

## **The Truth About Polygamy in the Bible**

**By Dan Jensen (2023)**

(In order to fully benefit from this essay, I recommend reading through my “works for beginners” first. They can be found on my website.)

One of the most common objections to the ethic found in the Bible is the existence of polygamy in its pages. One often sees the many lame pop-Fundamentalist Atheist apologists have certain scholars on their YT channels to discuss this very topic. These scholars often say things like, “So, conservative Christians love to talk about how marriage is only between one man and one woman, and yet the Bible clearly allows for polygamy! So, you keep using that word, but I don’t think it means what you think it means!!” “Ha, ha, HA!” is usually the gleeful response from the Atheist, who usually doesn’t know his left foot from his right. It is honestly almost shocking that so many of these scholars can be so ignorant about such a basic point of history. Allow me to explain.

Polygamy (technically only polygyny, but I will stick to the better known term) in the Bible is only ever allowed in the Old Testament, on the rarest of occasions, for a good reason (which we will discuss soon), and even these marriages were still only between one man and one woman. That last point really confuses people because they are ignorant of the issues, including many scholars unfortunately. When a man was allowed to take more than one wife, each of those wives constituted a separate marriage. There was never ever any such thing as one marriage between multiple people. It is not like when Abraham married Hagar (this marriage was actually unlawful, but I use it to make a point because once the contract had been made, Abraham and Hagar were truly married), Hagar was now married to Sarah as well. That is not how it worked.

I am not trying to be overly crass, but Hagar and Sarah were still forbidden from any sexual relations with each other, or from having sexual relations with Abraham at the same time. Abraham's marriage to Sarah was one distinct marriage (one man and one woman), while his marriage to Hagar was one distinct marriage (one man and one woman). He was married to two different women and each of those marriages was its own marriage. The definition of marriage is never ever altered throughout the entire Bible. Polygamy was the practice of having more than one marriage at the same time. But, again, each marriage was its own distinct marriage. So, ummm, actually we do understand the word quite well, thank you very much. Polygamy was the sin of taking more than one wife, not the sin of changing the definition and practice of marriage itself. Those are two separate issues and sins against God's law that are constantly conflated by skeptics.

These same scholars also love to say that polygamy is found all over the Old Testament and so it must have been normative under old covenant law. The first point is true, but the latter part of that (the inference being made) is a false inference. Polygamy was exceedingly common and normative throughout most of the Ancient Near East (ANE). That is certainly true. Thus, it is no surprise that we often see a minority of God's people struggle with this sin. That in no way means that it was ever condoned by God across the board. These same scholars will often point to the laws found in the Mosaic law regulating the practice, laws that allegedly prove that it was in fact permitted, and was even normative. Again, this is a false inference.

Once someone committed the sin of polygamy, he was not to put away his second wife (Abraham with Hagar was a unique situation that was directly commanded by God). The man was married to her, and under God's law he was bound to be a good husband to her. We really don't even see any evidence of this changing under new covenant law either. Hence, those laws about polygamy found in the Mosaic law are there simply to regulate the practice after someone had committed this sin. As far as Lev 18:18, this command is hardly confusing. God is merely saying with this command that anyone who is tempted to take another wife better not take the sister of his wife as a second

wife. This would be to greatly aggravate his sin of polygamy. Such a sin would have been punished much more harshly than the bare sin of taking a second wife.

These same scholars will inevitably retort that we should then see some evidence in the Mosaic law condemning the practice of polygamy, and of men being punished for engaging in the practice. Once again, this is a false inference. The Mosaic law does not address many aspects of life. It did not need to rehash much from the laws that God gave to humanity at creation, and many other matters are often assumed or left to the judges in Israel to decide. In fact, there is nothing in the Mosaic law governing what actually constitutes a marriage. This is precisely because nothing needed to be said because that law had already been laid down in creation. It is true that there are a number of laws regarding sexual immorality, but this was because in the Pagan world that surrounded the Israelites, a man would often engage in all manner of sexual practices beyond his marriage or marriages. But, the basic understanding of what marriage was did not need to be defined as it was already understood within that culture.

These same scholars would probably respond to what I've just said by saying that if the Israelites needed to be heavily reminded not to commit sexual immorality like their Pagan neighbors, why would they also not need to be reminded to avoid polygamy when by my own admission it was such a common practice in the ANE? Again, the creation laws would have been well understood within the Israelite community. These basic laws would have been passed down orally from Abraham himself. And this is shown by the fact that despite the constant refrain from the skeptical scholars, polygamy was not a common practice among the Israelites. As we will soon see, there are only 5 major examples of godly Israelites engaging in the practice. We will discuss these soon. But, we see no evidence of polygamy with Adam; Abel; Seth; Enoch; Noah; Job; Lot; Isaac; any of the 12 Patriarchs; Moses (we will discuss the challenge to this); Aaron; Joshua; Caleb; Jephthah; Boaz; Eli; Samuel; Nathan; Gad; Asaph; Uriah; Elijah; Elisha; Jehoshaphat; Hezekiah; Josiah; all of the major prophets; all of the minor prophets; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; Ezra; Nehemiah; or Mordecai. How on

earth do you explain that wealth of evidence apart from the tradition that polygamy was illicit given how normative the practice was throughout the ANE?

The basic creation laws were to leave one's home and get married; marriage was to be between one man and one woman; be fruitful and multiply; have dominion over the earth (this would have included the command to take care of the garden specifically); honor the Sabbath; and do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This last commandment obviously no longer applied after the fall. Many things were not commanded beyond these basic commandments because it never would have occurred to Adam and Eve to do or not do certain things. Hence, there is no prohibition against murder as the entire concept of murder would have been utterly foreign to them. The same is true regarding sex outside of marriage. While the creation ordinance specifies what marriage is, it does not say anything regarding sex outside of that relationship. And while honoring the Sabbath is implied by the creation narrative, almost no specific details are given as to how to honor that special day. God must have given those specifics to Adam and Eve orally and they were not passed down for whatever reason. This is why God repeatedly has to command His people to rest for that entire day throughout the Mosaic law.

How often in old covenant law are the Israelites commanded to get married? And yet marriage was the norm among the nation. How often in old covenant law are the Israelites commanded to be fruitful and multiply? And yet having lots of kids was the norm within the nation. In fact, infertility was often falsely seen as God's curse because this norm was so strong. How often in old covenant law are the Israelites commanded to work hard and take care of what God has given them? And yet the Israelites were an extremely hard working people. So much so that God often had to remind them to rest on the Sabbath, and He often gave out severe punishments in this regard because the Israelites were so stubborn about their work. While that was certainly the case, we have no evidence that the Israelites ever bristled against worshiping God on the Sabbath. All of these things had been ingrained into the community ever since Abraham would have been reminded of the creation ordinances. In fact, it is highly likely that most of the

material in Genesis was passed down from Abraham orally to the time of Moses. The same would have been true of polygamy. The Israelites knew full well that monogamy was God's command. Jacob only broke this command when he fled from his family and began to live with his evil uncle Laban, who was clearly highly influenced by the Pagan culture around him.

As far as punishing polygamists, they certainly would have been by the judges in Israel. This is borne out by all that was said above about the paucity of evidence for the practice among the most godly Israelites throughout her history. A great deal is left up to the discretion of these judges under old covenant law. Certain general guidelines are of course given to them to follow, but on many specific interpretations and applications of the law, they had discretion.

With all of that clearly laid out, let us now turn to the major examples of polygamy found among those who were godly in the Old Testament. There are only 5. They are: Abraham; Jacob; Gideon; David; and Solomon. All other lesser instances are rare and were almost assuredly cases of disobedience. One example of this would be Elkanah. Of the 5 major examples, 2 are clear cases of disobedience. Abraham only married Hagar because he was pushed to do so by Sarah in a moment of extreme weakness. This marriage was such a mess that God later told Abraham to divorce her. God allowed divorce more often under old covenant law, but that in no way means that God ever sanctioned it becoming normative. Abraham's later marriage to Keturah constituted his sole marriage at that time. Sarah had died and he had divorced Hagar in obedience to God. And it is clear from the Genesis record that Jacob was not truly saved until his wrestling with God. Thus, his polygamist actions were the actions of a disobedient unbeliever. The fact that he often refers to God as his God before this proves nothing either. This was merely because he had been raised in a godly, albeit very problematic and somewhat dysfunctional, home.

That leaves just 3 major examples from the Old Testament: Gideon, David, and Solomon. And it is not at all difficult to discern why God made an exception with these

men. Each of them were supposed to be foundational figures in the development of the nation of Israel. While Israel was not to have a king at the time of Gideon, God clearly raised him up to be a major leader among the people. Had the Israelites been obedient after Gideon, his descendants would have continued to have had major influence among the people. The same was supposed to be true of David and Solomon. The idea was plainly that it was not enough for each of them to merely have an heir to the throne. The goal would have been for their descendants to become high ranking officials, military leaders, judges, etc. Their godly line was supposed to lead the nation in all manner of ways for generations. In each case, as was almost always what happened in Israel, disobedience thwarted God's preceptive will here. Disobedience on the part of each of these men, disobedience on the part of their many children, and disobedience on the part of the Israelites as a whole.

Specifically regarding the disobedience of Solomon, there is zero reason to believe that God was ok with him taking so many wives. Solomon probably never even met 95% of these wives. The vast majority were probably only political arrangements, which was highly disobedient of him. He also had no right to marry so many foreign wives, which in the end led to his horrible backslidden phase. These marriages did not in themselves constitute Solomon fully living in sin though. He undoubtedly reasoned that since God had made the exception regarding polygamy for him, that God also wanted him to take many foreign wives for political purposes. This was sinful, but was not as overtly disobedient as may seem to be the case at first blush. It does not appear that either David or Gideon sinned like Solomon did on this score. Both of them probably had less than 20 wives.

Skeptical scholars would probably object at this point that we have no recorded command in the Old Testament that God made an exception for these men alone. This proves nothing. As I've already demonstrated, where no explicit statements are needed, the Bible often does not provide them for us. We are supposed to infer a lot from what God does tell us. As just one example, the Old Testament never gives us any explicit statements about what Abraham thought was going to happen to Isaac after he

sacrificed him. That in no way means that God left His people completely in the dark here. God had told Abraham in no uncertain terms that Isaac would be his heir and would be the beginning of countless descendants. Plainly that meant that God was not going to leave Isaac dead. Further, in Gen 22:5, Abraham says to the servants that he and Isaac would be back. All of this shows that Abraham reasoned that God would raise Isaac from the dead. And this is precisely what Hebrews 11 tells us.

God always gives His word so that it reveals to the believer, but conceals and condemns the unbeliever. Many, many doctrines are not revealed explicitly by God. Nowhere does the Bible use the term *Trinity*. Nowhere does the Bible ever explicitly say that God exists as one being in three persons. Nowhere does the Bible ever explicitly say that Jesus is both God and man in one person. Nowhere does the Bible ever explicitly say that we are justified by faith alone. This is why skeptics and heretics reject these doctrines. They demand explicit statements. It does not matter how much biblical evidence we show them for these undeniable biblical truths, they will not submit. And in the case of the skeptics, they will also mock. None of this should ever surprise us. This is exactly what Jesus was getting at when He said what is recorded for us in Mark 4:10-11.

Thus, we can deduce beyond doubt that God told these three seminal figures in the history of Israel that they were not only allowed, but commanded to take multiple wives. And again, the reasoning here is not difficult either given that two of them were kings (and two of the earliest kings at that), and one had an office that was very *kingly* so to speak. We need no explicit text to this effect, nor do we need any explicit text overtly condemning the practice of polygamy broadly speaking.

God originally commanded monogamy. The first example of polygamy is Lamech, who was plainly a very evil and rebellious man. God explicitly prohibited future kings from being polygamous so that they would understand that David and Solomon were to be exceptions to the rule (Deut 17:17). The overwhelming vast majority of godly men in the Old Testament were not polygamous. God, throughout the Old Testament, refers to

Israel as his wife. Song of Solomon is a book about the ideal marriage, and it describes the deep and erotic love between one man and one woman. Many may object that the book was written by Solomon, who was a polygamist! So what? The book is describing his love for his first wife and is a template for godly marriages. Many may object that this proves nothing as I've already shown that even in polygamous households, each marriage was its own distinct marriage. Yes, but the ideal marriage is one where there are no other marriages present. That is clearly implied by the Song of Solomon and was written before Solomon had to go through with the command from God to take more wives.

We have no examples of a godly man in the New Testament who was polygamous. Jesus reiterates the creation example in regard to marriage (Matt 19:1-9). God has only one bride in the New Testament, and it is His beloved church. And despite what Dispensationalists and Semi-Dispensationalists tell us, the church is the continuation of Israel. God has only one wife, period. Finally, prospective elders and deacons cannot have multiple wives (1 Tim 3:1-13). This wealth of evidence found from beginning to end throughout the Scriptures more than proves that polygamy is prohibited biblically.

Those who do commit this sin and repent must continue to take care of their wives, but they can never be elders or deacons. Those who commit this sin while saved must undergo church discipline. Women who sinfully enter these unions and then repent must continue to be good wives. Those who do so while saved must undergo church discipline.

As far as addressing problem passages, there are not many given all that we have proved thus far. Again, any texts describing ungodly polygamists are irrelevant. Any texts describing lesser godly figures (and there are not even very many of these despite what is so often implied by skeptics and the extremely erroneous and lame arguments made by many supporters of polygamy online) are to be interpreted as disobedience. Simeon and Hosea were not polygamists and I am happy to answer any attempted counterarguments to this effect upon request. That request can be made through the



email found on my website. Any texts regulating polygamy are to be understood as giving guidelines concerning how to deal with such marriages once they have been sinfully contracted, or to make it crystal clear that no one better take the sister of his wife unto himself. Any texts in regard to David being blessed by the Lord with these marriages are to be understood in the sense of God blessing the results of these unions and not to the marriages taken in themselves.

That leaves us Numbers 12:1 and Ezekiel 23. The first text is used to say that Moses had more than one wife at the same time. He did not. Zipporah had died by this time and Moses remarried. He should have taken an Israelite wife, but in a moment of weakness, he did not. Aaron and Miriam sought to erroneously condemn Moses on these grounds. But, it is certain that Moses had already repented by this time and had already been addressed by the Lord. Therefore, Aaron and Miriam had no right to make this protest, and it is clear from the narrative that they were not actually upset about the marriage. They were annoyed by the authority of Moses and thus sought to use this marriage as a pretense for their accusations. The fact that the death of Zipporah is not mentioned is irrelevant. Very little is said about her throughout the entirety of the Pentateuch. She is not a major figure in the narrative. The Bible never at any point mentions her death, so this argument about the fact that her death had not been mentioned by Num 12 is an argument from silence. One can say that my argument is also an argument from silence, and to some extent that is true. But, my reasoning behind coming to my conclusion is not based on arguments from silence. It is based on the wealth of evidence we have examined in this essay.

As far as Ezekiel 23 goes, this chapter is being taken badly out of context by the supporters of polygamy and skeptics who are trying to slander the word of God. The bulk of the entire book is a judgment against God's chosen ethnic people, the Israelites. Ezekiel lays out many complaints from God against His people. And one of them is the fact that God had to divide His people because of the disobedience of Solomon. The entire point of Ez 23 is that it looked to the outside world that God did have two wives, which of course was scandalous. And as if that was not bad enough, both of those

people groups, both of God's "wives," were horrendously disobedient to Him. They were adulterous "wives." But, in reality it was only ever the entire nation (God's one wife) as a whole that committed adultery against Him. This is made clear again and again and again throughout the entire Old Testament.

The mere fact that there are problem texts proves nothing either. God in His wisdom has allowed "problem" texts regarding every single doctrine of the faith, including all of the essential ones. It is our job to interpret all of the Bible in the most harmonious and common sense manner possible. God could have written a technical systematic theology book wherein there would be little dispute over the meaning of most passages. But, such a book would have lacked the grandeur and creativity of the Bible, and that is coming from someone who loves systematic theology! Theology is extremely important, but it is not the only aspect to our walk with God, and the Bible reflects this fact. With that said, this truth makes the Bible more prone to misinterpretation. That reality only makes us all the more responsible to interpret the Bible with reverence and extreme care. Skeptics and heretics will always refuse to do this and this should never surprise us.

Given all that we have discussed in this essay, the historic position of the Christian church has been shown to be the correct and biblical one. Polygamy is sinful and is in no way condoned by the Bible. As far as the extremely rare cases of Gideon, David, and Solomon, God is allowed to make exceptions to the rule as He sees fit. In this fallen world, exceptions are sometimes required. However, those exceptions never negate the rule.

## **Appendix A**

In this appendix, we will look at one example of how poor the argumentation is from those who try to defend the notion that the Bible teaches the doctrine that polygamous unions are not only normative, but are blessed by God. This person (he does not provide a name and I am assuming the author is a *he*) is not a scholar or a skeptic, he

is in favor of “biblical polygamy.” But, he is very thorough. I will not be responding to all of his arguments as they are many and atrociously awful, despite his thoroughness. We will however, look at one key one he makes to make my point here.<sup>1</sup>

He attempts to put together a directory of polygamists in the Bible. He admits that many of these men were Pagans or were very ungodly Israelites. But, he seems to think that by merely pointing out the fact that the Bible records the reality of many polygamists, this is somehow dispositive of anything. It is not. The cultural milieu of the Old Testament is the ANE. And polygamy was normative in that culture. Hence, the idea that the Old Testament describes many polygamists is no more relevant than the fact that it describes many idolaters, both within and outside of Israel.

Further, it should be noted that even with all that I just said, he can only come up with a total of 40 examples. Now to be fair, he explains that one of his examples, Issachar, is actually referring to his descendants, who are said to have many wives. So, to give him the benefit of the doubt, let’s move the number up to 50. At first blush, that could actually sound like a high number. However, he does not hesitate to pick off even the most obscure figures in the Bible, such as people that are only named once in a genealogy. When one takes into account how many names there are in the Bible, 50 is a very paltry number indeed. Even further, he is forced to put an asterisk next to 8 of them to indicate that each of these are debatable. And I would argue that none of those were in fact actually polygamists. So, that brings his number back down to about 40.

One of his examples is Moses (without an asterisk), and we have seen that Moses was not a polygamist. Other than the major 5 that we have already discussed (which would only leave him about 35 examples), all of the rest of his examples are Pagans, ungodly Israelites, or extremely marginal figures in the biblical record. With many of his examples, we have so little to go by that there is no way to know if they were godly or not. Or even if they were godly, if they took their additional wives before they were

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<sup>1</sup> “Polygamists in the Bible,” *Biblical Polygamy*, accessed Jul 6, 2023, <http://www.biblicalpolygamy.com/polygamists/>.

saved or not. Or even if they were godly and took an additional wife after turning to the Lord, whether or not this was done in a sinful and weak moment.

Thus, as I showed in the core of my essay, we only have 3 examples where God is clearly positive about the polygamy of the men involved. And those 3 examples, as we have seen, are Gideon, David, and Solomon. Each one of them were unique seminal leaders in the history of Israel. We can no more use those exceptional cases to defend polygamy across the board, then we can use the many examples of godly people lying in the Bible for godly reasons to condone lying across the board. God condemns lying over and over again throughout His word, and thus the exceptions to the rule must be seen as just that. The same is true with polygamy.

The author of this website would probably respond by saying that the two cases are not identical. He would probably point out that lying is different because it is so often explicitly condemned. But, God gives His law to us in various ways just like He gives all of His truth to us in various ways. As I've already stated, the Bible never spells out what is required to enter into a marriage. It has to be inferred from the biblical record. It would seem that where a covenant is made between two lawful people in the presence of at least one witness, we have a marriage. Thus, no one could plead ignorance by saying that he or she is not married because the Bible never spells out exactly what must take place for a union to exist. If such a covenant has taken place, then the two parties are married. As another example, the Bible never explicitly says that the failure to worship the Holy Spirit is sin. But, plainly it is. To reject God in any manner is sin. The Holy Spirit is God and thus to willfully fail to worship Him is sin. The evidence that God condemns polygamy is overwhelming. Thus it is sin. And therefore, the comparison between lying and polygamy absolutely holds.

## **Appendix B**

In this appendix, we will briefly look at the concept of *concubine*. Many of those described in the Bible as being polygamists (lawfully for some and unlawfully for others)

are also described as having concubines. There was no one uniform understanding of this position or state in the ANE, and there is little in the Bible to give us any explicit definition either. Many have tried to say that a concubine was a slave wife, but there is not enough biblical evidence to conclude that is how the position should be defined biblically. It seems that the best we can say is that these were wives with a lesser status. The extent to which each of these wives was given a lesser status than any previous wives was probably determined in the initial contract. Concubinage is evil and is condemned by God in even stronger terms than general polygamy based on all that we have examined so far.

As far as our 3 key exceptions, Gideon, David, and Solomon, it would have unfortunately been very necessary to indicate to each wife and concubine what her children would receive. Not all of the children of each of these men could all be given the same high positions. Hence, God did allow each of them to take concubines as exceptions to the rule.