

# Polygamy

## Have you ever studied Scripture concerning a Torah observant plural marriage covenant?

Per some current events, some discussion regarding polygamy has arisen in the Messianic community, with some possibly considering that it has validity for today's Believers. Polygamy as a practice is seen in various parts of the Tanach, but one which the Jewish Synagogue abandoned long before the arrival of Yeshua the Messiah.<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 17:17 specifically warns the future kings of Israel, "He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away" (NASU).

With the creation of the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden, the ideal state has been for marriage to be between one man and one woman: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24, NASU), a principle upheld by Yeshua the Messiah (Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7-8). This was also a state where men and women were fully equal, as Adam attests that Eve was "bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23). The Creation of man before woman is a testimony *not* that God prefers males over females, but indicates that because men cannot reproduce and give birth—the first male requires an outside Creator.

It is only after the Fall that we see forms of polygamy practiced, and to argue that this is to be a normative, even encouraged practice, skews God's original intent at Creation. Leviticus 18:18 is a clear example of an explicit Torah commandment against polygamy: "While your wife is living, do not marry her sister and have sexual relations with her, for they would be rivals" (NLT). It is true that various Patriarchs and monarchs of Israel did have multiple wives, and seemingly did not incur any significant penalties from the Lord for doing so. Yet this must be balanced with the fact that the whole nation of Israel was commanded to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days each year (Leviticus 23:33-34), and Nehemiah says that "The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day" (Nehemiah 8:17, NASU)—which was after the Babylonian exile! The Ancient Israelites did not always follow the commands of God, and because of His love and grace He often overlooked their significant transgressions. Severe chastisement to Israel often did not come until idolatry, gross child sacrifice, and outright rebellion against the Lord were practiced.

From a practical standpoint, while we see polygamy observed by some members of Israelite society, it is far fetched to think that every single Israelite man could economically afford more than one wife. On the contrary, the fact that only Patriarchs, leaders, and monarchs of Israel are portrayed as having multiple wives demonstrates *how little* this practice was actually observed. And was it really worth it for them? When we read that Jacob had both Leah and Rachel as his wives, or David and Solomon had multiple wives—were their households places of genuine love and affection, or riddled with relational problems? Were their children behaved or unruly? 1 Kings 11:4 is not very good evidence in favor of polygamy: "For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God" (NASU). A significant reason Ancient Israel was ultimately divided into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms goes back to Solomon's incessant polygamy, and the state funded idolatry he sponsored.

(Perhaps the only justifiable reason for polygamy to be considered over monogamy would be seen when a population is so devastated by war or famine, that having multiple wives is the only way to repopulate. *But*, that exception would be few and far between.)

The Apostolic Scriptures make it abundantly clear that polygamy is something which is *not* to be practiced by the people of God today. The significant passages in the Gospels where Yeshua addresses marriage affirm Genesis' teaching on one man and one woman (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18). The Apostle

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. "monogamy and polygamy," in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 437.

Paul states candidly in 1 Corinthians 7:2, “each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband” (NASU). He also instructs Timothy that overseers/bishops and deacons only be allowed one wife (1 Timothy 3:2, 12). Furthermore, and perhaps most significant, he asserts in Ephesians 5:21-33 that the institution of marriage is to be a reflection on the Messiah’s service for the *ekklēsia*. This involved the Lord serving a single body of people, *not* multiple bodies of people: “let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband” (Ephesians 5:33, RSV).

Given the new status for males and females that the arrival of Yeshua has inaugurated (Galatians 3:28), polygamy is a practice that is degrading to the equality of the sexes which He has restored. In many cases, trying to Biblically justify polygamy—as though it is a good thing that God intended from Creation—**is almost always used as a way for men to fulfill sexual urges that cannot be kept under control**. Women are frequently the victims of such inappropriate and ungodly behavior, often because of men who want to treat them as little more than chattel.

The discussion regarding polygamy has been unleashed in a Messianic movement that is largely unsure about how what it means to recapture a Torah foundation for one’s faith in Yeshua. Does it mean that only the Books of Genesis-Deuteronomy are relevant to one’s faith (thus making us Sadducees who deny the resurrection)? Or does it mean that the Pentateuch is one stepping stone—and indeed a largely overlooked stepping stone—of God’s continually progressive salvation history (cf. Hebrews 1:1-2)? If it is the latter, then it is clear that the Torah’s legislation is intended to be a significant step forward, *but not the only step*, that is to return us to what the first man and woman had in Eden. The ideal state that God wants us to have does not include polygamy, and the Scriptures are clear that those who practiced it did not incur beneficial and lasting relationships as a result.

If anyone in the Messianic movement thinks that polygamy is something to be embraced and encouraged, the such views stand in direct contrast to God’s intention at Creation and the teachings of Yeshua the Messiah. They are also degrading to the female gender, which is now to be considered equal to the male gender in Him.

Consult Walter C. Kaiser’s remarks on polygamy in his book *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, pp 182-190, which further discusses some of the historical and exegetical issues. Consult the author’s article “**Is Polygamy for Today?**” for a detailed Messianic examination of this issue (appearing in *Men and Women in the Body of Messiah: Answering Crucial Questions*).