

FAQ

FROM THE MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS ARCHIVES (2000-2018)

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Frequently Asked Questions

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Polygamy

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

Within various sectors of the independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement (and especially Two-House sub-movement), there have been a number of people who have considered that polygamy, more specifically polygyny—a man having more than one wife—is something which should be considered for today’s Body of Messiah as a valid marriage practice. Polygamy is witnessed in various parts of the Tanach (OT), yet was rarely practiced, and was widely abandoned by the Jewish Synagogue long before the arrival of Yeshua the Messiah.¹ Deuteronomy 17:17 specifically warned 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 solely be monogamous, 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). This was a principle upheld by Yeshua the Messiah (Mark 10:7-8; Mathew 19:5). The original union was also a state where the man and woman were fully equal, as Adam attested that Eve was “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). The Creation of man before woman is **not** a testimony that God prefers males over females, but indicates how because men cannot reproduce and give birth, the first male required an outside Creator.

It is only after the Fall when Bible readers encounter 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 an example of a Torah commandment disapproving of 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 the Bible records many things, where the Lord exhibited a wide degree of forbearance and tolerance for aberrant behavior, on the part of His own. Consider the fact that the whole nation of Israel was commanded to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*) for seven days each year (Leviticus 23:33-34), yet Nehemiah 8:17 records how “The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day” (NASU), a period of time after the Babylonian exile! The Ancient Israelites did not always follow the commands of God. But, because of God’s love and grace, He often overlooked their significant transgressions. Severe chastisement and punishment to Israel often did not come until idolatry, gross child sacrifice, and outright rebellion against the Lord were practiced.

From a practical standpoint, while Bible readers see polygamy observed by some members of Ancient 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, monarchs, and the wealthy 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 how 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 a huge array of 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

¹ Cf. “monogamy and polygamy,” in Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 437.

Polygamy

LORD his God” (NASU). A significant reason why 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 resultant of it.

(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 followers of Yeshua the Messiah. The significant passages in the Gospels where Yeshua addressed marriage, affirmed Genesis’ teaching on one man and one woman (Mark 10:2-12; Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9; Luke 16:18). The Apostle Paul stated candidly in 1 Corinthians 7:2, “each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband” (NASU). Paul also instructed Timothy that the overseers/bishops and deacons he appointed, only be allowed one wife (1 Timothy 3:2, 12). Furthermore, and perhaps most significant, is how Paul asserted in Ephesians 5:21-33 that the institution of marriage is to be a reflection on the Messiah’s service for the *ekklesia*. This involved the Lord serving a single body or community of people, *not* multiple bodies or communities 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 which the arrival of Yeshua has inaugurated (Galatians 3:28), polygamy or plural marriage is a practice degrading to the equality of the sexes which His work on the tree has restored.² In many cases, trying to Biblically justify polygamy—as though it was a good thing which God intended from Creation—is **almost always used as a way for men to fulfill sexual urges which cannot be kept under control**. Women are frequently the victims of 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 among various people, within today’s Messianic sphere of influence, who are largely unsure about what it means to recapture a Torah foundation for their faith in Yeshua. Does it mean that only the Books of Genesis-Deuteronomy are relevant to one’s faith (thus making one a Sadducee who denies 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 accounts and instruction are intended to be a significant step forward, *but not the only step*, which is to return His people to what the first man and woman had in Eden. **The ideal state which God wants His people to have does not include polygamy**, and the Scriptures are clear how those who practiced it did not incur beneficial and worthwhile relationships as a result.

If any person within today’s independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement—who we may find within the sphere of things Messianic—thinks that polygamy is something to be embraced and encouraged, **then such views stand in direct contrast to God’s intention at Creation and the teachings of Yeshua the Messiah.**³

² If necessary, consult the author’s exegesis paper on Galatians 3:28, “Biblical Equality and Today’s Messianic Movement” (appearing in *Confronting Critical Issues*).

³ For a further discussion on the issue of polygamy, consult the significant remarks witnessed in Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp 182-190, which further analyzes some of the historical and exegetical issues.

Also consult the author’s article, “Is Polygamy for Today? The Case Against Polygamy” (appearing in *Men and Women in the Body of Messiah: Answering Crucial Questions*).