

TOUGH QUESTIONS ... from the Old Testament

Monogamy or Polygamy: What Did God Intend?

Several months ago I was in a discussion with a young believer who for the first time was reading the Old Testament. He bombarded me with questions that he had run across in his reading, one of which had to do with the many occurrences of polygamy in the Bible. “What’s going on with so many biblical characters having so many wives?” was his question. “I feel like I’m reading something straight out of the Book of Mormon,” he said.ⁱ

By the way, it’s said that Mark Twain argued once with a Mormon about the legitimacy of polygamy. The Mormon challenged Twain to cite any passage of the Bible that prohibited having multiple wives. Twain thought a moment and then replied, “Well, how about that passage that tells us that no man can serve two masters at the same time?”

Though I didn’t ask him, I’m sure some of the passages in the Old Testament that my friend had run across were these:

So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. Genesis 16:3

Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. Genesis 25:1

He (Gideon) had seventy sons of his own, for he had many wives. Judges 8:30

Of course, the most blatant example of an Old Testament believer having many wives is King Solomon. “He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines...” (1 Kings 11:3).ⁱⁱ

What is even more disturbing is that the Old Testament gives specific instructions as to how to regulate certain problems resulting from a polygamous marriage. Take for example Deuteronomy 21:15-17:

*If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other, and both bear him sons but the firstborn is the son of the wife he does not love, when he wills his property to his sons, he must not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the wife he loves in preference to his actual firstborn, the son of the wife he does not love. He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father’s strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him.*ⁱⁱⁱ

What are we to make of such examples of and (as in the latter case) even instruction concerning polygamous marriages? After all, if the Bible is the Word of God (as we believe it is), then how do we explain such things as polygamy? Have you ever wondered that? Or have you ever had critics of the Bible ask you questions about that? In fact, I was reading a book the other day that was quite critical of the Bible. One entire section was devoted to this topic of polygamy in the

Old Testament. The author concluded the chapter by simply stating: “If you are *opposed* to polygamy, don’t expect much support from the Bible.”^{iv}

Definitions

To be sure we’re all on the same page, let’s begin with some definitions. Just what is polygamy? Polygamy [*polus* meaning “many” and *gune* meaning “wife”] speaks of a marriage where there are more than two partners. That is, a man has two or more wives or a woman has two or more husbands at the same time. There are more technical terms to describe variations of this, but I won’t go into that this morning.^v

Polygamy is, however, to be distinguished from *monogamy*. Monogamy [from *mono* meaning “one” and *gune* meaning “wife”], in the sense described in the Bible, refers to one man being married to one woman.

What the Old Testament Describes

So just what does the Bible, and specifically the Old Testament, have to say about polygamy? If you remember the first message in this series on *Tough Questions from the Old Testament*, we suggested an important principle. It’s this: the Bible does not *prescribe* all it *describes*.

When your doctor *prescribes* a medicine, he’s telling you to take it. That’s a *prescription*. But when your doctor *describes* a remedy, he’s telling you what’s out there, what’s available. That’s a *description*. The Bible is like that. The Bible *describes* certain things, like the sins and failures of people (even people who love God), without necessarily *prescribing* those same actions.

One of the sinful practices, even among God’s people, that the Bible *describes* is the sin of polygamy. We’ve already mentioned several passages that tell us just how wide-spread this sinful practice was in Israel. On the other hand, it’s a mistake to assume that polygamy was the rule in the Old Testament, and that monogamy was the exception. The fact of the matter is that Adam, Noah, Issaac and Joseph were most likely monogamists (having only one wife) and Abraham, Jacob and David were polygamists, having several wives.^{vi}

Polygamy is first mentioned in the Bible as the result of man’s sin. Genesis 4:19 says this: “Lamech married two women, one named Adah and the other Zillah.” And in nearly every occurrence of polygamy in the Old Testament, it is either motivated by sinful attitudes or results in sinful consequences. Here in Geneses 4 Lamech boasts to his two wives of his prowess in killing another man.

The next case of polygamy mentioned in the Bible is Abraham as described in Genesis 16. God had promised many descendants to Abraham. There was only one problem – Sarah, his wife, was barren. So they devise a plan. Sarah takes her servant, Hagar, and gives her to Abraham as his wife.^{vii} We know the rest of the story. Hagar has a child by Abraham named Ishmael. The whole arrangement resulted in envy and family division. Why? Abraham’s marriage to Hagar was an act of unbelief to start with.

One final example. As we said earlier, Solomon is certainly the best known polygamist in the Old Testament, with his 700 wives and 300 concubines. But we need to notice what the Bible says about the consequences of his polygamy:

...and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. 1 Kings 11:3-5

This is what the Bible, and specifically, the Old Testament *describes*; just as it describes adultery, murder, corruption, and idolatry among God's people.^{viii} However, what the Bible describes is *not* necessarily what it prescribes. Quite frankly, I'm thankful that the Bible is so realistic that it describes the way God works in the world *as it is* and among his people *as they are*.

"But why," you might ask, "does the Bible even lay down legislation for how a man is to treat a situation with more than one wife, such as in the passage we read earlier: *If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other...*" (Deuteronomy 21:15)? Again, we must remember that God is working in and through a fallen world...with people like you and me. Amazingly God providentially used the polygamy of Jacob to bring about the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Apparently, God was willing to pass regulation that controlled the effects of polygamy, but not to immediately abolish it. Just as I teach my children progressively, so God knew that his was not the time to focus on this lesson. We might condemn certain practices of these Old Testament saints. But if the truth were known and God were to reveal the thoughts and intents of our hearts, we would all – *without exception* – be found guilty.

What the Old Testament Prescribes

What then does the Bible *prescribe* in the area of marriage? From the very beginning, God set the pattern for marriage: one man and one woman:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created *man* in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." ... And God saw all that he had made, *and it was very good.* Genesis 1:26-28, 31

I want you to notice that "man" is defined in these verses as "male and female." Creation as the image of God means, among other things, that man was created for relationship. According to

this verse, true humanity exists in community and the essential form of this community is the relationship between one man and one woman. God is a personal God and as his image we are created with “personalness” i.e. a unique capacity for relationship.

If we were nothing but a highly developed brute, then it is to be expected that we will behave like brutes, with rape, incest, sexual abuse, homosexuality and polygamy. That is why sex divorced from a committed, monogamous and loving relationship of marriage is a mockery to the image of God in man. Animals don't think about ethics or reflect on their feelings in relationship. Animals think, but they don't think about the fact that they think. But man does!

Ten times in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 God says, “it is good” about various aspects of this creation, including this creation prototype of male and female. But when we come to chapter 2 where we see Adam standing alone, apart from the woman, God says for the first time, “it is not good.”

The LORD God said, “*It is not good* for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. Genesis 2:18-21

On the outside, everything looked great. Adam was in the perfect “bachelor pad.” He had food, drink and rest. But there was one problem—he was without companionship. And to get his point across and emphasize the felt need, God parades before Adam all these different animals: livestock, birds and beasts. It becomes quite clear to Adam that none of these animals are suitable as a complimentary partner or “helper.”

Can't you just imagine God parading before Adam a cow? Great for milking, but not the most communicative in relationship! And the Adam sees what has been called “man's best friend” and names it a “dog.” Maybe they even hang out together for awhile, like I do with my dog. When I'm feeling bummed, I might call Belle and sit on the back porch and stroke her furry coat. But you know what? She's a great listener, but she never talks back. No, each animal is deficient when it comes to being a suitable helper for Adam. So what does God do? He makes a woman from the rib of man and brings her to Adam:

So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” Genesis 2:21-23

Remember, they didn't wear any clothes back then in the Garden. So God brings Eve up to Adam who says, “Great, someone I can play checkers with!” No, he cries out, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called...” “Whoo man!” (woman) for she was taken out of man. God lovingly place naked Eve before naked Adam and said, “This is your companion!”

But then, God shows us the context in which this relationship is to be nurtured and enjoyed:

For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. Genesis 2:24

This is one of the most frequently cited passages in the New Testament. It's cited in Matthew 19:5, Mark 10:8, 1 Corinthians 6:16 and Ephesians 5:31. And it's no wonder, because here God gives us the definition of marriage. For a true marriage to take place, there must be a *leaving* (an emotional and psychological leaving of mother and father), a *cleaving* to one woman (including some type of public commitment to one another), and a *becoming one flesh* (the sexual consummation of the marriage relationship).

This is a happy day! Do you know why? Because one of the members of our fellowship is entering into this marriage commitment this very afternoon. And I have the privilege of "tying the knot" so to speak. Who am I speaking of? It's Glenwood McGeorge (our bass player) who is marrying Julie Bolster (who's out getting her hair done this morning!).

INTERVIEW : Glenwood McGeorge and Julie Bolster

Glen, we can start with the obvious. How many women are you marrying this afternoon? Briefly, what does this verse mean to you: to leave, to cleave and to become one flesh?

(Prayer for Glenn and Julie)

We see from Genesis 1 and 2 that, from the very beginning God set the pattern for marriage: one man and one woman. Not one man and several women and not one woman and several men. But one man and one woman. In fact, this seems to have been the general practice of the human race until the time of Lamech in Genesis 4.^{ix} Jesus himself affirms this pattern.

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the *two* will become one flesh'? So they are no longer *two*, but one. Matthew 19:4-6

Jesus emphasizes it twice: "the *two* will become one flesh" and "they are no longer *two*, but one."

Paul says the same thing. "Let each man have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Corinthians 7:2). And again, in writing to young Timothy he says concerning church leaders that an elder is to be the husband of *one* wife (1 Timothy 3:2, 12).

Not only does the Bible prescribe (or teach) monogamy in marriage, but it also clearly warns of the dangers of compromising this creation principle. The Law of Moses said, "You shall not multiply wives." (Deuteronomy 17:17). On several occasions, the warning against polygamy is repeated in 1 Kings, where we have a description of Solomon's many wives (1 Kings 11:3-5).

Given our cultural context, not many of us (if any of us) are tempted to compromise this principle of one man for one woman by taking multiple wives or by a woman taking multiple husbands.^x And yet all the while being condemnatory of Old Testament believers who had polygamous relationships, we too can compromise the creation principle of one man for one woman in more subtle ways.

We can compromise God's good intentions for one man with one woman by a lustful glance, by an unhealthy emotional attachment, by a pornographic web site, by a failure to truly leave, cleave and become one flesh in the marriage relationship in which God has us. We compromise God's good intentions for one man with one woman by leaving a marriage relationship and marrying someone else without biblical justification. As singles, we can compromise God's good intentions by failing to keep ourselves for our future mate.

Several years ago Phyllis George interviewed Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach. It was a dull interview until Phyllis asked, "Roger, how do you feel when you compare yourself with Joe Namath, who is so sexually active and has a different woman on his arm every time we see him?"

"Phyllis," Roger answered, "I'm sure I'm just as sexually active as Joe. The difference is that all of mine is with one woman."

Touchdown! Roger hit the end zone with that comeback. Real men don't commit adultery. And neither do real woman. A real man sticks with one woman. Period.^{xi}

ⁱ Actually, the Book of Mormon agrees with the Bible on the subject of one man for one woman. In the Book of Mormon, Jacob 3:5 states that the commandment of the Lord was to have one wife. It was the later "revelations" given to Joseph Smith that permitted, even commanded, polygamy (cf. *Doctrine and Covenants* 132:38, 39).

ⁱⁱ Other examples of polygamy in the Old Testament include Jacob (Genesis 31:17-18 "Then Jacob put his children and his wives on camels...") and David (2 Samuel 5:13-14 "After he left Hebron, David took more concubines and wives in Jerusalem, and more sons and daughters were born to him.")

ⁱⁱⁱ Another difficult passage is found in 2 Samuel 12:7-8. It reads: "Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. 8 *I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more.*" It seems as if God gave Saul's wives to David. However, it was customary that the wives of a deceased King were entrusted to the protection and care of his successor. Othewise, someone marrying one of the deceased King's widows might try to usurp the throne. This was shy Solomon was so alarmed by Adonijah's proposal to marry King David's youngest wife, Abishag (1 Kings 2:22). Another passage that, at first glance, is difficult to understand is 1 Kings 15:5 "For David had done what was right in the eyes of the LORD and had not failed to keep any of the LORD's commands all the days of his life-except in the case of Uriah the Hittite." However, several things need to be kept in mind. First, David's life is being contrasted to the sins of Abijam (cf. verse 1). Secondly, this is a general characterization of David's life, and not intended as a precise statement of details. David himself confessed that he had sinned in numbering the people of Israel. Finally, David's other sins did not turn him from moving in the direction of obedience.

^{iv} C. Dennis McKinsey, *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995), 282.

^v More technically, bigamy refers to a man having *two* wives or a woman having *two* husbands, while polygamy refers to having three or more partners. Also more technically *polyandry* is the term used to describe a woman who has more than one husband.

^{vi} But even where there were several wives, one seemed to be the chief wife.

^{vii} The Babylonian Code of Hammurabi allowed this same practice.

^{viii} In many of these cases, there was a chief or true wife and then secondary wives. This is also the case in many lands where polygamy is present today. What this shows is that monogamy is the ideal.

^{ix} Monogamy highlights the value of the woman. Where there are several wives, each is often viewed as mere property to be selfishly used.

^x Polygamy is however a problem in certain parts of the world, particularly Africa.

^{xi} Adapted from Steve Farrar, president of Strategic Living Ministries in Dallas. *Men of Integrity*, Vol. 1, no. 1 as cited on www.preachingtoday.com