

Why Did God Allow Polygamy?

Untangling Old Testament Sexual Ethics

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ABSTRACT: Among Israel's patriarchs and kings, polygamy and concubinage seem almost a matter of course. More than that, some Old Testament passages appear not only to describe these practices but to sanction them. But when read carefully, accounts of polygamy in the lives of Abraham, Jacob, David, and others cast a shadow on this departure from God's design and definition. The spiritual and familial devastation on display in Scripture's accounts of polygamy invites us to see the beauty of monogamous marriage, climaxing in the union of Christ and his bride.

For our ongoing series of [feature articles](#) for pastors and Christian leaders, we asked Sam Emadi (PhD, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary), senior editor at 9Marks, to explain the practices of polygamy and concubinage among Old Testament saints.

Most who read the Bible soon notice a rather odd tension between Scripture's sexual ethics and the often gross sexual perversions of many of the Old Testament's main characters. Perhaps the most obvious example involves the somewhat frequent occurrence of polygamy in the Old Testament, even among otherwise faithful saints like Abraham and David.

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Modern skeptics sometimes point to such examples as instances of the Bible endorsing polygamy, or at the very least of Scripture's uncritical complicity in the polygamous cultural practices of the ancient Near East. But is this truly the case?

Given these apologetic challenges, and given the breakneck pace at which Western society is endeavoring to normalize polyamorous relationships, Christians need to understand how Scripture advances the normativity of monogamy and how that squares with the many polygamous saints found in the pages of the Old Testament.

How Scripture Makes Ethical Claims

Scripture nowhere presents polygamy and concubinage as part of God's design for creation or as morally licit. While modern skeptics may suggest that Scripture uncritically embraces the polygamous and polyamorous practices of ancient cultures, the actual teachings of Scripture suggest otherwise. Far from being complicit in the sexual deviance of ancient cultures — deviance that harmed and oppressed women and children — both the Old and New Testaments rigidly uphold monogamy as normative.

At the heart of this discussion is how we derive ethical principles from Scripture. Yes, Scripture records acts of polygamy and concubinage among Old Testament saints. But description is not prescription. Recording an action — even an action of an otherwise upstanding “hero” of the biblical narrative — is not in itself a commendation of that action. Few characters in Scripture emerge as heroically as the apostles, but no one suggests the Gospel writers want us to imitate Peter's denial of Jesus.



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The Bible doesn't offer an ethical code through isolated stories of individual exemplars. Instead, it provides a comprehensive story that establishes God's purposes for humanity in creation, how humanity has rebelled against those norms, and how Christ restores humanity and, by his Spirit, reanimates the redeemed to obey God's law. This whole-Bible approach to ethical reasoning not only tells us what God wants of us but also provides the lens through which we can interpret whether we should understand the actions of saints recorded in Scripture as either virtuous or villainous.

Jesus himself models this type of whole-Bible ethical reasoning with regard to sex and marriage in [Mark 10:2-9](#).

Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” They said,

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“Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

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Well-intentioned, faithful Christians differ on exactly *what* Jesus teaches about legitimate conditions of divorce and remarriage. What’s important for us to see right now, however, is not *what* Jesus is arguing but *how* he argues. The Pharisees want to debate Mosaic case law. Jesus, however, bypasses Deuteronomy and quotes instead from the creation narrative in [Genesis 2:24](#) — emphasizing the normative role the creation narrative plays in establishing ethics and in interpreting later Scripture. Jesus doesn’t ignore Mosaic laws; he is happy to comment on them ([Mark 10:5](#)). But he does so by reading them in light of the entire biblical story line. He models a whole-Bible approach to ethical reasoning.

Monogamy in the Biblical Story Line

In Genesis 1, God weaves complementary pairs into the fabric of the created order: heaven and earth, sea and dry lands, light and darkness. Even the sequence of the creation days offers a complementary pair: in days 1–3 God forms heaven and earth, and in days 4–6 he fills them. The complementarity of creation culminates in the creation of God’s image-bearers as a complementary pair: a man and a woman.

As Jesus teaches in Mark 10, the account of God creating Eve and giving her to Adam establishes what is normative for human sexuality and marriage. At the heart of the definition of marriage is the monogamous relationship between a man and a woman. As Moses writes, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” ([Genesis 2:24](#)).

This marriage pattern established at creation — one man and one woman in a monogamous commitment — is both commanded and commended throughout the rest of Scripture. The seventh commandment forbids adultery — that is, sexual activity outside the bounds of marriage ([Exodus 20:14](#)). Deuteronomy forbids Israel’s future king, the ideal Israelite and new Adam (cf. Psalm 8), from multiplying wives ([Deuteronomy 17:17](#)). The Song of Solomon poetically unfurls the glory of marriage and sex in a way that lauds complementarian monogamy.

The New Testament follows the same pattern. Jesus, as we have seen, affirms the goodness of God’s design for monogamy in Mark 10. Similarly, the church’s elders,

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whose lives should serve as examples of faithfulness for all Christians ([1 Peter 5:3](#)), must be one-woman men ([1 Timothy 3:2](#)).

Finally, in Ephesians 5, Paul shows the logic behind God's design for marriage. God didn't institute complementarity and monogamy into the created order arbitrarily. Instead, these features reflect heavenly realities — namely, Christ's relationship with his people. As Christ has only one bride, so marriage on earth testifies to that truth.



Four Portraits of Polygamy

If the Bible's teachings for monogamy are so clear, why then are so many of God's Old Testament saints polygamists? The reason Scripture records so many instances of polygamy and concubinage is not to endorse these actions, but to condemn them and show just how destructive such sexual perversity proved to be. Consider the outcomes of four of Scripture's most notable polygamous relationships.

LAMECH

Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch. To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad fathered Mehujael, and Mehujael fathered Methushael, and Methushael fathered Lamech. And Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. . . .

Lamech said to his wives:

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,
then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.” ([Genesis 4:17–19, 23–24](#))

The first polygamist in Scripture is Lamech, a son in the line of Cain. Lamech is not an exemplary character. Instead, Moses portrays him as the archetypal bad guy of the prediluvian world. In the line of the seed of the serpent, Lamech is the epitome of human wickedness, a man whose bloodlust and violence are exponentially worse than Cain's.

Moses's mention of Lamech's two wives establishes a stark contrast between God's good design in the garden and life away from the presence of God, east of Eden ([Genesis 4:16](#)). This story of the first polygamist in Scripture establishes that those who follow Lamech's polygamous ways do so not out of righteousness, but because they've sinfully embraced

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the ways of the serpent and followed in the pattern of Cain's unrighteous seed (at least in the area of sexual ethics).



“As Christ has only one bride, so marriage on earth testifies to that truth.”

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ABRAHAM

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. ([Genesis 16:1-4](#))

Moses's retelling of Abram's taking Hagar as a wife ([Genesis 16:3](#)) underscores Scripture's condemnation of polygamy. He depicts Abram in this story as mimicking the wickedness of the Pharaoh who earlier took Sarai into his harem ([Genesis 12:10-20](#)). In that story, Pharaoh "took" Sarai ([Genesis 12:15](#)) while she and Abram "sojourned" in Egypt ([Genesis 12:10](#)). In Genesis 16, these same elements reemerge, but with Abram occupying the place of Pharaoh. Just as Pharaoh took Sarai while they sojourned in Egypt, so now Abraham and Sarai "take" Hagar the Egyptian (a name that means "sojourner") in the land of Canaan.

Even more, Moses portrays Abram's sin as a replay of Adam's initial failure in the garden. Just as Adam "listened to the voice of [his] wife" ([Genesis 3:17](#)) and fell into sin, so too Abram "listened to the voice of Sarai" ([Genesis 16:2](#)). Read in light of previous narratives, Moses's depiction of Abram's polygamy clearly casts judgment on his actions. In this moment, Abram is no better than pagan Pharaoh or rebellious Adam.

JACOB

The account of Jacob's wives (Leah and Rachel) and concubines (Bilhah and Zilpah) is found throughout Genesis 29-50. Once again, abundant evidence exists from within the text itself that Moses means for his readers to see Jacob's polygamous actions as leading to sorrow and misery. We need only read the account of the naming of Jacob's sons in Genesis 30 to find that the bitterness and jealousy between rival wives, as well as their sorrow, is enshrined in the very names of their children.

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These rivalries and Jacob's favoritism toward Rachel and her children sow seeds of division that nearly destroy the family and Jacob himself. The consequences for Jacob's polygamy and favoritism culminate with the Cain-like actions of the children of the unfavored wives, who nearly kill Joseph (the son of the favored wife) and eventually sell him into slavery. Once again, Moses depicts Jacob's deviation from the biblical norm established at creation as a path of ruin — a sin with consequences so severe that they resonate throughout generations.

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DAVID

Accounts of David's polygamy spread across 1–2 Samuel. The narrator mentions David's new wives matter-of-factly ([1 Samuel 25:42–43](#); [2 Samuel 3:2–5](#)), but that doesn't mean he is indifferent toward his actions. Deuteronomy 17, a passage the author of 1–2 Samuel regularly alludes to, prohibits Israel's king from multiplying wives. Read in light of that passage, each reference to David taking another wife strikes an ominous note — one that anticipates David's coming fall with Bathsheba.

In the Bathsheba account, David's sins of polygamy (and the murder that grew from his lust) finally catch up with him. Nathan prophesies that the sword will not depart from his house ([2 Samuel 12:10](#)) — an apt description of the conflict and violence that characterize his family for the rest of his life. His first child with Bathsheba dies, his son Amnon rapes his daughter Tamar, his son Absalom murders Amnon, and eventually Absalom stages a *coup d'etat*.



“The biblical authors never commend the polygamists in the Old Testament, nor are they indifferent.”

Once again, description does not mean prescription. At the same time, how the biblical authors choose to describe events often reveals their judgments on those actions. The case studies above show that the biblical authors never commend the polygamists in the Old Testament, nor are they indifferent. Instead, they are often at pains to show the devastating consequences of deviating from God's established pattern of monogamy. The same pattern holds true for other polygamists, such as Elkanah, whose polygamy leads to division and strife within his family ([1 Samuel 1:1–7](#)), and Solomon, whose many wives and concubines lead him into idolatry ([1 Kings 11:1–8](#)).

What Should We Imitate?

Scripture holds out Old and New Testament saints as patterns for imitation ([1 Corinthians 11:1](#); [James 5:10–18](#)). Given the rather egregious sexual sins of men like Abraham and David, how can that be? After all, it's one thing for preachers to challenge

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Christians to “dare to be a Daniel,” but I’d wager you’ve never been encouraged to “strive to be a Sampson!”

While the Bible does encourage Christians to imitate Old Testament saints, it never does so uncritically or without exception. Plenty of Old Testament figures are held out as negative examples ([1 Corinthians 10:6, 11](#); [Hebrews 12:16](#)). Furthermore, the New Testament most often upholds the *faith* of Old Testament saints as the primary feature worthy of attention and emulation (Hebrews 11), not their track record of righteous behaviors.

What About Supposed Polygamy-Endorsing Passages?

Skeptics sometimes put forward a few texts in Scripture that they suggest endorse polygamy. Let’s briefly take a look at two of the most plausible.

[DEUTERONOMY 21:15–17](#)

As Moses teaches God’s law to the generation of Israelites about to inherit the Promised Land, he says,

If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him children, and if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, then on the day when he assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons, he may not treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn, but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his.

This command assumes that Israel’s leaders and judges will encounter polygamy in the nation. If that’s the case, doesn’t this command implicitly endorse polygamous relationships?

Not quite. This legislation, like many others in Exodus and Deuteronomy, is case law. Case laws don’t articulate ideal standards of righteousness. They instead provide directions for Israel’s judges and political leaders on how to rule justly in light of the deeply broken and sinful situations they were likely to encounter. Note that the passage begins with “If a man has two wives . . .” not “Since a man may have two wives . . .”

On this same point, consider the two case laws that follow this one:

- ☞ “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother . . .” ([Deuteronomy 21:18](#)).

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☞ “If a man has committed a crime punishable by death ...” ([Deuteronomy 21:22](#)).

Obviously, these case laws are not commending that children be rebellious or that Israelites commit high-handed crimes. In the same way, [Deuteronomy 21:15](#) isn't endorsing polygamy but seeking to mitigate the division, rivalry, and brokenness that emerges from polygamous unions by protecting the unfavored wife and her children from the husband's favoritism.



[2 SAMUEL 12:8](#)

The prophet Nathan tells King David on behalf of God,

I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more.

Some skeptics have suggested that this verse teaches that God blessed David by giving him the wives of Saul. But this claim is extraordinarily thin and can be dispatched with rather quickly.

This chapter records Nathan's rebuke of David after his sin with Bathsheba (hardly a moment we'd find a prophet endorsing polygamy!). As Nathan rehearses God's kindness to David, he recalls how God delivered Saul's "house and . . . wives" into David's hand. The idea being conveyed here is not that David took Saul's wives as his own, but that the royal house came under David's authority. Furthermore, although the author of 1–2 Samuel does not shy away from listing David's wives, he never lists any of Saul's wives among David's.

When Two Become One

Scripture grounds monogamy in the created order, ordained by God himself as a picture of Christ and the church. Depictions of polygamy and concubinage in Scripture don't overturn that fact. Instead, they reveal the ugliness and heartbreak that accompany sexual activity outside God's established boundaries. Far from commending polygamy, narratives of polygamous patriarchs and kings in Israel reveal the spiritual and familial devastation inextricably linked to this sin.

The biblical authors include their stories not to inspire their readers but to warn them. Whereas explicit commands in Scripture teach the people of God that polygamy is wrong, the stories show it to be ugly — a hideous perversion of one of God's greatest gifts. From the muck and mire of Abraham, Jacob, and David's broken families we are meant to see

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the beauty and goodness of God's original design: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" ([Genesis 2:24](#)).

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