

HOW DOES THE BIBLE TREAT POLYGAMY?

www.broadwaychurch.com

1. What is polygamy?

- a. It is the technical term for having several spouses.
 - i. Polyandry: when a woman is married to more than one man.
 - ii. Polygyny: when a man is married to more than one woman.

Why Polygyny Was More Frequent Than Polyandry...

Historically, polygyny is far more frequent than polyandry for a couple of reasons. Firstly, for sociological reasons, since ancient societies were predominantly patriarchal (male-dominated). Secondly, for practical reasons, since one man with several wives could have several children every year, while one woman with several husbands could only have one child per year.

2. Where is polygamy found in the Bible?

a. Genesis 4:19... Lamech (Adah and Zillah)

- i. Lamech was a descendant of the infamous Cain. Since Lamech, himself, was associated with violence and arrogance (Genesis 4:23-24) polygamy was not painted in a positive light from the very beginning.

b. Genesis 16... Abraham (Sarah and Hagar)

- i. Sarah was barren, so she followed a culturally accepted option at that time of offering her maidservant to Abraham to bear them a child. The birth of the resulting child (Ishmael) led to all kinds of marital and family conflict after Isaac was eventually born to Sarah.

c. Genesis 26:34-35; 28:6-9... Esau (and his Hittite wives)

- i. Esau was the twin brother of Jacob. They were the children of Isaac and Rebekah. Esau's eventual marriage to six Hittite women caused great grief for his parents. His clan grew, he moved away, and his descendants (Edomites) were often antagonistic towards the nation of Israel.

d. Genesis 29-30... Jacob (Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, Zilpah)

- i. Like Sarah, Rachel was also barren. So Leah (Rachel's sister, and Jacob's first wife) bore him several children, (as did Bilhah and Zilpah.) Years later, after Rachel finally bore a son (Joseph), the marital tension and sibling infighting tore the family apart, contributing to Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers.

e. 2 Samuel 3:2-5; 13... David (and his many wives)

- i. King David had multiple wives and concubines. (Concubines had the legal status of a wife but were considered "second tier" wives.) The story of Amnon and Tamar illustrates the destructive consequences of polygamy as Amnon sexually assaulted his half-sister, Tamar, leading her full brother Absalom to murder his half-brother, Amnon. This led to long-term family turmoil, including Absalom's eventual rebellion against his father, King David (2 Samuel 15).

f. 1 Kings 11:1-4... Solomon (700 wives and 300 concubines)

i. Solomon's wives led him into idolatry, which angered God, eventually resulting in the nation of Israel being divided into two kingdoms after Solomon's death (1 Kings 12).

3. How is polygamy treated in the Bible?

a. ***While some passages factor it in when dealing with case law, nowhere in the Bible is polygamy endorsed or treated in a positive light.***

b. ***God's design for marriage is clearly monogamy:*** as described in Genesis 2:24 and as reinforced by Jesus in Matthew 19:3-6.

c. ***Description is not prescription:*** just because the Bible records an activity does not mean God is endorsing that activity. Just because God uses (or even temporarily tolerates) an activity does not mean that God recommends that activity. Sometimes God is patiently compromising due to the sinfulness of humanity. Divorce (Matthew 19:7-8) is a classic example of this dynamic.

d. ***Scholars fall into two main camps regarding how God treats polygamy in the Bible:***

i. ***It was not the ideal, but was legally tolerated:*** although not the ideal, it was not treated as inherently immoral as it provided, during a tumultuous time, a safety net for women who had no other means of honorable existence other than marriage.

ii. ***It was not the ideal, was not legally tolerated, but was usually ignored:*** this view sees Leviticus 18:18 as God forbidding the practice. However, it was so ingrained in the ancient near-eastern culture, it was simply not enforced as a law.

e. ***As the years went on, and as the sociological need for it decreased, the practice diminished.*** Rabbinic law increasingly discouraged it, and Roman law largely prohibited it. In the early church, polygamy was entirely forbidden, (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6.)