

Marriage Revisited: The Christian Polygamy Movement

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Introduction

No one ever said the Bible was easy to understand. If it were, there would be no market for books dealing with Bible difficulties. But as it is, even the briefest of surveys reveals the number of such books out there—all offered to help us sort through the many puzzling things we encounter in Scripture. Of course those who deny inspiration and inerrancy view the Bible's difficulties as the evidence of its fallibility as a merely human document. Some of the earlier books written to handle Bible difficulties responded specifically to that charge.¹

But there are many more difficulties in Scripture than those that touch directly upon the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy. There is truly a plethora of problems in the Bible, and quite a few books have come off the press in recent years to help Christians out. There are some helpful "Bible difficulties" books out there,² as well as a variety of "hard sayings" volumes—ones on the whole Bible,³ just the Old⁴ or New Testament,⁵ or the hard sayings of Jesus⁶ and Paul.⁷ Most if not all the doctrines we study have sets of problematic data that have to be reckoned with. That's the nature of Scripture; it's a thinking man's book that requires one to roll up his sleeves and do a lot of hard work. It is because the Scriptures are hard to understand that the untaught and unstable end up twisting them to their own destruction (2 Pet 3:16).

One doesn't have to read very far in Scripture before one bumps into problems. At the root of many of them is Genesis 3. The Fall changed everything: it broke Adam and Eve's fellowship with their Creator, tainted their relationship with each other, poisoned their environment and their quality of life within it, set up the age-long conflict with the serpent, and corrupted all their descendants. We see the results of this last item immediately. The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 is one of sibling rivalry, jealousy, anger, and murder. Eden is gone. Harmony has been

¹ E.g. R. A. Torrey, *Difficulties and Alleged Errors and Contradictions in the Bible* (New York: Revell, 1907); W. Arndt, *Bible Difficulties: An Examination of Passages of the Bible Alleged to be Irreconcilable with Its Inspiration* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1932).

² Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1992).

³ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1996).

⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1988).

⁵ Peter H. Davids, *More Hard Sayings of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1991); on the gospels, Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Sayings in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

⁶ F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1983); William Neil, *Difficult Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975); William Neil and Stephen H. Travis, *More Difficult Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

⁷ Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of Paul* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1989).

destroyed. No longer are God's creatures "very good." No longer does the creation reflect the goodness and holiness of its Creator. Yes, sin complicates everything. From Genesis 3 onward the ever-present reality of sin makes it difficult to distinguish that which God approves from that which He disapproves but nevertheless allows. Once sin enters the picture, it's not always so easy to tell whether the things people do in Scripture merit divine disapproval or approval. When sinners act—and all human acts since Adam with the exception of Christ's are acts of sinners—it's sometimes hard to distinguish the good or neutral acts of sinners from their sinful acts.

For example, consider the descendants of Cain in Genesis 4: they build cities (v. 17), herd livestock (v. 20), play musical instruments (v. 21), and forge metal implements (v. 22). Are these merely the innocent and morally neutral activities of civilization, or are they the sinful acts of a fallen humanity in rebellion against God? Think of the city. Starting with its first reference in Gen 4:17, Jacques Ellul traces the concept of city throughout the Bible and concludes that cities in Scripture are the manifestation of human sin and rebellion against God, and as such are the enemy of the church.⁸ It is easy to see how this understanding could lead the church not only to view cities with aversion and suspicion, but to abandon them altogether.⁹

How about musical instruments? Through the centuries the church has struggled with the question of whether musical instruments have a place in public Christian worship. Hugh Stowell Brown, English Baptist preacher and contemporary of Charles H. Spurgeon, was convinced that "The introduction of instrumental music into the public and stated worship of the church, for singing the praises of Jehovah, is in direct contradiction to the express will of God, as contained in his complete and positive institutions."¹⁰ Brown traces the practice of the church back to the early church fathers, among whom Clement of Alexandria and Basil weighed in on the issue. As Brown points out, "The testimony of Clement is, that musical instruments in worship is fitter things for beasts than for men. Basil says, he thought musical instruments unprofitable and hurtful. He calls them, the inventions of Jubal of the race of Cain."¹¹

The Problem of Polygamy

There is another human activity mentioned in Genesis 4, which is the topic of this paper: *polygamy*. We read in v. 19 that "Lamech took to himself two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other, Zillah."¹² Is Lamech's act of polygamy¹³ evidence of his sinful

⁸ Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, Biblical and Theological Classics Library (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1997), 15.

⁹ For discussion of this point and others regarding the mission of the church and the city, see Randy A. Nelson, "The City as the New Frontier" <http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/14-4_City/14-4_R_Nelson.pdf>, accessed October 28, 2002.

¹⁰ Hugh Stowell Brown, "Discourses on Scripture Psalmody in Praising God and Against Instrumental Music in Public Worship" <<http://www.gospelcom.net/chi/HERITAGF/Issuenos/chl071.shtml>>, accessed October 28, 2002.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this paper are taken from the NASB.

¹³ Technically speaking, polygamy is a more general term that can refer to multiple marriages by either sex. Polygyny specifically describes the taking of multiple wives by a man, while polyandry means the taking of multiple

rebellion against God? Or could it be considered a morally neutral or even divinely sanctioned option? The text of Genesis 4 does not tell us what God thinks; it only records the fact that Lamech took two wives. Now of course the narrative does clearly present Lamech as a sinner in rebellion against God. After all, he is a murderer (v. 23) and a mocker of God's justice (v. 24; cf. v. 15). Thus, one could make the point that his taking two wives does reflect his rebellion against God's monogamous model for marriage as revealed in Genesis 1–2.

But what complicates the matter is that later in Scripture men appear who are not wicked rebels, but rather men who walk with God and are generally approved by God, and yet who have multiple wives. Abraham had both Sarah and Hagar for wives (Gen 16:3), as well as concubines (Gen 25:6).¹⁴ Jacob had the sisters Rachel and Leah and their handmaids Bilnah and Zilpah for a total of four wives (29:24, 28; 30:4, 9).¹⁵ In neither case does God openly condemn their taking of more than one wife. In fact, God makes a point to bless the “odd wife out” in each case—Hagar with a special promise (16:10–14) and provision (21:17–20), and Leah with a fruitful womb (29:31–35). Now again, it could be pointed out that God in no way arranges or openly condones these multiple marriages. They are entirely the doing of men, not God. God in His mercy takes pity upon these wives because they are helpless victims. He blesses Hagar because she is treated harshly by Sarah (16:6), and Leah because she is unloved by Jacob (29:31). God is at work in these marriages, but he has neither arranged them nor does he condone them.

But what about later OT revelation which *does* appear on the surface to place God's stamp of approval on polygamy? For example, we may note several pieces of divine legislation regarding marriage in the Law of Moses. First, Exod 21:7–11 addresses the situation of a girl sold by her father to another man.¹⁶ If the man who purchased the girl (for marriage) takes to himself another wife, “he may not reduce her [that is, the first wife whom he purchased] food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights” (v. 10).¹⁷ Second, Deut 21:15–17 regulates how a man must designate his inheritance to the sons of his multiple wives. He must assign the double portion to the first-born, even if the first-born is the son of his “unloved” wife. He must not give the double portion to “the son of the loved” wife (v. 16).

husbands by a woman. The related term bigamy identifies unlawful polygamy. For the sake of simplicity and in line with common usage, I will let the word polygamy stand for polygyny throughout this paper.

¹⁴ The concubine (Heb. פִּילְגֶּשֶׁת, פִּלְגֶּשֶׁת) of the ANE was the legal property of her master. She had some rights, but not as many as his full and free wives. We read of individuals having concubines in the period of the patriarchs (Gen 25:6, 35:22) and conquest (Jdg 8:31, 19:1; 1 Chron 2:46, 48), but after that they appear specifically as a royal prerogative (William White, “Concubine,” in *ZPEB*, vol. 1, ed. Merrill C. Tenney [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 1976], 935).

¹⁵ Other examples of unremarked polygamy by men generally approved by God are Caleb (1 Chron 2:46, 48) and Gideon (Judg 8:30).

¹⁶ This of course raises the whole issue of slavery in Scripture (cf. v. 2, “If you buy a Hebrew slave....”). For the matter of slavery and the Christian, see for example Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 288–90.

¹⁷ The word translated “conjugal rights” here is עֲנֻהָ, *cohabitation*, taken by some to be a euphemism for the designated time for marital relations (BDB, 773; cf. *TWOT*, vol. 2, 679). Gen 30:14–16 shows how two wives might negotiate for it. See also 1 Cor 7:3–4 for Paul's teaching regarding marital duty in the sexual realm. However, as we will see later, the meaning of עֲנֻהָ here is by no means certain.

Third, some passages in Leviticus do prohibit certain polygamous marriages, but only because they constitute incest. A man could not marry a woman *and* her daughter or granddaughter (18:17), a woman *and* her sister as a rival (v. 18), or a woman *and* her mother (20:14).¹⁸ Fourth, Deut 17:17 forbids the future king of Israel to “multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away.” Rather than forbidding polygamy outright, this regulation first of all seems instead to condemn the oriental practice of taking foreign wives when treaties are made with foreign allies. In warning the Israelite king against multiplying wives “lest his heart turn away” (יָסוּר לְבָבוֹ וְלֹא יִלֵּא), this passage seems clearly to anticipate the sin of Solomon, who “loved many foreign women” (1 Kgs 11:1). God had warned the Israelites not to take foreign (i.e., pagan and idolatrous) wives, “for they will surely turn your heart (יָטוּ אֶת־לִבְבְּכֶם) away after their gods” (v. 2; cf. Exod 34:12–16). But Solomon held fast to his foreign and idolatrous wives (cf. 1 Kgs 11:5–8) in love, and as a result “his wives turned his heart away” (וַיִּטּוּ נַשְׂיֹ אֶת־לְבָבוֹ) (v. 3).

Besides pagan polygamy, the second thing that the legislation in Deut 17:17 clearly forbids is *excessive* polygamy. The Israelite king is not to *multiply* wives to himself. Once again, this surely anticipates the excessive polygamy of Solomon, who “had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines” (1 Kgs 11:3).¹⁹

The point of all this is that none of the Mosaic legislation considered above condemns outright or prohibits polygamy per se. The Law regulates polygamy, forbids incestuous polygamy, and prohibits pagan and excessive polygamy in light of other Mosaic legislation. But it does not forbid polygamy outright. However, one could respond once again that, as in the case of the pre-Mosaic patriarchs, God is neither commanding nor openly condoning polygamy in the Mosaic Law, but rather merely regulating it as it already existed in ANE society. It is God’s desire not to allow the exploitation of women that drives him to legislate marriage the way He does in the Law of Moses. But the legislation of existing polygamy cannot automatically be taken to equal the divine stamp of approval upon it.

But that is not the end of the story. What about King David? Just as in the case of the patriarchs, David is a man who walked with God, was generally approved by God—indeed was a man “after God’s own heart” (1 Sam 13:14; cf. 1 Kgs 11:4), but who had multiple wives and concubines.²⁰ Furthermore, just like with the polygamous patriarchs, God never condemns

¹⁸ These are examples of the basic principle that through marriage a woman’s mother, sisters, and daughters become her husband’s mother, sisters, and daughters (Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 257–58).

¹⁹ If Exod 21:7–11 does concern a man’s responsibility not to withhold conjugal rights from any of his wives, Solomon would have had to have been superman in order to honor the conjugal rights of all his wives and concubines!

²⁰ Scripture specifically assigns eight wives and ten concubines to David, but he apparently had more. His first wife is Michal, the daughter of Saul (1 Sam 18:27), who is taken away from David (1 Sam 25:44) and then returned to him (2 Sam 3:14). Michal was followed by Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail the widow of Nabal (1 Sam 25:42–43). By the time David is established in Hebron as king of Judah he has added four more wives: Maacah, Haggith, Abital, and Eglah (2 Sam 3:3–5). When David is established in Jerusalem over all Israel he takes “more concubines and wives from Jerusalem” (2 Sam 5:13). Later we read specifically of ten concubines (2 Sam 15:16). Finally, David adds Bathsheba, the widow of Uriah, as his wife (2 Sam 11:27).

David's polygamy outright. But even more than this, one passage seems to indicate that God gave Saul's wives to David as a way of blessing him! In 2 Samuel 12, after David has committed adultery with Bathsheba, murdered her husband Uriah, and taken her as his wife, Nathan the prophet confronts David with his sin:

Nathan then said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul. I also gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these!'" (2 Sam 12:7–8).

Three things are remarkable about this passage. First, God does not condemn David's polygamy *per se*. As noted above, David has been amassing wives and concubines all along, without divine comment. God does not condemn David here merely for adding another wife to his household. Second, what God does clearly denounce in this passage is the fact that David has taken another man's wife: he has committed adultery (seventh commandment) with Bathsheba and has murdered (sixth commandment) her husband Uriah (vv. 9–10). Third, and most importantly, God seems to be telling David in this passage that Saul's *wives* are one of the blessings God has given to David!

Note again the verses cited above. Through Nathan, God rehearses to David all that He has done for him: He has anointed David king over Israel; He has delivered David from the hand of Saul; He has given David Saul's house; He has given David Saul's wives; and He has given David the house of Israel and Judah. All of these presumably are the blessings of God upon His anointed servant David. Saul's wives are placed together with the other gifts of God to David: kingship, deliverance from Saul, Saul's possessions, and a kingdom.

This is more than the toleration of polygamy (as with patriarchs). This is even more than the regulation of polygamy (as in the Mosaic legislation). This appears to be a clear-cut case of divine *approval* and even *promotion* of polygamy. It is apparently with His *blessing* that God gives Saul's wives to David. Saul's wives are God's present to David. How are we to take this?

The Christian Polygamy Movement

Many through the years have taken these OT data as grounds for promoting polygamy as biblical. The connection of polygamy to Mormonism is well known; however, Mormon polygamy will not be the focus of this paper.²¹ What has arisen in recent days, which I want to

²¹ For a brief history of the founding of Mormonism by Joseph Smith and the rise and development of his polygamy doctrine, see the section on Mormonism in Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985), 166–226). For a more detailed treatment of polygamy and Mormonism, see the chapters entitled "Origins and Importance of Polygamy" and "Polygamy today—Rejected by Saints" in Wallace Turner, *The Mormon Establishment* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 167–217. The Mormon Church, or Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), disavowed polygamy in 1890 and excommunicates any LDS members who practice it. However, an off-shoot denomination, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS), promotes and openly practices polygamy. Within the FLDS an estimated 30,000 people are presently

examine in this paper, is a movement completely unaffiliated with Mormonism, but that like Fundamental Mormonism promotes polygamy. However, this movement does so, not on the basis of extra-biblical revelations or doctrines like celestial marriage, but on the basis of the biblical data alone.

I first became aware of this non-Mormon “Christian Polygamy Movement” through an article on the website of *The Detroit News*.²² The article features Stephen Butt, polygamous husband of three wives, father of five children, and pastor of the recently organized Be Free Patriarchal Christian Church of Circleville, Utah.²³ This is just one of many non-Mormon and self-proclaimed Christian polygamy groups promoting their doctrine and lifestyle on the Internet today.²⁴ Butts claims that plural marriage comes straight out of the OT. He points to the patriarchs and claims, “Obviously polygamy can’t be something that’s immoral if God allowed it with these people whom he showed so much favor.”²⁵

The pattern of promoting polygamy as biblical at least in part on the basis of OT teaching can be duplicated. On his website Healing Leaves Health, self-proclaimed pro-polygamy Christian Mike Sullivan supplies a link to his article “Polygamy is Not Sinful!”²⁶ The first point of Sullivan’s paper deals with “The OT and the Law on Polygamy.” Here is his opening paragraph:

The Scriptures are clear that polygamy was and still is, today a valid form of marriage. God, nowhere condemns such godly men as Abraham (Gen 16:3), Jacob (Gen 29–30), Moses (Exod 2:16–21; Num 12:1), Caleb (1 Chron 2:46, 48), Gideon (Judg 8:30), or David (1 Sam

practicing polygamy throughout the West. Some cases of polygamy have brought the FLDS into the national spotlight recently. On August 27, 2002 the outspoken polygamist Tom Green was sentenced to five years to life in prison for child rape because in 1986 he took a 13-year-old girl as his “spiritual” wife (“Polygamist Tom Green Sentenced For Child Rape” <http://kutv.com/topstories/StoryFolder/story_13318632_html>, accessed October 30, 2002). Most recently, Suzie Stubbs Holm, member of a polygamist FLDS household in rural Utah, was charged by the Utah Attorney General with abetting bigamy and illegal sex. She is accused of getting her 16-year-old sister to marry into her polygamous household. She could get up to ten years in prison. This is the first time in more than 100 years that Utah prosecutors are going after a woman on polygamy-related charges (“Utah Woman Charged with Aiding and Abetting Polygamy,” *USA Today* [October 14, 2002] <http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2002-10-14-utah-woman-polygamy_x.htm>, accessed October 14, 2002).

²² Hannah Wolfson, “Polygamists Say Bible is On Their Side,” *The Detroit News* (January 13, 2000) <<http://detnews.com/2000/religion/0001/16/01140011.htm>>, accessed July 11, 2002.

²³ The church’s website is www.befree.org, but unfortunately at the time of writing was closed for repairs.

²⁴ Just a sampling of organizations (and leaders if named) are: Dave Hutchison, Liberated Christians <http://www.lovemore.com/articles/christians_love.html>; Mike Sullivan, Healing Leaves Health <<http://members.aol.com/healinglvs/healinglvs/index.htm>>; Mark Henkel, TruthBearer.org; and Christian Polygamy <<http://www.polygamy.net/>>. Not all polygamy websites are Christian. Michael Shone operates the largest polygamy personal ads Internet site, www.3coins.com, but says religion has nothing to do with why he practices and promotes polygamy (Kate Silver, “Jesus Loves Polygamy, This I Know: Christians Use Internet as Polygamy Tool,” *Las Vegas Weekly* [January 11, 2001] <www.lasvegasweekly.com/2001_2/11_22/news_upfront1.html>, accessed July 11, 2002).

²⁵ Wolfson, “Bible On Their Side.”

²⁶ By the way, Sullivan’s bio reveals that he graduated from Calvary Chapel Bible College (associated with Chuck Smith and the Calvary Chapel denomination) in the late 80’s and attended The Master’s College (associated with John MacArthur and Grace Community Church) in the early 90’s where he majored in theology for two years. He left Master’s after rejecting dispensationalism and mild Calvinism in favor of five-point Calvinism.

18:27; 2 Sam 3:2–3) for having more than one wife. In fact, in the case of David, God would have given him more wives had he asked for them [quotation of 2 Sam 12:7–8]. God gave David these wives as a BLESSING, just as anointing him as king over Israel, protecting him from Saul, and giving him the house of Israel and Judah were also blessings from Him.²⁷

For Mark Henkel, founder of TruthBearer.org, the argument is very much the same:

Mark Henkel ... is a conservative Christian who, after extensive Bible study, realized that the marriage lessons he's learned are wrong. Since Isaiah, Abraham, Moses, and other figures had more than one wife, Henkel decided to follow in the "mighty heroes" [sic] footsteps.... Henkel adds that Christian polygamy differs from Mormon polygamy. With Mormons, he says, the main purpose for polygamy is procreation; they believe it's their duty to give life to a multitude of children's unborn souls. With Christians, it's about following Scripture.²⁸

On the homepage of his website, TruthBearer.org, Henkel makes it very clear that his is a Christian and morally clean organization:

This ministry is a Christ-centered, Spirit-led, Scripture-believing organization. As such, this web-site is 100% "family-friendly." That means, therefore, that this web-site does NOT contain or endorse *any* form of vulgarities or "fleshly foolishness."

As preached here at this ministry, **Christian Polygamy** is only about life-long-committed (hence, NONpromiscuous), consensual, NONabusive, loving Christian MARRIAGE. The only educational matter here is that this is about men ever-growing in other-centered, ministerial, giving, selfless love in marriage to more than one woman (as Christ so selflessly and givingly loves the Churches). Accordingly, we place the initial warning to all men who have not yet grown to such profound maturity in selfless loving, "Do Not Try This At Home."²⁹

Under his brief presentation of the scriptural support for Christian polygamy, Henkel offers a hodgepodge of verses, among which are some of the OT texts discussed above. First, Exod 21:10 protects the first wife's rights in a polygamous marriage. (This verse comes only twenty-two verses after the commandment against adultery in 20:14, Henkel notes). Second, 1 Kgs 11:3–4 condemns Solomon's multiplying wives to himself, while Scripture does not condemn David's merely adding his eighteen-plus wives. Thus, adding a handful of wives is not sinful, while multiplying hundreds of wives is. Third, Deut 21:15–17 gives specific instructions to any man with "two wives," assuming apparently that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with having two wives.³⁰

²⁷ Mike Sullivan, "Polygamy is Not Sinful!" <<http://members.aol.com/healing1vs/healing1vs/poly-00.htm>>, accessed July 11, 2002, emphasis original.

²⁸ Silver, "Jesus Loves Polygamy."

²⁹ "Christian Polygamy" <<http://truthbearer.org>>, accessed October 31, 2002, emphases original.

³⁰ "Scripture Exegesis" <<http://truthbearer.org/read-first/exegesis>>, accessed October 31, 2002. Henkel offers what he calls more in-depth exegetical proof through links to a series of "Truth Tracts," but paid membership is required for access.

The anonymous Christian Polygamy website offers quite extensive and documented research papers for those seeking the biblical teaching on polygamy. The paper entitled “The Biblical Portrayal of Polygamy as Seen Through Detailed Inquiry” (forty-one pages, seventeen of which are endnotes), starts with Lamech and examines all of the instances of polygamy in the OT. The anonymous author finds at least four cases where polygamy appears to receive God’s stamp of approval. First, God promoted and enforced the law of levirate marriage.³¹

The three levirate instances in the Old Testament revealed God’s encouragement of levirate marriage. In Genesis 38, God struck dead the deceitful levir but the widow was vindicated in her deceit to have the duty fulfilled. In Deuteronomy 25, the law provided extreme pressure on the levir in the form of public shame so as to fulfill his duty. The intent was not to allow a provision of escape but to produce compliance. The book of Ruth then clarified the spirit of the levirate duty as an obligation falling upon even lesser kinsmen and as being an honorable and praiseworthy function.³²

Second, God blessed David with Saul’s wives: “God’s action in giving David Saul’s wives is regarded as a blessing ‘I would have added to you many more things like these!’ (2 Sam 12:8b), and likewise God threatened the removal of his wives as a judgment (2 Sam 12:11).”³³

Third, God condoned the polygamous marriage of Solomon to the Shulammitte in Song of Solomon:

Chronologically the marriage has difficulty being other than polygamous ... the book reveals a harem of sixty queens and eighty concubines (Song 6:8–9) that can be none other than Solomon’s.... Most importantly in regard to this inquiry, the marriage and sexual relationship portray a **divinely** accepted and encouraged marriage. Since Solomon’s marriage here is polygamous, the polygamist finds a clear instance of a divinely accepted polygamous marriage to support its contention. But even more than this, the Song of Songs is not a passing reference but the most lengthy comment on marriage in the whole of Scripture. This instance of a polygamous marriage and the extensive and obvious divine encouragement of the marriage exhibited in Song of Songs therefore requires a major adjustment in the “monogamy only” contention.³⁴

Fourth, Joash king of Judah appears to be commended by God for taking only two wives instead of multiplying wives like Solomon: “And Joash did what was right in the sight of the LORD all

³¹ The Latin term *levir* refers to a husband’s brother. The law of levirate marriage states that a man must marry his deceased brother’s wife and bear her a son. Not only would the resultant son carry on the deceased brother’s name and inherit his property, but the widowed wife would be cared for as well.

³² The author adds, “While the individual Biblical cases may or may not have been polygamous, the levirate custom and law functioned with the result of producing mandated polygamy. The Biblical cases of levirate were thusly surveyed to ascertain God’s attitude and actions with regard to levirate marriage and these were seen as reflective of His attitude toward the mandated polygamy produced by the levirate law and custom (“The Biblical Portrayal of Polygamy as Seen Through Detailed Inquiry” <<http://www.polygamy.net/Biblical-Date/Chapter-Two.htm>>, accessed October 31, 2002.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., emphasis original.

the days of Jehoiada the priest. And Jehoiada took two wives for him, and he became the father of sons and daughters” (2 Chron 24:2–3). The anonymous author of the article under examination responds,

The proximity of these two comments implies that the taking of wives in this case was part of the commended conduct and probably relates to the Deuteronomic 17 limitation on excess wives. This editorial comment concerning Joash is an exception among the citations of harems in the Divided Kingdom, the other references being simple historical references.³⁵

The anonymous author concludes his (or her?) study of the polygamy passages by acknowledging on the one hand that “many cases were historical occurrences without obvious comment as to the propriety of polygamy.” But on the other hand, “Although mere existence and citation in Scripture does not reflect a positive or negative comment, the more citations that occur the more one would expect that accompanying comment would exist if the item in question was controversial or morally important.”³⁶ Furthermore, the reader is reminded of the cases cited above where God appears to promote and commend polygamy. The conclusion of the paper, then, is this: “Polygamy, rather than being identified as sinful conduct by the Scriptures, is portrayed as a divinely accepted institution in certain cultural contexts.”³⁷

Polygamy and Theological Method

For Bible believing Christians, the rightness or wrongness of polygamous marriage hinges on God’s view of it. The Christian polygamists cited in this paper who claim obedience to Scripture agree with Christian monogamists on this point. It is God’s opinion that ultimately matters. So what does God think about polygamy? Christian polygamists marshal the scriptural examples of polygamy to argue that because God permits and regulates the practice, He must condone it. Christian monogamists counter that while these passages do show God permitting and regulating polygamy, they do not prove conclusively that He condones it. Is there any way to get beyond this impasse? One way is to remind ourselves of an important principle of theological method. John Feinberg points out that the way to answer questions regarding any given theological concept is to “go first to passages that directly address the concept in question, for they are the basis for our fundamental understanding of the concept.”³⁸ The first passages to consider when formulating a biblical/theological doctrine ought to be the didactic passages that specifically speak to the doctrine.³⁹

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001), 691. Feinberg is not talking about polygamy in this context, but rather Open Theism. However, his main point is about proper theological method, and that point applies to any theological discussion.

³⁹ Lewis and Demarest express this basic hermeneutical principle in this way, “Doctrinal passages have initially a greater importance than historical narratives that may report ideas and practices not normative for others” (Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, three volumes in one [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 1:31).

What is the underlying question in this discussion of polygamy? Namely this: What is God's will regarding marriage? The Christian polygamists surveyed above offer their biblical case for the view that God approves of polygamy. But what kind of passages do they choose first and foremost in order to defend their view? Invariably, they begin with the narrative or legal passages that either describe the practice of polygamy, or show God responding somehow to the practice of polygamy. But this is wrongheaded, for why would one seek to answer a question regarding *God's view* of something by first examining *man's behavior*? Victor P. Hamilton makes the important observation that while

Ancient Israel never produced a marriage manual for its citizenry.... What we do have abundantly in the OT are stories about the marriages of men and women. On occasion the narration of these marriages is pivotal in the development of a major theme or motif. At other times their telling appears but peripheral. Some of these marriages appear, on surface, to be normal and predictable, while others border on the bizarre. Some of these marriages are marked by sanctity and integrity, while others are aberrant and profane. Taking all these marriage stories together, looking for common threads, and on that basis trying to construct an OT concept of marriage is like sitting beside our highways and parkways, observing the flow of traffic and the driving patterns of individuals, and on that basis composing a driver's manual. Both in driving and in marriage there is often a considerable difference between prescription and practice. For this reason, we ... need to *distinguish between the divine will in marriages and OT marriages as they are illustrated*. The latter may reflect the former, but not necessarily so."⁴⁰

Therefore, since the question under discussion is *God's* view of marriage, wouldn't it make more sense to start with passages where God *gives* us His view? Are there any such passages? There most certainly are, so let's examine three of the key texts now.⁴¹

God's Intention for Marriage

The obvious place to start is the beginning, Genesis 1–2, where God first establishes the institution of marriage. Here, in a world yet uncorrupted by sin, God teaches us what His original intention was for the man and the woman He created. We will begin with Gen 1:27.

Genesis 1:27

Gen 1:1–2:3 comprises the opening scene of Scripture, with 1:1–2 serving as the introductory statement and 2:1–3 the summary conclusion of God's creation of "the heavens and the earth ... and all their hosts." Several observations are important from this opening narration of creation.

⁴⁰ Victor P. Hamilton, "Marriage, Old Testament and Ancient Near East," in *ABD*, vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 560, emphasis added.

⁴¹ For the sake of space I am going to limit myself to an examination of Gen 1:27, 2:24, and Matt 19:4–6. If God clearly communicates His original intent for marriage in these three passages, and He doesn't change His view in any others, then we can conclude that He is still of the same opinion. Other key teaching passages that touch on the divine intent for marriage would include 1 Cor 7:1–40, Eph 5:22–33, and 1 Pet 3:1–7. For God's requirements specifically for pastors and deacons, see 1 Tim 3:1–13 and Titus 1:5–9.

First, man is clearly the climax of the creation account.⁴² Second, man is created in the very image of God (v. 27a).⁴³ Third, man is created as male and female (v. 27b).⁴⁴ Fourth, God blesses the male and female He has created and tells them to be fruitful, multiply, fill, and subdue the earth (v. 28).

The important point to make for our purposes is that God’s creation and blessing of man is quite different from that of the other living creatures. God creates the animals of the sea, air, and land apparently *en masse*, according to their various kinds (vv. 20–21, 24–25). Then He blesses them all as a group to be fruitful, multiply, and fill their respective environments (v. 22). However, God does not create humanity *en masse*, but rather as a solitary male and female “in His own image” (v. 27). Hence, God’s blessing that follows is not directed to a mass of humanity, but to the single male and single female He has just created (v. 28). As this male and this female—this couplet of created humanity—proceed to be fruitful, multiply, fill, and subdue the earth, they will reflect their Creator who has made them in His own image and likeness (cf. 5:3).

Genesis 2:24

God’s intention for one man and one woman to come together as one in order to fulfill His plan for them becomes even more clear in Genesis 2. As stated above, Gen 1:1–2:3 is the opening scene of creation, bracketed by an introduction (1:1–2) and conclusion (2:1–3). Gen 2:4–4:26

⁴² Man’s creation comes at the end of, and is set apart from, the rest of creation. Concerning the rest of creation God calls forth vegetation from the earth (1:11), living creatures from the waters, birds from above the earth (v. 20), and living creatures from the earth (v. 24). But regarding man God declares, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (v. 26a). Furthermore, man is set over the rest of creation: “and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (v. 26b).

⁴³ Man is created in the *image* (בְּצַלְמוֹ) of God and according to the *likeness* (כְּדְמוּתוֹ) of God (v. 26). These two words are similar, but in this context the first probably carries the idea of representation, while the second carries the idea of similarity. Thus, to state it simply, “*The fact that man is in the image of God means that man is like God and represents God*” (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* [Leicester: IVP; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 442, emphasis original).

⁴⁴ There is a significant link between man created in the image of God and man created as male and female. This becomes obvious when we observe the structure of v. 27:

- A “And God created man” (וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם)
- B “in His own image,” (בְּצַלְמוֹ)
- B’ “in the image of God” (בְּצַלְמוֹ אֱלֹהִים)
- A’ “He created him;” (בָּרָא אֹתוֹ)
- B” “male and female” (זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה)
- A” “He created them.” (בָּרָא אֹתָם)

We see that B” parallels B’ and B—the phrase “male and female” parallels the phrases “in the image of God” and “in His own image.” There seems, then, to be an intentional link being forged between man’s being created in the image of God and man’s being created as male and female. This becomes even more intriguing when we add to this the statement of Gen 2:24, where in marriage it is said that “a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become *one* flesh” (בִּשְׂרָ אֶחָד). Man as created in the image of God is created as a plurality of male and female, even as with God Himself there is an aspect of plurality (Gen 1:26). But yet mankind existing separately as male and female becomes one flesh in marriage, even as “the Lord our God is *one* Lord” (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד, Deut 6:4). There is one God, yet three divine Persons (Matt 28:19); there are two human persons, yet one race called “man . . . in the likeness of God” (Gen 5:1–2).

comprises the next section of the book, beginning with a second look at creation.⁴⁵ Gen 2:4–25 serves a two-fold function in the flow of the narrative. Looking ahead, it prepares us for the events recorded in chapter 3. Looking back, it provides a more detailed account of what occurred in chapter 1. Gen 2:4–25 zeroes in on God’s crowning creative act: man—his creation, environment, tasks, and the creation of his partner.

We will focus on this last point: God’s creation of the man’s partner (vv. 20–25).⁴⁶ Gen 1:27 simply stated that God created man in His image as male and female. But now, Genesis 2 informs us that God created the man first (v. 7), with some intervening events preceding His creation of the woman. After God placed the man in the garden of Eden to cultivate and keep it (v. 15), He declared, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him” (v. 18). Hamilton explains the significance of this phrase:

The Hebrew word for “helper” [עֲזָרָה] has particularly rich nuances throughout the OT. For example, of the twenty-one times it is used, fifteen times it refers to divine help. Most of these refer to help in times of despair or distress. As his helper, woman rescues man from his loneliness and delivers him from his solitude.... This helper is to be “meet for him” (KJV) or “fit for him” (RSV), which are attempts to translate a Hebrew expression which reads literally “like what is in front of him” [כְּנֶגְדּוֹ]. A good translation would be “corresponding to,” suggesting that both man and woman form a polarity. Neither is inferior/superior to the other, but one without the other is incomplete.⁴⁷

God’s decision to create a companion for Adam flows from the fact that out of all of the other creatures God had made and brought to Adam to name, “there was not found a helper suitable for him” (v. 20b). God then causes the man to fall into a deep sleep, takes one of his ribs, fashions it into a woman, and brings her to the man (vv. 21–22), who exclaims, “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (v. 23). He names her Woman (אִשָּׁה) out of recognition of the fact that she has been taken “out of Man” (מִגֵּזֶת אָדָם, v. 23b). The man recognizes his own likeness in the woman.⁴⁸ She is his perfect complement and companion, for she has been fashioned from the very substance of his own body.

“For this cause,” v. 24 concludes, “a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” Allen P. Ross explains the significance of this verse in terms of God’s original intention for marriage:

⁴⁵ Gen 2:4 marks the first occurrence of the word תּוֹלְדוֹת , “generations,” which recurs through Genesis as a major structural marker in the book (cf. 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 27, 25:12, 19, 36:1, 9, 37:2). Gen 2:4–4:26 treats three topics: Adam and Eve’s creation (2:4–25), fall (3:1–24), and sons (4:1–26).

⁴⁶ Concerning the man’s creation, while Gen 1:27 merely stated that God created man in His image, Gen 2:7 fills in some details. God created man in two steps. First, He formed the man’s body from the dust of the ground. Second, He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. This makes man a unique being, a being imbued with the very breath of God, a being created in the image of God.

⁴⁷ Hamilton, “Marriage,” 568.

⁴⁸ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in *EBC*, vol. 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 47.

The epilogue to the passage explains that this account provides the foundation of marriage. (The “therefore” [עַל־כֵּן] formula is frequent in Genesis.) If God is the speaker then the verse must be in the future tense; but if the narrator (the view more consistent with usage), then it would be translated in the present tense: “This is why a man leaves.” The divine plan for marriage, then, is one man and one woman becoming one flesh and living together in their integrity. For the sake of the wife the man leaves the strong bond of his parents and unites with her.⁴⁹

Ronald F. Youngblood picks up on the wordplay from v. 23 to make the same point:

As in English, so also in Hebrew the words for “man” and “woman” sound very much alike. Even in themselves they serve to help cement the one-flesh union—monogamy, not polygamy—that was the divine intention for husbands and wives from the beginning. One man would be united to one woman and they would become one flesh (2:24) forever (Matt 19:4–6).⁵⁰

The initial divine teaching on marriage introduced in Genesis 1 and expanded in chapter 2 stresses three important points. First, God is the one who solemnized the marriage of the man and the woman (1:27, 2:22). Second, the marriage is monogamous—a one-woman-to-one-man union.⁵¹ Third, this first union “became a measuring rod for all marriages that were to be solemnized in future generations (v. 24).”⁵²

Youngblood’s reference to Matt 19:4–6 cited above leads us to the third significant text where Scripture teaches God’s original intention for marriage. In this passage, Jesus Christ, the one and only Son of God, who came from the very bosom of the Father in order to explain Him to us (John 1:18), clarifies God’s intention for marriage from the very beginning. Let’s examine this third key text now.

⁴⁹ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 127.

⁵⁰ Ronald F. Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 40. This is not just the conservative evangelical view. That broader biblical scholarship is in basic agreement that Gen 2:24 reflects an original intention for marriage as monogamous can be seen from the following quote from the article on marriage from *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*: “The ideal marriage [sic] in OT society was a monogamous one, one man for one woman, one woman for one man. The creation narrative (Gen 2:24) makes this point with its call to the man to forsake his mother and father and cleave unto his wife (not wives)” (Hamilton, “Marriage,” 565).

⁵¹ Pamela S. Mann says it well, “Adam ... the first husband, was a monogamist. He had no choice. The Lord made him only one wife ‘and it was very good’ (Gen 1:31)” (Pamela S. Mann, “Toward a Biblical Understanding of Polygamy,” *Missiology* 17 [1989]: 15). Unfortunately, what Mann makes of this astute observation belies the title of her article. She concludes, “A decent polygamist, however, can be one flesh with the first wife on her day of cooking and sleeping with him and then one flesh with his second wife on her day.” Thus, while Western readers of Genesis “contextualize” the teaching in terms of their established monogamous practice, “for those ordered societies where polygamy has worked for generations, Genesis 2 provides not a call to monogamy, but a poetic explanation for sexual attraction” (Mann, “Understanding of Polygamy,” 15).

⁵² Leupold A. Foullah, “A Socio-Theological Evaluation of Polygamy,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 19 (1995): 78–79.

Matthew 19:4–6

Jesus' statement in Matt 19:4–6 regarding marriage is prompted by the Pharisees' testing Him in v. 3 with the question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?" While the main subject is divorce, and therefore Jesus' response should be understood first of all as addressing that topic, this passage can likewise add to our overall understanding of God's original intention for marriage. In answering the Pharisees' question about divorce, Jesus makes it clear that God's intention from the very beginning was that marriage be both *exclusive* and *permanent*.

First, regarding the exclusivity of marriage, Jesus cites the first key passage examined above, Gen 1:27, "He who created them from the beginning made them male and female" (Matt 19:4). Notice where Jesus goes in order to clarify God's intention for marriage: back to the beginning. "Jesus' point of reference is not what Abraham, Jacob or Elkanah did. In order to teach the right thing about marriage, Jesus went back to the first marriage that was solemnized between Adam and Eve before the appearance of the rest of mankind."⁵³ The implication of Gen 1:27 as Jesus cites it is that "the two sexes should be united in marriage."⁵⁴ "Whatever may have been the practice, since man could ask himself, What is right? He has known that ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ..., *au fond*, at bottom, marriage is the choice of one man and one woman for each other for a life family relation."⁵⁵

Then, to make the implication of Gen 1:27 crystal clear, Jesus cites the second key passage, Gen 2:24, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh" (Matt 19:5). In other words, it is *because* God made man male and female that they should be united as one flesh in marriage.⁵⁶ Thus, "the 'one flesh' in every marriage between a man and a woman is a reenactment of and testimony to the very structure of humanity as God created it."⁵⁷

Second, regarding the permanency of marriage, Jesus adds this final point to the teaching of Scripture, "Consequently they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (v. 6). According to Jesus, marriage is the union of a man and a woman forged by God Himself. In God's eyes, they are no longer two separate individuals, but one entity—a husband-wife union. Furthermore, God's will is that this bond of His own doing, this uniting of one man and one woman as one flesh is to be permanent. The sanctity of this exclusive and permanent union is based upon the truth that the marriage of this couple is God-ordained.⁵⁸

How does this teaching on marriage make Jesus' point regarding divorce? Because God's purpose in creating man as male and female was that the two of them would become one flesh in

⁵³ Foullah, "Evaluation of Polygamy," 80.

⁵⁴ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *EBC*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 412.

⁵⁵ Charles Caverno, "Polygamy," in *ISBE*, vol. 4, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 2416.

⁵⁶ Carson, "Matthew," 412.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

marriage, God never intended that divorce be part of the marriage equation (v. 6). God only permitted divorce through the Mosaic legislation because of the hardness of men's hearts (v. 8a). However, "from the beginning it has not been this way" (v. 8b). The violation of the one-flesh union of a man and a woman was not part of the Creator's perfect design. "Moses' concession reflected not the true creation ordinance but the hardness of men's hearts."⁵⁹ According to the teaching of Genesis and Jesus, the true creation ordinance of marriage has always been one man and one woman united as one flesh for one lifetime.⁶⁰

Problem Polygamy Passages

If all we had in Scripture were passages like Genesis 1–2 and Matthew 19 that teach monogamy, and descriptive passages that present only the practice of monogamy, there would be no debate. However, this is not the case. As Feinberg points out, there are always other sets of passages besides the key teaching passages that enter into the discussion of any given theological concept, and we dare not ignore them.⁶¹ The concept of marriage in Scripture is no exception. We cannot merely sweep the secondary passages under the rug and ignore them. We must examine them and satisfactorily explain them in light of the primary passages. Of course, in this case the secondary passages are the examples of polygamy in Scripture. While space will not allow me to do this thoroughly, I want to at least in a preliminary way show how we might understand the polygamy passages in Scripture in light of God's original intention that marriage be exclusively monogamous.

Negative Portrayal of Polygamy

Before looking at the negative portrayal of polygamy in Scripture, a preliminary word is necessary to put things in perspective. Throughout the recorded OT history, from creation to the divided kingdom of Israel, there are only about eighteen examples of polygamy.⁶² This relatively

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ David Gitari concedes that although Jesus' teaching here seems "to support the monogamous ideal," we should keep in mind that in this passage "Jesus is concerned not with polygamy but with divorce" (David Gitari, "Rethinking Polygamy: Jesus Spoke Against Divorce, Not Polygamy," *The Other Side* 24 [April 1988]: 42–43). While it is true that the immediate issue Jesus addresses is divorce, the principle He affirms from Genesis applies more broadly. If it is on the basis of God's original monogamous model for exclusive and permanent marriage that Jesus condemns the specific breaking of that union called divorce, then on that basis condemnation would follow for any act that would violate the monogamous union, including polygamy. Jesus and the rest of the NT authors simply do not state the obvious: polygamy is not an option for the people of God. While some of God's OT people practiced polygamy, "there is nothing of this recorded as existing in the New Testament church" (Willard Burch, "Polygamy and the Church," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 34 [1963]: 223). The NT assumes monogamy for the children of God.

⁶¹ Nevertheless, to repeat Feinberg's methodological point, "the primary passages must be the ones that directly offer teaching that explains the concept or tells us what the concept is" (Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 770).

⁶² They are Lamech (Gen 4:19), Nahor (Gen 22:23–24), Abraham (Gen 16:3), Esau (Gen 26:34; 28:9), Jacob (Gen 29:24, 28; 30:4, 9), Caleb (1 Chron 2:46, 48), Gideon (Judg 8:30–31), Jair (Judg 10:4), Ibzan (Judg 12:9), Abdon (Judg 12:14), Elkanah (1 Sam 1:2), Saul (1 Sam 14:50; 2 Sam 3:7; 12:8), David (1 Sam 18:27; 25:42–43; 2 Sam 3:3–5; 5:13; 11:27; 12:8; 15:16), Solomon (1 Kgs 11:3), Rehoboam (2 Chron 11:21), Abijah (2 Chron 13:21), Ahab (2 Kgs 10:1), and Joash (2 Chron 24:2–3). Jair, Ibzan, Abdon, and Ahab apparently had multiple wives in view of their many sons (cf. Jdg 8:30). Another possible case of polygamy is Gen 6:2 and the sons of God.

small number stands starkly against the numerous monogamous marriages and commendations of monogamy found in Scripture.⁶³ From the eighteen examples, several clearly present polygamy in a negative light. They show us the tragic consequences for those who practiced it. Before mentioning the obvious ones, I would like to comment on Lamech. Can it really be coincidental that the first polygamist in Scripture, the *only* one in the primeval history (Gen 1–11), is the murderous and rebellious Lamech, descendant of the murderer Cain? Yes, it is true that Scripture does not condemn Lamech’s polygamy or reveal any negative consequences of it. However, it seems difficult to get around the impression that, seeing as how it follows so quickly on the heels of the monogamous model set forth in the creation narrative, and in the light of his generally wicked character, Lamech’s polygamous act was a direct violation of the divine will regarding marriage.

The obvious examples of the terrible consequences of polygamy are Abraham, Jacob, Elkanah, David, and Solomon. Abraham’s bearing a son by Hagar brought nothing but trouble for everyone involved. When Hagar conceived she despised Sarah (Gen 16:4). Sarah then treated Hagar so harshly that Hagar fled (v. 6). Later, because Hagar’s son Ishmael began to mock Isaac (21:9), Sarah asked Abraham to drive them away (v. 10). This caused great anguish for Abraham, who cared for his son Ishmael (v. 11). The descendants of Ishmael, the “wild donkey of a man” (Gen 16:12), continue to be a thorn in the flesh of the descendants of Isaac even today.

Jacob’s example is worse. He loved Rachel more than Leah (Gen 29:30). This favoritism and the competition it spawned between them led to their giving their maids Bilhah and Zilpah to Jacob to bear sons for them. Later Rachel and Leah competed with each other for Jacob’s conjugal rights (30:14–16). In the end, because of the favoritism Jacob showed his favorite wife Rachel’s son Joseph (37:3), Joseph’s brothers hated him (v. 4) and sold him into slavery (v. 28). The resentment between the sons of Jacob by his four wives eventually plays itself out in the division of the united kingdom of Israel along tribal lines.

The story of Elkanah continues the pattern of favoritism and jealousy between the wives in a polygamous marriage. Elkanah loved his wife Hannah more than his wife Peninnah. When he sacrificed he gave Hannah a double portion of his sacrifices because he loved her more, even though Peninnah had given him children and Hannah had not (1 Sam 1:1–5). Peninnah’s jealousy pushed her to provoke Hannah bitterly to irritate her (v. 6), which caused great emotional stress for Hannah (v. 7).

David’s story is likewise filled with the tragic results of polygamy. King David has numerous wives and concubines, but is still not satisfied. He violates Bathsheba, a married woman, then tries to get her husband Uriah to sleep with her because he has gotten her pregnant (2 Sam 11:2–13). When that doesn’t work, David arranges for Uriah’s death in battle (vv. 14–25). God confronts David with his sin through the prophet Nathan and predicts that the sword will never depart from David’s house, and that someone from David’s own house will rebel against him and violate his wives before all Israel (12:1–12). The events prove God right. David’s firstborn son Amnon violates his half sister Tamar, the brother of Absalom, leaving her desolate (13:1–20).

⁶³ E.g. Prov 5:15–23 and Song of Solomon (Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, 122).

Absalom responds with hatred (vv. 21–22), which leads him to kill Amnon (vv. 28–29). Later, Absalom revolts against his father David (15:1–12) and violates his concubines in full view of Israel (16:21–22). At the end of David’s life Adonijah, another son by yet another wife, aspires to be king, causing more problems for David until his son Solomon by Bathsheba is finally installed as king of Israel (1 Kgs 1:5–53). All of this conflict and turmoil, apart from being prophesied, flows out of the multiple wives of David and the relationships and rivalries between their children.

Finally, the tragedy of Solomon’s life is his spiritual bankruptcy brought about by his many foreign wives who turned his heart away from the Lord and into idolatry (1 Kgs 11:1–8). Solomon was the wisest, richest, most honorable king who ever lived (1 Kgs 3:12–13), and

Yet in his old age he went to pieces by the wiles of the women with whom he had loaded his harem. Partly by his extravagance in his polygamous life, and partly in attempt to build temples in distant places for the religions represented by the inmates of his harem, he bankrupted his nation. As a consequence his kingdom was divided at his death, and there was never again a united Israel (1 Kgs 11:12). Polygamy may be justly charged with these untoward results.⁶⁴

When we read the tragic stories of divided love, favoritism, jealousy, rivalry, hatred, and sorrow within the polygamous households of Abraham, Jacob, Elkanah, David, and Solomon, are we to think that these are the only polygamous families in the OT that had problems? Are we to think, for example, that because nothing is told us of Caleb’s or Gideon’s polygamous households that everything was rosy? There are certainly enough negatives conveyed in the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Elkanah, David, and Solomon to leave the reader of the OT with the impression that polygamy can lead to tragedy for all parties involved.

So-called Positive Portrayal Polygamy

The tragic accounts of OT polygamy present a powerful picture of its terrible consequences for all the parties involved. Furthermore, while Burch’s statement is true, “There is indeed no one Bible verse that explicitly forbids having two or more wives simultaneously,”⁶⁵ it is also true that “there never existed an express biblical permission for polygamy. The law governing marriage had always looked to Genesis 2:24 as normative.”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, there are several OT passages that seem to grant polygamy the divine stamp of approval. I will briefly respond to the argument that the Mosaic legislation condones polygamy, followed by a look at the so-called commendations of polygamy in the case of David and Song of Solomon.

The first passage from the Mosaic legislation is Exod 21:7–11. According to the common understanding, this passage teaches that if a man purchases a woman for marriage and then adds a second wife, he may not reduce the food, clothing, or conjugal rights of his first wife.

⁶⁴ Caverno, “Polygamy,” 2416.

⁶⁵ Burch, “Polygamy and the Church,” 223.

⁶⁶ Kaiser, *OT Ethics*, 183.

However, as Kaiser points out, there are three textual difficulties in this passage that render the common interpretation at least questionable if not improbable. First, v. 8 may be taken to mean that the man who purchases the woman does *not* in fact take her as his wife. Second, v. 10 may then mean that he marries another woman *instead of* the woman he has already purchased, not in addition to her. Third, since עֲנֻתָּהּ is a *hapax legomenon*, its meaning cannot be ascertained for certain, and several viable meanings other than “conjugal rights” have been offered.⁶⁷ In light of these questions, one should probably not put too much weight on this passage either way. But even if it does mean to guarantee a wife’s conjugal rights to her husband if he takes a second wife, this by no means places God’s stamp of approval on polygamy, just as God’s regulation of slavery (the context of this passage in the first place) by no means places His stamp of approval on that institution.

Second are the regulations regarding marriage in Leviticus. According to the common understanding, Lev 18:17–18 and 20:14 forbid a man to marry a woman *and* her daughter, granddaughter, sister, or mother. I will focus on 18:18 because it generates the most discussion. The crux is the translation of אִשָּׁה אֶל-אֲחֵתָּהּ. Normally this is understood to mean “a wife in addition to her sister,” thus not forbidding polygamy per se, but incestuous polygamy along the lines of that forbidden in v. 17 and 20:14. However, some argue that this phrase is clearly a Hebrew idiom used extensively in the OT to mean merely “one to another.”⁶⁸ John Murray argues that translating it “a woman to her sister” ignores the use and force of this idiom elsewhere. He concludes, therefore, that Lev 18:18 is a general prohibition of polygamy.⁶⁹

The difficulties with this view are several. First, throughout Leviticus 18 the word אֲחֵתָּהּ always denotes sister (cf. vv. 9, 11, 12, 13).⁷⁰ Second, a general prohibition against all polygamy would seem out of place in a section entirely devoted to the avoidance of incestuous unions (vv. 6–17) and other Canaanite customs that are mainly sexual deviations (vv. 19–23).⁷¹ Third, the penalty for all of these sexual violations is to be death (v. 29; cf. 20:14). Fourth, on this basis later polygamists such as Caleb, Gideon, Saul, David, Solomon, etc., ought to be condemned to death, but they are not. God punishes David for adultery and murder, but not for polygamy. God judges Solomon for multiplying wives in violation of Deut 17:17 and for letting them lead him into idolatry, but not for polygamy. It seems best, then, to see Lev 18:18 as forbidding incestuous polygamy instead of polygamy per se.⁷² But even so, divine prohibition of incestuous polygamy does not equal divine God approval of non-incestuous polygamy.

The third and final passage from the Mosaic legislation is Deut 21:15–17. The common understanding is that a man with two wives, one loved and one unloved, must give the double portion of his inheritance to his actual firstborn son, even if he is the son of his unloved wife.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 184–85.

⁶⁸ For the occurrences of this feminine form as well as the masculine form (“one man to another”), see Kaiser, *OT Ethics*, 185, n. 12, n. 13.

⁶⁹ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 253. Kaiser draws the same conclusion in *OT Ethics*, 186.

⁷⁰ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 258, n. 27.

⁷¹ Ibid., 249.

⁷² This would forbid Israelites from following the example of their father Jacob, who took two sisters.

The passage is understood to regulate polygamy. But Kaiser answers that the imperfect tense in the phrase פִּי־תְהוּיִן לְאִישׁ (“if there be to a man two wives,” that is, “if a man has two wives”) is imprecise. It does not necessarily mean that the man has both wives simultaneously, “for that would be asking of the imperfect verb form (future or continuous action of the verb) to bear a load it was not means to carry.”⁷³ Following several versions (LXX, Vulgate, Samaritan Version, Targum) Kaiser translates the phrase perfectly, “If a man has had two wives,” meaning that he hasn’t necessarily had them at the same time. In response, the same imperfective construction is found three verses later in v. 18: פִּי־יָהִיהָ לְאִישׁ בֶּן סוֹרֵר (“if a man has a rebellion son”). The idea is that the man has a rebellious son at the present and must deal with him. It makes sense to take the identical imperfective form in v. 15 the same way: the man has two wives at the present and loves one and hates the other. Thus, it seems to me that Kaiser’s interpretation is a bit forced. Nevertheless, just because Moses legislates the dividing of the inheritance among the sons of multiple wives does not mean he is authorizing polygamy.⁷⁴

If we understand these Mosaic passages as legislating polygamy but not prohibiting it outright, then this raises another question. Why *did* God regulate polygamy if it was against His will, and why *didn't* He prohibit it outright? At least part of the answer is found in another example: divorce. If divorce was against God’s will, why did He merely regulate it instead of prohibiting it outright? Jesus tells us in Matt 19:8: “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.” God permitted polygamy because of the hardness of men’s hearts, but from the beginning it was not according to His will and plan for marriage.

Finally, we need to look at the situation with David and Saul’s wives in 2 Sam 12:8 and Solomon’s marriage of the Shulammitte in Song of Solomon. As for David’s receiving Saul’s wives in 2 Sam 12:8, Kaiser suggests we translate נְשֵׂאֵי as “women” instead of “wives.” Thus, God gave David Saul’s “house” (property) and “women” (female servants). Placing them into David’s “bosom”⁷⁵ simply means into his “care,” as the NASB renders it. Thus, Kaiser concludes, “We can understand the phrase as everything that was Saul’s, including his female domestics and courtesans passed over into David’s possession.... We conclude that the expression of the divine donation of all that was Saul’s means nothing more than the fact that everything was placed under the control and supervision of David much as a conquering king exhibited his full victory over a subjugated nation by taking control of the defeated king’s household.”⁷⁶ If this interpretation is accurate, and it seems to make good sense, then 2 Sam 12:8 does not portray God as giving David Saul’s wives as a way of blessing him.

⁷³ Kaiser, *OT Ethics*, 187.

⁷⁴ Furthermore, just as in the case of Lev 18:18, this passage recalls Jacob, who loved Rachel but not Leah.

⁷⁵ Heb. חֵיק, elsewhere usually translated “bosom” (NASB has “arms” in Gen 16:5).

⁷⁶ Kaiser, *OT Ethics*, 188. Ronald Youngblood, who takes the passage to mean Saul’s wives, suggests that one of them may be Ahinoam, whom David takes as a wife in 1 Sam 25:43. Ahinoam is mentioned as the wife of Saul in 1 Sam 14:50 (Ronald F. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” in *EBC*, vol. 3, ed. Frank E. Gaebelien [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 764). But Ahinoam was the mother of Michal, David’s wife (1 Sam 14:49–50), and the Law forbade the taking of one’s mother-in-law as incest, incurring the penalty of burning (Lev 18:17) (Kaiser, *OT Ethics*, 188). Furthermore, Saul’s wife is called Ahinoam the daughter of Ahimaaz, while David’s wife is called Ahinoam the Jezreelitess. They are thus different women.

We conclude with Song of Solomon. The groom of the beloved Shulammitite may or not be King Solomon himself. He may be an anonymous shepherd, and although King Solomon has his many queens and concubines (6:8), “the shepherd is wealthier still with his single bride.”⁷⁷ But even if Solomon is the subject of the Song, the book surely extols the virtue and goodness of monogamous marriage.

In this sense, the Song is an extended commentary on the creation story—an expansion of the first recorded love-song in history. “Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man’” (Gen 2:23). The author of Genesis draws the obvious conclusion from this: “Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:24–25). The fulfillment of the creative act is unity, support, and an openness before each other and God.⁷⁸

Conclusion

God clearly teaches us in key passages like Gen 1:27, 2:24, and Matt 19:4–6 that His will from the very beginning of creation has been that one man and one woman would unite as one flesh for one lifetime. The OT examples of polygamy in no way imply that the practice was ever condoned by God. On the contrary, the negative examples serve graphically to portray the terrible consequences for all parties involved when man goes against the divine will in this area. It was only because of the hardness of the sinful hearts of man that God allowed His people in ancient times to practice the custom along with those around them. Yes, in the Mosaic Law under the old dispensation God regulated polygamy as it existed; however, this cannot be taken as proof of His approval any more than His regulation of slavery is proof that He approved of it. For His own reasons God allows men to act contrary to His will in order that the negative consequences of choosing against His will might become evident, and the blessings of following His will might be apparent to all.

The so-called Christian Polygamy Movement is just another example of how untaught and unstable men so easily twist the Scriptures to their own destruction. The only sure measure of right and wrong is God’s will as revealed in His inspired word. To take descriptions of human practice as trumping God’s clearly expressed view on the subject of polygamy not only is hermeneutically questionable; it leads to gross theological error and immoral practice. It leads men to extol as virtuous that which is contrary to God’s created order, and that which has been proven by the examples of Scripture to lead to tragedy.

⁷⁷ Kaiser, *OT Ethics*, 195.

⁷⁸ G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, TOTC (Leicester, U.K.: IVP, 1984), 35.