a possible injustice due to polygamy does not occur.

Even a quick study of the evidence demonstrates that the Old Testament provides shaky grounds for the practice of anything except monogamy.

The Function of Polygamy in Ancient Culture

Modern readers of the Bible usually assume that the only reason for polygamy was sexual desire, and it comes as a surprise to learn that in ancient cultures there were other motivations behind it. At least, three reasons can be identified for polygamous marriages:

1. *Provision of an heir:*
 - a. Keeping an inheritance within a family or clan (Gen. 15:2-3) was accomplished by following the culturally acceptable practice of a man impregnating a servant (Gen. 16:1-4; 30:3-5, 9-13).
 - b. Deuteronomy 25:5-10 required the practice of Levirate marriage in which a man married his brother's childless widow in order to continue the deceased brother's name and protect the family's inheritance rights.
2. *Political alliances:* Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter (1 Kings 3:1; 11:1-8) aligned Israel with Egypt, an alliance that would have been considered mutually beneficial.
3. *Destitute women:* Single women and widows were especially vulnerable to poverty, slavery, and prostitution in the ancient world. Polygamy provided a means to escape those desperate possibilities.

The limited benefits of polygamy were apparently tolerated within ancient Israel, but that does not imply that polygamy was accepted as an unmitigated good. It was usually just the powerful and rich who could afford to wed more than one woman, and laws were necessary to guard against abuse. The practice was tolerated but not endorsed or encouraged.

Conclusion

The teaching of Genesis 2:24 remained the standard for Israelite society in spite of the exceptions that the rich and powerful could afford. Monogamy is assumed in Psalm 128:3, Proverbs 5:15-21, and Malachi 2:14. In the New Testament monogamy is specifically endorsed by Jesus in Matthew 19:4-8.

When all of the Biblical evidence is taken into consideration, it can be concluded that neither the New Testament nor Old Testament provides solid grounds for practicing any form of marriage other than heterosexual monogamy.

**Appendix:
Polygamy in the Old Testament**

Reference	Individual	Wives	Concubines	Characteristics
Gen. 4:19	Lamech	2		Demonstration of his boastfulness
Gen. 16:3; 25:1, 6, 12; 1 Chron. 1:29-34	Abraham	2 or 3 ¹	More than 1	Cultural custom to take a servant as a 2 nd wife to bear offspring Demonstrated lack of faith in God Created hostility between wives
Gen. 26:34-35; 28:6-9	Esau	3		Viewed negatively by parents because of Hittite background of wives
Gen. 29:16-30:24	Jacob	4		Tricked into marrying 2 sisters Took servants to bear offspring according to cultural custom due to jealousy between sisters
Lev. 18:18				Prohibition of marrying a woman and her sister
Deut. 21:15-17				Polygamy regulated due to tensions it creates in family
Deut. 25:5-10; Ruth 4:1-12				Levirate marriage to insure continuation of family line and inheritance rights
Judg. 8:30-31	Gideon	Many	1	
Judg. 10:4	Jair	?	?	30 sons
Judg. 12:9	Ibzan	?	?	30 sons and 30 daughters
Judg. 12:14	Abdon	?	?	40 sons
1 Sam. 1:2	Elkanah	2		Rivalry between wives

¹ See Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:445-446 for discussion of terminology in Genesis combining “wife” and “concubine.”

Reference	Individual	Wives	Concubines	Characteristics
1 Sam. 14:50; 2 Sam. 3:7; 12:8; 21:8-11	Saul	Perhaps more than 1	1	[Probably just conventional language (2 Sam. 12:8) to express one king's takeover of another's kingdom]
1 Sam. 18:22-27; 25:40-44; 2 Sam. 5:13-16; 15:16; 16:21-22; 19:15; 20:3; 1 Chron. 3:1-9	David	8	At least 10	Contributed to tension between sons (2 Sam. 13:1, 20, 22)
1 Kgs. 3:1; 11:1-8	Solomon	700 ²	300	Political alliances cemented through marriage Led Solomon away from God
2 Chron. 11:21	Rehoboam	18	60	
2 Chron. 13:21	Abijah	14		
1 Kgs. 20:3	Ahab	Perhaps more than 1		[Probably just conventional language to express one king's takeover of another's kingdom]
2 Chron. 21:17	Jehoram	More than 1		
2 Chron. 24:3	Joash	2		The high priest Jehoiada chose the wives for him

Recommended resources:

R.K. Harrison, "Polygamy," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:901-902. Harrison provides a good general overview of the topic.

Walter C, Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 182-190. Kaiser examines Exod. 21:7-11, Lev. 18:18, Deut. 21:15-17, and 2 Sam. 12:7-8.

² This number seems implausibly high. It may have been a culturally understood expression designed to exalt a king's reputation. Wiseman cites a reference to 3000 wives and concubines in one royal Egyptian household. See Donald J. Wiseman, *1 & 2 Kings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 135; and G.H. Jones, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 1:234.