

PASTORING POLYGAMISTS:
BIBLICAL COUNSEL FOR THE AFRICAN CHURCH

by

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ABSTRACT
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This thesis explores polygamy within African culture by addressing the hermeneutical, biblical, and pastoral implications on a matter heavily debated throughout the centuries. Since the majority of passages describing polygamy occur in the Old Testament (OT), proper rules and guidelines are necessary for a suitable handling of the OT in the New Testament (NT) era.

Several OT passages appear to condone polygamy, leading some to tolerate its practice. After all, Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon were godly men greatly blessed of God—all of whom had multiple wives. Many believe this is clear support for polygamous marriages. This thesis seeks to debunk those arguments by taking a closer look at the context, grammar, purpose, and application of all the relevant passages.

The crux of this thesis aims to give pastoral counsel to those ministers who are shepherding polygamists *after* they are converted. Though the counsel handed down by church history gives no consensus on this point, Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage does give light. Further there are a host of other NT passages that solidify the point of this thesis: Scripture never condones or legislates polygamy, nor does it mandate the formal divorce of converted polygamists, thus freeing African pastors to be shrewd and gracious in their counsel of them.

To Lindy

My one and only

“murandziwa wa nga i wa mina” (Tinsimu 6:3)

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Pastor Maluleke swallowed hard and then gave thanks. After years of Bible studies and counsel, the Lord had answered his prayers. Kojo and his wife Sarah had repented and trusted in Christ. But the couple sat across from him in their dimly lit dining room with tears of mixed emotions. On the one hand, as believers they were anxious to begin their new life in the body of Christ. Baptism, Bible reading, prayer groups, and service in the church would no doubt soon follow. Or would it?

Kojo, like many of his African countrymen, was a polygamist, and Pastor Maluleke was dreading the question he knew would arise. “How must I live as a Christian with many wives?” This was only the beginning of the complexities. Should Kojo divorce all of his wives but one, and if so, which wife should he keep? If Kojo should be allowed baptism without divorcing his wives, could he serve as a leader in the church? If he himself were forbidden baptism, may his converted wives be baptized and join the church, since they are married to only one man?

For years, missiologists, pastors, professors, and missionaries have studied, debated, and written about the issue of polygamy—especially within the context of the African church. While the cultural ramifications are well documented, the biblical implications are less so, and a pastoral theology on this matter is sorely lacking.

While the Church of England in the nineteenth century held a staunch position that polygamists must divorce all but one of their wives in order to join the church, things have changed over the past hundred years. Missionary journals and books on Christian ethics are replete with articles and thoughts on polygamy, many of them condoning it. May polygamists join the church? Is the Bible clear on this issue? Do other issues like divorce and remarriage relate in any way to polygamy?

The goal of this thesis is to show that Scripture never condones or legislates polygamy, nor does it mandate the formal divorce of converted polygamists, thus freeing African pastors to be shrewd and gracious in their counsel of them. First, I will consider the hermeneutical principles that will guide us in our study of polygamy. Second, I will do a biblical analysis of most of the pertinent passages on polygamy. The third section will address polygamy from a pastoral perspective as related to church history, divorce and remarriage, and counsel within the African church.

CHAPTER 2

POLYGAMY ADDRESSED HERMENEUTICALLY

Does the Old Testament (OT) teaching on polygamy still apply today? This question poses a litany of difficulties over which theologians have long debated. After an overview of the problem, it will be important to address several principles of biblical interpretation: (1) the distinction between the Mosaic Law and the New Testament (NT), (2) the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive texts, (3) the distinction between various cultures, and (4) the distinction between *ought* and *is*.

An Overview of the Problem

Clearly a number of the OT laws seem strange and bewildering when analyzed in the contemporary context. Since the majority of polygamous situations and laws occur in the OT, we must discern whether or not these commands and applications are germane today. If only a portion of the OT law is relevant, how do we choose which precepts to apply? For example, certain OT laws forbid God's people to touch the skin of a dead pig (Lev. 11:6-8), trim the hair around their temples (Lev. 19:27), wear clothing woven from two different kinds of materials (Lev. 19:19), plant two different crops in the same field (Lev. 19:19), or eat sea creatures that lack scales or fins (Lev. 11:10). If laws like these still apply today, modern Christianity is in danger of violating God's law, as few for example "stand up before the gray

head”¹ (Lev. 19:32) or build a wall around the roof of their house (Deut. 22:8). But if these admonitions *do not* apply directly to us, as most Christians believe, then on what basis should we to listen to OT laws addressing homosexuality, adultery, and the topic of this thesis—polygamy? Are we free to choose which biblical standards we will follow, or are there guidelines that will help us in our interpretation of the Scriptures?

Principles of Biblical Interpretation

As previously stated, the majority of commands, examples, laws, and stories regarding polygamy are in the OT. Some have maintained that the OT is so popular in Africa because it is sympathetic to polygamy.² In fact, the African church does more than just *accept* OT teaching; she *runs* to it. Phillips writes:

From all parts comes testimony that Africans of primitive tribes find the Old Testament easy to understand. Some even say the atmosphere is *too much* like their own, including in it some things from which they are desperately trying to free themselves; its references to use of wine do not help them to purge the community of its beer drinking, and the plurality of wives of the patriarchs is an embarrassment in the building up of a monogamous church. In both East and West Africa there are secessionist churches which encourage polygamy, insisting that it is permitted “in the Bible.”³

Thus it is vital to arrive at a clear hermeneutic⁴ as we seek to bring these OT passages to bear in the modern church. Moreover, some of the NT passages relating to polygamy are

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations will be taken from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001). Used by permission.

² G. C. Oosthuizen, *Post-Christianity in Africa: A Theological and Anthropological Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 169.

³ Godfrey E. Phillips, *The Old Testament in the World Church* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1942), 7.

⁴ Grudem writes: “In order to help people to avoid making mistakes in interpreting Scripture, many Bible teachers have developed ‘principles of interpretation,’ or guidelines to encourage growth in the skill of proper interpretation. The word *hermeneutics* (from the Greek word *hermeneuo*, ‘to interpret’) is the more technical term for this field of study: *hermeneutics is the study of correct methods of interpretation* (especially interpretation of Scripture).” Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 108, emphasis original.

surrounded by admonitions directed toward different cultures in a different era. To determine how to proceed, we need to discuss sound principles of biblical interpretation as we seek to determine which commands are timeless in their application.

The Distinction Between the Mosaic Law and the New Testament

How the OT law is to be used in the NT era is a perennial theological issue.⁵ Some emphasize the eternal, absolute validity of at least the moral aspect of the law while others believe the law is abrogated all together. The breadth and complexity of this issue will not allow a thorough treatment, but some definitions, arguments and guiding principles are in order.

The continuity position believes that the OT law *continues* in the NT era. While some proponents of this view deny that the civil and ceremonial laws are still valid, all agree that there is basic continuity between the Law of Moses and the teachings of the New Covenant.⁶

⁵ The guidelines may vary among interpreters, but Goldsworthy is correct when he says: “Any attempt to categorize the various approaches suggested by modern biblical theologians will need to recognize that different emphases are just that—emphases, not mutually exclusive perspective.” Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 239.

⁶ For a clear overview of the continuity and discontinuity positions, see John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), 34–40. Within these two views, Feinberg lists four positions. (1) Theonomists hold to a continuity position and believe that all of the OT applies today. See Greg L. Bahnsen, *By This Standard: the Authority of God’s Law Today* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991). (2) A more moderate continuity position believes the OT law generally applies today but must be adjusted in relation to the NT era. The Westminster Confession provides a classic expression of this position. For a brief summary, also see Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation*, 244. (3) The most radical discontinuity position believes that Christ terminated not only the Mosaic Law but all law in general. Rather, the Christian is to follow the leading of the Spirit. (4) The moderate discontinuity view believes that while there is great overlap between OT and NT laws, Christ and his teaching ultimately fulfills the law and thus determines which OT laws are valid. It is for this position that I am arguing. See Douglas J. Moo, “Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 20 (February 1984): 3–49; Thomas Schreiner, *40 Questions About Christians and Biblical Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010); Feinberg and Feinberg, 34–40. Zaspel and Wells concur: “Moses survives, but only as he is taken up into Christ.” Tom Wells and Fred G. Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 2002), 113.

The discontinuity position believes that Christ fulfills the law, thus precluding the assumption that the OT law is operative in the same way it was in the past.

The Meaning of “Law”

The main word for law in the OT is *torah*, and in the NT the corresponding Greek word is *nomos*. Though *nomos* sometimes refers to the Pentateuch (Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; John 1:45) or at other times more broadly to the entire OT Scriptures (Matt. 22:36; Luke 10:26; Gal. 4:21), *nomos* commonly refers to the commands and statutes in the Mosaic covenant that God requires of his people.⁷

The Benefits and Difficulties of the Tripartite Division of the Law

Given that a large portion of God’s revelation is made up of OT laws⁸, many evangelical scholars have divided them into three categories⁹: civil (social), ceremonial (religious), and moral (ethical).¹⁰ These divisions are important because they help the Christian to know which laws are applicable today. In this view, God gave the civil and ceremonial laws to ancient Israel for a fixed time (i.e., the requirement of the death penalty for those who curse their parents), while moral laws are timeless and pertain to both ancient and modern believers (i.e., statutes forbidding homosexual behavior).

⁷ Schreiner, 19–23.

⁸ The Jewish rabbis of the past counted 613 specific laws in the Pentateuch, 365 prohibitions and 248 positive commands.

⁹ For good explanations of the three-part division of the law, see *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (19:3-5) and Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 114–119.

¹⁰ A good example of moral law would be the Ten Commandments and the requirement to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). An example of civil law would be the Sabbatical year (Deut. 15:1). Ceremonial law is represented in legislation controlling the festivals, sacrifices, and priestly activities, such as the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 16:13).

This tripartite division of the law is appealing for several reasons. First, it provides a convenient framework for the way in which behavior was legislated in the OT.¹¹ Plummer states: “Many supposed inconsistencies of Christian morality (for example, the charge that Christians pick and choose their morality from the Bible) are explained by understanding the provisional and preparatory nature of the civil and ceremonial laws of the old covenant period.”¹² Second, this three-fold distinction has a long history of honest scholarship, especially in the Reformed tradition—dating back to John Calvin¹³ and continuing among most Reformed scholars today.¹⁴

Third, few would dispute that ethical OT laws against moral crimes like covetousness, murder, adultery and lying are clearly applicable today, though the same cannot be said for other kinds of law. For example, Jesus clearly rescinded laws regarding clean and unclean foods, for Mark tells us: “Thus [Jesus] declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:19). Finally, while OT laws relating to many feasts and festivals are absent in the NT, standards of personal morality agree in both the OT (“be holy, for I am holy,” Lev. 11:44) and NT (“be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect,” Matt. 5:48).

¹¹ See Walter C. Kaiser, “The Weightier and Lighter Matters of the Law: Moses, Jesus and Paul,” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 176–192.

¹² Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* (Grand: Kregel, 2010), 169.

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 348–423, Logos electronic edition. For example, Calvin writes: “This always remains an unassailable fact: no part of the authority of the law is withdrawn without our having always to receive it with the same veneration and obedience. The ceremonies [or, ceremonial law] are a different matter: they have been abrogated not in effect but only in use. Christ by his coming has terminated them, but has not deprived them of anything of their sanctity” (364).

¹⁴ For a standard non-theonomic Reformed view of the use of the Law, see Willem A. VanGemen, “The Law Is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective,” in *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian*, ed. Wayne C. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 13–58. VanGemen writes: “The laws of the Old Testament have also been commonly categorized as moral, ceremonial, and civil. Each one of the Ten Commandments expresses the moral law of God, whereas laws in the Pentateuch regulate the rituals and ceremonies (ceremonial laws) and the civil life of Israel as a nation (civil laws).” (30) In fairness, VanGemen does acknowledge the complex nature of the law and the difficulty that comes with separating it into distinct categories.

While the threefold division of the law provides a convenient means of evaluating the applicability of the OT law, there are a number of difficulties. The NT does not directly distinguish the different aspects of the law in this way. Paul speaks of “the whole law” (Gal. 5:3) and James states that a simple violation of a single law makes one guilty of all (James 2:10). David Dorsey asserts that while the tripartite division of the law is common, the NT speaks of the law “in quite monolithic terms. Legal obligation to only a portion of the corpus is nowhere suggested. If one is legally bound to the law, it is to the entire law, including every ‘minor stipulation,’ that he is bound.”¹⁵

Second, the division between three kinds of law is often used in an arbitrary way. For example, is it not inconsistent to choose Deuteronomy 22:5 as binding on Christians (“a woman shall not wear a man’s garment”) but not Deuteronomy 22:12 (“you shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of the garment with which you cover yourself”)?

Gordon Wenham notes how the tripartite division is not apparent in the arrangement of the various statutes: “The arbitrariness of the distinction between moral and civil law is reinforced by the arrangement of the material in Leviticus.”¹⁶ He rightly observes that the command to love one’s neighbor (moral) directly precedes a prohibition on mixed breeding (civil; 19:18-19) and the holiness motto (moral; “be holy, for I am the LORD your God”) comes just before the law on executing disobedient children (civil; 20:7-9). Commenting on Leviticus 19:18-19, Daniel Hays highlights the difficulty in determining which laws are

¹⁵ David A. Dorsey, “The Law of Moses and the Christian: A Compromise,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, (1991): 330.

¹⁶ Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 34–35, Logos electronic edition.

timeless and which are temporal, saying the “text gives no indication that any kind of hermeneutical shift has taken place.”¹⁷

In sum, because both sides make valid points, we should show caution in outright rejection of either side. In one respect, it seems overly simplistic to maintain that only the moral law is still valid for today’s believer, while the civil and ceremonial laws have passed away. On the other side, however, the tri-partite division appears beneficial not only for ease in communication but its ability to synthesize the central statement of Jesus, “I came to fulfill” with “all Scripture is profitable.” Douglas Moo cautions: “While the evidence does not allow us to assume that Jesus and his hearers presupposed a clear and conscious demarcation between the moral and ceremonial law, it is not illegitimate to find the seeds of this kind of a distinction [elsewhere].”¹⁸

Guiding Principles

Several guidelines will help us as we study the OT in the NT era. First, NT Christians are ultimately subject to the new covenant inaugurated by Christ, not the Mosaic Law that was given to ancient Israel as part of the old covenant. We are, as Dorsey says, “looking over the shoulder of the Israelite” as we read the law.¹⁹ This can be defended in at least six ways. (1) The book of Hebrews confirms the ceremonial law (i.e. the Mosaic sacrificial system) is no longer in force because of Christ’s work on the cross. Hebrews 8:13 states, “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes *the first one obsolete*. And what is becoming obsolete and

¹⁷ J. Daniel Hays, “Applying the Old Testament Law Today,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001): 23.

¹⁸ Moo, 15.

¹⁹ I would recommend following a summary of David Dorsey’s excellent hermeneutical procedure in applying OT laws. He maintains that while the 613 OT laws are not *legally* binding on the Christian, “each is valuable for determining theological truths, for correcting misconceptions, for exposing and rectifying wrong behavior, and for training and equipping the Christian in practical, personal righteousness.” Dorsey, 332–333.

growing old is ready to vanish away” (emphasis mine). (2) Romans 13:1 and 1 Peter 2:13-15 show that the NT Christian does not live in a theocracy, thus making the civil law invalid. (3) Second Corinthians 3:14 speaks of the “old covenant” in contrast to the “new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:6). The old *covenant* is linked with the OT *laws*, referred to as “the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone” (3:7).²⁰ We can conclude then, as does Schreiner, “if the Mosaic covenant is no longer in effect because it has been replaced by the ‘new covenant,’ then the laws, which belong to that covenant, are no longer binding either.”²¹ Copan writes: “Israel’s Old Testament covenant wasn’t a universal ideal and was never intended to be so.”²²

(4) The book of Galatians suggests that the OT law is no longer normative. In this epistle, Paul is warning the churches in Galatia that salvation is by faith alone in Christ, apart from the works of the law. Practically, Paul is trying to convince the Galatians that though circumcision was necessary for entrance into OT covenant (Lev. 12:3) and those who refused it were severely punished (Josh. 5:1-9), it is *not* mandatory for entrance into the NT church since justification is by faith alone (Rom. 4:9-12; 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 6:15). Paul could only say this if the law has been eradicated. Indeed, the law was temporal (Gal. 3:19), holding us captive (3:23) and guarding us (3:24) until Christ came and ended its purpose (3:24-25).

²⁰ “Additionally, as some have argued, the Mosaic Law cannot be detached from the Mosaic Covenant or vice versa. They are part and parcel of one another. If this is so, then to say the Mosaic Code is still in force today is also to say the Mosaic Covenant is binding for today. However, continuity-oriented thinkers traditionally say the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31 governs the Church. Jeremiah 31 clearly distinguishes the New Covenant from the Mosaic Covenant. All of this raises the following dilemma for continuity positions: if the Mosaic Code is part and parcel of the Mosaic Covenant and inseparable from it, then to say we are under the Mosaic Code is to say we are under the Mosaic Covenant. But to hold that contradicts the belief that NT believers are governed by the New Covenant. It is inconsistent to say the Church is governed by the New Covenant when it comes to salvation, but by the Mosaic Code (and Covenant) when it comes to law. A discontinuity position avoids this problem by claiming that the Church is governed by the New Covenant as to salvation and by the Law of Christ as to law.” Feinberg and Feinberg, 37.

²¹ Schreiner, 67.

²² Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 64.

(5) Romans 7:4-6 confirms that the law is not normative since Christians have “died to the law through the body of Christ” (7:4) and are now “released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code” (7:6). (6) Paul’s position on clean and unclean food in Romans 14 and 15 affirms the end of the law. While many laws in the Old Testament forbid certain food, Paul says “everything is clean” (Rom. 14:20) and “nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean” (Rom. 14:14). By calling clean what the OT law specifically called unclean, Paul was confirming that the laws associated with the Mosaic covenant were no longer in force.

Second, the OT must be interpreted in light of its fulfillment in Christ. Jesus testified that he came to fulfill the law (Matt. 5:17)—that is, bring it to its full-intended meaning.²³ Jesus was demanding that the law²⁴ be read in light of his coming and the inauguration of the New Covenant.²⁵ The key passage is Matthew 5:17-18, which Moo calls “the single most important passage in determining the relationship between Jesus and the law.”²⁶ It reads: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish

²³ There are at least seven definitions of the Greek word *plēroō* in Eugene Albert Louw and Johannes P. Nida, “πληρώω,” *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 200, Logos Electronic Edition. These include: (1) *to fill*, (2) *to make complete*, (3) *to finish*, (4) *to provide fully*, (5) *to proclaim completely*, (6) *to give true meaning*, and (7) *to cause to happen*. This lexicon associates Matt. 5:17 with the sixth meaning, that is, Jesus came not to destroy but to give true meaning to the law.

²⁴ Schreiner writes: “The notion that Matthew emphasizes only continuity in his view of the law should be rejected. The theme of fulfillment is prominent in the gospel (Matt. 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9; cf. also 3:15; 26:54, 56), but the fulfillment centers on Jesus Christ and thus should be understood in terms of the newness that is realized in Christ. Jesus fulfills the law, but the law also points to him.” Schreiner, 161.

²⁵ See Hays, 29, where he writes: “Jesus restated some of the Old Testament laws (19:18-19), but some He modified (5:31-32). Some He intensified (5:21-22, 21-28), and others He changed significantly (5:33-37, 38-42, 43-47). Some laws He abrogated entirely (Mark 7:15-19).”

²⁶ Moo, 19.

them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”

The key word is “fulfill” (v. 17), meaning to bring to completion. Not only must the law be interpreted and applied in light of its fulfillment in Christ but it must also be viewed in light of Christ’s teaching, which came not only from his mouth but also from the mouth of his apostles. Moo observes:

The continuing validity of the law is to be understood in the light of its ‘fulfillment’ (v. 17). In all its details, the Scripture remains authoritative, but the manner in which men are to relate to and understand its provisions is now determined by the one who has fulfilled it.²⁷

Thus, we are not to abandon the law but teach it—though with caution, knowing that it is subjected to the teachings of Jesus and his apostles. Again, Moo observes: “In his direct statements about the law Jesus upholds the continuing validity of the entire OT Scriptures, but also asserts that this validity must be understood in light of its fulfillment.”²⁸

Third, where the Mosaic Law and the teaching of the NT overlap, appeal to the OT is proper. Schreiner says:

In most instances Paul does not argue that the moral norms from the Old Testament are authoritative on the basis of their appearance in the Old Testament, though in some instances he does cite the Old Testament command (e.g., Rom. 13:9; Eph. 6:2-3). They are not normative merely because they appear in the Mosaic covenant, for that covenant has passed away. It seems that they are normative because they express the character of God. We know that they still express God’s will for believers because they are repeated as moral norms in the New Testament. It is not surprising that in the welter of the laws we find in the Old Testament (613 according to the rabbis) that some of those laws express transcendent moral principles.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., 27.

²⁸ Ibid., 28.

²⁹ Schreiner, 93–94.

Fourth, determine which OT laws reflect timeless ethical principles found in the NT and the mind of God. Dorsey explains:

It is here that the point of profound applicability for the Christian is found. A law reflects the mind, the personality, the priorities, the values, the likes and dislikes of the lawgiver. Each law issued by God to ancient Israel (like each declaration by God through the prophets) reflects God's mind and ways and is therefore a theological treasure. Moreover the theological insights we gain from a particular OT law will not only enhance our knowledge and understanding of God but will also have important practical implications for our own lives if we are patterning them after our heavenly Father and modifying our behavior and thinking in response to our knowledge of him and his ways (Paul argues along these very lines in 1 Cor 9:9-10). It is in this sense that every one of the 613 laws of Moses is binding upon the NT Christian.

Finally, determine the practical implications of the theological insights gained from this law for your own NT circumstances. For example, Exodus 22:25 states: "If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him." This was a civil law directed specifically to Jewish covenanters and is not legally binding upon Christians today. However, Dorsey suggests there are still implications and insights that can help today's Christian, like the avoidance of being overly burdensome upon those in financial crisis and being generous to the poor. As another example, in this thesis we will discover the law of levirate marriage. Though there is disagreement as to whether this law implicitly commanded polygamy, I am arguing here at least two things vis-à-vis this law. First, Christians are not legally bound to fulfill levirate marriage. Second, we can still benefit from this law because it teaches us the importance of caring for the wellbeing of our extended family members.

In sum, we must heed Paul's reminder in 2 Timothy 3:16 that "*all* Scripture is profitable." This must include both the Old and New Testaments. But because we are under the teachings of Christ in the New Covenant, not the Mosaic Law, "we can determine which

moral norms to preach as applicable today when we read the Old Testament from the standpoint of the New Testament.”³⁰ The OT illustrations and legislation on polygamy are important because they allow us to peer into the mind, values, and priorities of God.

The Distinction Between Descriptive and Prescriptive Texts

Descriptive texts *describe* what is customary, while prescriptive texts *prescribe* what ought to be. Knowing the difference is important because prescriptive texts carry more weight than those that are descriptive. The Bible *describes* David’s adultery with another man’s wife (2 Samuel 11), but the *prescription* in the Decalogue not to commit adultery trumps the example of David (Exod. 20:14). This is not to say that descriptive texts have no value, as they certainly complement clear exhortations. The prayer life of Jesus is described in the Gospels (e.g. Luke 6:12: “And in these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God”) and thus supports direct commands to pray (e.g. Luke 22:40: “Pray that you may not enter into temptation”). As one scholar puts it: “A good general rule is that a behavior reported in the text may be considered prescriptive only when there is subsequent explicit teaching to support it.”³¹ That is, while Jesus wearing a beard is not prescriptive because it is never commanded, the example of Jesus’ prayer on the mountain *is* prescriptive because elsewhere it is explicitly taught.

More examples will make this clearer. We find the following in Luke 22:41: “And [Jesus] withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed.” Should we conclude from this that all Christians must kneel in prayer? Certainly not, as believers are

³⁰ Ibid., 227.

³¹ Plummer, 170.

nowhere commanded to do this.³² Some believe that Christians should not own property but rather live in a community setting like those that held everything in common in Acts 5:32-37. While it is certainly right to give with generosity to fellow believers, the NT never prescribes that the Christian community live this way. We conclude then that descriptive texts may support direct commands, but believers are not bound to them in the same way as prescriptive texts.

This idea directly applies to polygamy. The polygamous marriages of the patriarchs *described* in Scripture do not necessarily imply that polygamy is *prescribed*. The descriptions of Isaac digging a well (Gen. 26:18) or Elkanah offering sacrifices in Shiloh (1 Sam. 1:3) are not binding on Christians any more than their polygamous marriages.

The Distinction between Various Cultures

Seth Meyers argues that because “the Bible was written in a specific historical and cultural context” it therefore “guides the correct interpretation.”³³ If this is correct, then we as the interpreters must know something about the culture to which the particular passage is written.³⁴ In relation to culture and time, Plummer suggests that the moral commands of

³² In fact, there are many postures of prayer modeled in Scripture, such as: bowing (Gen. 24:26; Matt. 26:39), spreading out the hands (Ps. 28:2; 1 Timothy 2:8), and standing (1 Kings 8:14; Luke 18:11).

³³ Seth Meyers, “History and Culture: The Fourth Principle of Hermeneutics,” Lecture notes for Hermeneutics course (Limpopo Bible Institute, Makhado, South Africa, 2011), 22.

³⁴ For an excellent overview of Christianity’s response to culture, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951). Niebuhr presents five models Christians may use to approach culture. (1) “Christ against culture.” This view sees everything in culture as evil and therefore separates from it because Christ and culture are at odds. This is incorrect because the “world” (in Scripture) and culture are not the same. The world is the bad part of culture; we should not be conformed to it (Rom. 12:2). But *culture* has many good elements. (2) “Christ of culture.” This is an attempt to find common ground with the unregenerate world. This approach seems to overlook the reason Christ came, namely to save sinners and the wicked elements of their culture. (3) “Christ above culture.” Here, Christ is better than the best culture has to offer and thus culture is somewhat inferior to spiritual “Christianity”. We must abandon lowly culture and seek for higher matters like living in a monastery, never marrying, or becoming a priest. (4) “Culture in paradox.” This complex idea essentially teaches that there are two different sets of standards: one for the church and one for the secular

Scripture be divided into two categories: (1) Commands that transfer from culture to culture with little or no alteration; and (2) Commands that embody timeless principles that find varying expressions in different cultures.³⁵ A passage that fits into the first category, though much debated, is 1 Timothy 2:11-14. “Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.”³⁶ The imperative that women must not preach authoritatively to an assembled group of Christian men applies to all cultures of all time because it is rooted in the pre-cultural creation account (“Adam was formed first, then Eve”) and the intrinsic distinction between male and female (“Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived”).³⁷

Another passage in Timothy is quite different, and falls into the second category. First Timothy 2:9 states: “likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire.” The timeless principle is that women should be adorned *externally* with “respectable apparel” and *inwardly* with good character. However, the prohibitions against “braided hair and gold or pearls and costly attire” were a particular expression of prideful gaudiness in the Roman culture that may not translate in every culture in the same way.

world. But this view overlooks that what is right for Christians is right for pagans. What is moral for carpenters, and machinists is also morally right for priests and pastors. We do not need distinctively different standards for the church and the secular world. (5) “Christ transforming culture”. This is the best view because it recognizes that we live in a fallen world and yet, have the means to improve by God’s grace. This *does not* mean that believers must “Christianize” everything they touch. It is not necessary to have a Christian Yellow Pages. Still, we ought to bring Christian standards to bear in everything we do; this is how we will transform culture.

³⁵ Plummer, 170.

³⁶ The verb in v. 11a (γυνὴ ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ μαθητεύτω) is an imperative.

³⁷ For more clarity on this issue, see Wayne A. Grudem, *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism* (Sisters, Or.: Multnomah Publishers, 2006); John Piper and Wayne A. Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006).

The Distinction between Ought and Is

In referring to what some ethicists have called the “naturalistic fallacy,” John Frame says that “from premises about what is...you cannot deduce conclusions about what you ought to do.”³⁸ That is, merely expressing what is done does not in itself set forth a moral requirement. As an example of such a fallacy, someone might say, “cake *is* delicious; therefore we *ought* to eat cake.” But it does not follow that just because cake tastes good that we *ought* to eat it. Similarly, polygamy *is* evident among God-honoring characters in the Bible, but this does not mean that we *ought* to support polygamy.³⁹ As we study dozens of biblical examples regarding polygamy, we must be careful not to commit this fallacy.⁴⁰ However, the following is *not* a naturalistic fallacy because there is an “ought” (or, moral obligation) within both the premise and conclusion.

Premise: monogamy *is* morally right.

Conclusion: we *ought* to marry only one wife.

Careful interpreters will be able to distinguish between the two examples.

³⁸ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 2008), 60.

³⁹ Other examples of the naturalistic fallacy are: (1) Marriage *is* boring; therefore I *ought* not to be married any more. (2) In regard to global warming, there *is* slightly more CO² in the atmosphere; therefore we *ought* to ride our bikes to work and not our vehicles. (3) Sex *is* pleasurable; therefore we *ought* to have sex whenever we want. (4) Every other African nation *allows* polygamy; Zimbabwe *ought* to allow polygamy. (5) King David *committed* adultery and was greatly used by God; therefore we *ought* to commit adultery to be greatly used by God. (6) Universal health care will help many people; therefore we *ought* to have universal health care. (7) Homosexuality *is* sometimes *seen* within the animal world; therefore humans *ought* to engage in homosexuality.

⁴⁰ “The Bible has no clear-cut statements condemning or prohibiting polygamy as practiced in the Old Testament. We are thus faced with the standard problem of whether it is possible to move from statements of fact to statements of value, and vice versa. That is, can one derive statements of *ought* from statements of *is*?” Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Hippo Books, 2008), 226.

CHAPTER 3

POLYGAMY ADDRESSED BIBLICALLY

Though there may be exceptions, the rule is this: monogamy—not polygamy—is God’s design for the human race. It took just over fifty verses before the author of Genesis began defining for us the meaning of marriage. The writers of the Pentateuch, Writings, and Prophets did not cease to commend that same definition as seen in the very first book. There are several passages resisting the practices of polygamy. We shall look at seven examples.

Old Testament Scripture Opposing Polygamy

The single greatest passage defining monogamy is in the OT. Furthermore, the majority of passages dealing with polygamy are in the OT as well. Thus, the OT is where we shall begin our biblical study.

The First Marriage (Genesis 2:18-24)

As the grand Creator of marriage, God has the full authority to define it. “The creation design for human sexuality finds expression in a marital form that is heterosexual and *monogamous*.”¹ We can see this most clearly in the establishment of the first marriage in Genesis

2. There are at least four defining elements of matrimony in Genesis 2:18-24.

¹⁸Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” ¹⁹Now out of the ground the LORD God had

¹ Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), 177.

formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.²⁰ The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him.²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.²³ Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

First, marriage is *monogamous*. Nearly all scholars agree² with Frymer-Kensky: “the monogamous nuclear family was established by God at the very beginning of human existence.”³ The narrator of Genesis uses singular nouns to make this point: God promised to give Adam “a helper” (v. 18); because for Adam there was not “a helper” (v. 20), God took the rib that he removed from “the man” and used it to create “a woman,” who was then “brought to the man” (v. 22). Adam named a plurality of animals in verse 20 (“all the livestock,” “the birds,” “every beast of the field”) but only one woman (“she shall be called Woman,” v. 23). Kostenberger concurs that monogamy in this passage is clear:

One could argue that from a practical standpoint, perhaps God, especially in anticipation of the fall of humanity and the universal death that would ensue, should have provided the man with two or more wives. For what would have happened if Eve had died before having children, or had died in childbirth? Would the human race have perished? If God desired for the earth to be populated (Gen. 1:28), does not logic dictate that this could occur faster if Adam were provided with more than one or perhaps even a large number of wives? Yet, in spite of practical arguments such as these in favor of having more than one wife, the Creator's design is simple and clear: one woman for one man. This is the law of marriage established at creation.⁴

² One exception is Eugene Hillman, renowned author on polygamy and seasoned missionary to Africa, who acknowledges that if the first human species started from only one pair of humans, then the original marriage must have been monogamous. He denies this however, instead embracing the evolutionary theory that “primitive man must have had animal parents, and mankind emerged gradually from a population: not from a single pair.” Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1975), 151.

³ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Law and Philosophy: The Case of Sex in the Bible,” *Semeia* 45 (1989): 91.

⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage & Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 198.

Second, marriage is *restricted*. This can be seen by the word “leave” (Heb. ‘*azab*)—the first of three action verbs in verse 24.⁵ The Hebrew word may have a strong emphasis meaning “to leave a person or place” (Ezek. 8:12) or even “to desert someone” (Ps. 27:10).⁶ Ruth protested to Naomi: “Do not urge me to leave you” (Ruth 1:16). In marriage, it is not just the woman who is to leave, as is assumed in most cultures, but specifically “the man” who “shall leave his father and his mother”. Matthews suggests that “leave” here is metaphorical rather than literal since it was the custom for the woman to leave the house (e.g., Rebekah [Gen. 24] and Tamar [Gen. 38]).⁷ Further, we find many OT examples where the sons remained within the homestead of the father (e.g., Jacob’s sons in Genesis). Davidson understands that this command demands absolute autonomy from outside interferences:

This leaving also implies the exclusiveness of the relationship: husband and wife, and no other interfering party, are bone of each other’s bones, flesh of each other’s flesh. This exclusivity in the marriage relationship is ultimately rooted in the monotheistic nature of God. Just as the one God (Yahweh Elohim) created the whole of humanity for fellowship with himself, so the man and the woman made in God’s image were to be exclusively devoted to each other in marriage.⁸

Third, the covenant of marriage is *permanent*. The second of the action verbs defining marriage in verse 24 is “hold fast” (Heb. *dabaq*), which means “to cleave or cling” and is “used

⁵ Regarding this verse, Hugenberger says “it unquestionably offers a climactic summary for the whole of Gen. 2:18-24.” Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 152.

⁶ Wilhelm Gesenius, “בזע,” in *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, trans. Samuel Prideaux Trugelless, electronic. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003), 617. See also James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

⁷ K. A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, vol. 1A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 223, Logos electronic edition. Also see Craig L. Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12,” *Trinity Journal* 11 (1990): 167. “‘Leaving’ parents in the biblical world would not often have meant establishing a separate residence but would have referred to giving up a loyalty to one’s father and mother as the closest of human relationships.”

⁸ Davidson, 44.

quite often in the OT of physical things sticking to each,”⁹ like the tongue cleaving to one’s mouth (Job 29:10). In its personal uses, the verb describes Ruth cleaving to Naomi (Ruth 1:14), the men of Judah cleaving to King David (2 Sam. 20:2), Shechem cleaving to Dinah (Gen. 34:3), and the Israelites loyally cleaving to the Lord (Deut. 10:20). The author of Genesis uses this meaning of *dabaq* to show that the solidarity within the marriage covenant is for keeps.

Fourth, the marriage covenant is *intimate*. “Become one flesh”¹⁰ makes up the third and final description of marriage in verse 24. This one-flesh relationship points to the sexual union that serves as the sign upon the marriage covenant. William Reyburn understands this verb to mean the “result of the coming together itself, not as sex or offspring.”¹¹ While this “one-flesh” union certainly is not limited to the sexual aspect of marriage, I judge his remark as a misunderstanding of the verb’s sexual overtones, as “become one flesh” follows “cling,” indicating it means more than just a temporary coming together. Michael Lawrence puts covenant and coitus together lucidly: “If marriage is a covenant, then that covenant must have a sign, something that makes visible the invisible reality of this one-flesh union The sign of that unique covenant relationship is the physical act of becoming one flesh in sexual intercourse.”¹²

Genesis 2:18-24 is the clearest definition of marriage we have in Scripture. It defines the marriage covenant as monogamous, restricted, permanent, and intimate and in no way allows either explicitly or implicitly a polygamous union.

⁹ Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 177, Logos Electronic Edition.

¹⁰ The phrase in Hebrew: **לְבָשָׁר אֶחָד**. “Flesh” (Heb. *basar*) is also used for family (Gen. 37:27), humans (Num. 16:22), and animals (Gen. 6:19).

¹¹ William David Reyburn, *A Handbook on Genesis* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1998), 76, Logos electronic edition.

¹² Michael Lawrence, “A Theology of Sex,” in *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 137–138.

The Polygamy of Lamech (Genesis 4:19-24)

Lamech¹³ is the first recorded polygamist in Scripture, as Genesis 4:19-24 briefly describes his bigamy and actions:

And Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah.²⁰ Adah bore Jubal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock.²¹ His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe.²² Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.²³ 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.²⁴ If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold."

Because Lamech was a wicked man, many have concluded that his polygamy is therefore implicitly condemned. Kunhiyop disagrees, averring that the moral character of the polygamist cannot be used since just as many *righteous* polygamists can be found in the Bible as wicked. Thus, "the reference to polygamy in Genesis 4:19 should be properly interpreted as a mere statement of fact."¹⁴

I must disagree with Kunhiyop for a number of reasons. First, the brief account of Lamech's life mentions his polygamous marital status three times (4:19, 23a, 23b). This repetition suggests that the author is not merely recounting facts, but calling attention to the monogamous norm from which Lamech has departed. Second, the writer of Genesis takes pains to paint in at least four ways the depravity of Lamech: (1) In his "Song of the Sword," Lamech gloated over the youth he had murdered and claimed the right for ten times more vengeance than God promised to Cain. "God's promise to avenge Cain's life 'seven times' (v. 15) is interpreted by Lamech as a badge of honor for Cain rather than as a merciful provision by God for a

¹³ The Lamech in Genesis 4 should not be confused with the Lamech in Genesis 5, the father of Noah.

¹⁴ Kunhiyop, 229.

shameful criminal”¹⁵; (2) The retribution of murder the lad received for merely “wounding” Lamech was too severe; (3) Lamech’s crime was even worse because he probably killed a man much younger than himself. The word for “young man” is *yeled*, commonly translated “child” and is used to refer to the infant Isaac (Gen. 21:9) and the teenager Ishmael (Gen. 21:16); (4) Lamech actually glorifies his crime, believing himself to be invincible among those who want to retaliate. There is no shame in his voice.

Finally, by highlighting the genealogies of Seth (5:6-32) and Cain (4:17-24), in both cases expanding on the seventh descendant for effect, the narrator shows the contrast between righteousness and depravity. Davidson states: “By juxtaposing these two illuminating character portraits and paralleling their position of completeness or fullness as seventh in the respective genealogical lines, the narrator succeeds in condemning the practices of Lamech just as effectively as—and perhaps even more so than—could have been accomplished by an explicit verbal denouncement.”¹⁶

In sum, Lamech’s polygamy was not a “mere statement of fact.” The actions of Lamech’s life (including polygamy) were denounced in story form. “By this method [of narrative theology], theological truth is embodied in a historical narrative rather than in generalized propositions. With this perspective in mind, it is not difficult to discover the point in the narrative concerning the multiple marriages of Abraham and Jacob.”¹⁷ Lamech’s marital status was bracketed by accounts of his depravity and undermined by a genealogy that set everything he did in contrast to a parallel line of righteousness. Polygamy did not rise among the godly Sethites but in the evil progeny of Cain.

¹⁵ Mathews, 289.

¹⁶ Davidson, 181.

¹⁷ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Genesis of Sex: Sexual Relationships in the First Book of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 2002), 90.

The Polygamy of Abraham (Genesis 16-22)

Because Abraham is so highly revered in both the Old and New Testaments and is the first example of a godly polygamist, several observations are in order to show that the polygamy of Abram (his name at the time) was neither approved by God nor carried out in ways most bigamous marriages are today.

First, Abraham's background cannot be ignored, as his father was an idolater (Josh. 24:2), his brother a polygamist (Gen. 22:20-24), and his culture such that barrenness was—according to rabbinic interpretation—grounds for divorce after a ten-year period.¹⁸

Second, though Sarah gave Hagar as a “wife” (Heb. *ishshah*) to Abraham (16:3), God never refers to Hagar as Abraham's wife but rather as the “servant of Sarai” (16:8) or “the slave woman” of Abraham (21:12). By contrast, God speaks of Sarah to Abraham as “your wife” (17:15, 19; 18:9-10).¹⁹ The biblical narrator does use both “wife” and “concubine”²⁰ (Heb. *pilegash*) to describe Hagar and while considerable debate²¹ surrounds the precise meaning of *pilegash*, several conclusions are apparent.²² (1) “Wives” and “concubines” are similar though

¹⁸ Mathews, 185.

¹⁹ Of the forty-three different verses in Genesis where the name “Sarah” or “Sarai” is found, nearly half (18) refer to Sarai/Sarah as the wife of Abraham. Conversely, “Hagar” is found in ten verses and only once (16:3) is she called the wife of Abraham. She is called the servant of Sarah four times.

²⁰ In Tsonga culture, as in Scripture, different terminology is used to distinguish the wife from the second wife or “concubine.” In the Tsonga Bible, for example, *nsati lo 'ntsongo* (lit. “the small wife”) is used for “concubine” (e.g. 2 Sam. 3:7) and in common vernacular for the wives in a polygamous marriage beside the first wife. The old Tsonga Bible (see bibliographic information below) also uses *nhlantswa* (“second wife”) sparingly in reference to concubine but it is no longer used in modern speech or the newer 1961 Tsonga Bible version. In the Tsonga village where I reside, most people use *nsati wo sungula* (“first wife”), *nsati wa vumbirhi* (“second wife”) etc. Bible Society of South Africa, tran., *Bibele: Yi Nga Testamente Ya Khale Ni Le 'yintsha*. (Cape Town: Bible Society of South Africa, 1929).

²¹ For a perspective on the practice of concubinage, see Hugenberger, 106–107. He writes: “There is considerable uncertainty regarding the legal status of concubines and the precise distinctions, if any, between a concubine, a slave-wife, and a captive-wife.”

²² Mathews, 185. “Concubinage involved a husband who added secondary wives, usually for purposes of procreation. Concubines held an inferior status to the primary wife. They are portrayed in the Bible as a servant to

not the same and are often in clear contradistinction from one another. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3). David had both concubines and wives (2 Sam. 5:13). (2) A “concubine” was never the initial wife but a later partner whose “legal rights were limited, but who was cared for (Exod. 21:7-11).”²³ This may be why Keturah is called Abraham’s concubine (1 Chron. 1:32) because even though Sarah had already died, Keturah was not his first wife. (3) The titles *ishshah* and *pilegesh* often overlap, as Hagar (Gen. 16:3; 25:6), Keturah (Gen. 25:1; 1 Chron. 1:32), and Bilhah (Gen. 37:2; 35:22) are called both “wife” and “concubine.” Nathan told David his “wives” would be reviled (2 Sam. 12:11), later fulfilled when Absalom went into his father’s “concubines” (2 Sam. 16:22). Thus, while in some respects Hagar was considered “the wife,” she was in reality the maidservant of Sarah and was used in a moment of desperation in hopes of birthing the promised child.

Third, the polygamous relationship with Hagar was very short lived, with clues suggesting Abraham returned to a monogamous relationship soon after the conception of Ishmael. With the exception of a brief generational note in Gen. 25:12, Hagar is only mentioned in two scenes: the giving of the maidservant Hagar to Abraham in Genesis 16 and the party in Genesis 21 where Abraham officially “sent her away” (21:14).

Fourth, even though Abraham’s bigamy²⁴ was brief, the author paints with vivid colors the strain that arose from this union. Not only was there tension between Abraham and Sarah, as

the husband’s primary wife but above the status of a slave. The language ‘concubine’ (*pilegesh*) is not required to name surrogate wives; although identified as a ‘wife,’ Hagar (v. 3) and later Keturah (25:1) are not designated ‘concubines’ in Genesis except by inference (25:6; also 1 Chr 1:32 for Keturah).”

²³ Reyburn, 351.

²⁴ Some may argue that Abraham must have been more than a bigamist, since Genesis 25:6 (“to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts”) indicates he may have been married to Keturah before the death of Sarah and maintained other polygamous relationships throughout his life. But a closer look at the evidence suggests several reasons that “concubines” refers to Hagar and Keturah. (1) “Concubine” and “wife” are interchangeable terms, as “concubines” can refer to any women taken in marriage after the first wife, as Mathews suggests in the note above. (2) “Even though Hagar is nowhere else specifically referred to as a concubine, the story of her marriage to Abraham indicates that she was treated as one. Keturah, on the other hand, even though called a wife in Gen. 25:1, is

Sarah intimated that Abraham was blameworthy and culpable for her pain (16:5). There was also tension between the two wives as Hagar poured “contempt” on Sarah (16:4) and Sarah “dealt harshly” with Hagar and demanded she be sent away (21:10). Finally, there was tension between the children of the two wives (16:12; 21:9).

In sum, I cannot concur with Kunhiyop when he asserts: “If God does not condemn Abraham’s action, neither should we.”²⁵ It is fallacious to assume that propositions are needed to condemn an act, thus ignoring the unique way historical narrative denounces sin. Rather, it is possible God may not have even considered Hagar to be the wife of Abraham. His polygamous marriage to her was most likely very brief, yet their union still endured terrible consequences.

The Polygamy of Esau (Genesis 26-28)

Genesis 26:35 tells us that “they [Esau and his two wives] made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah.” Did his parent’s disapproval arise because Esau’s marriage was polygamous or because his wives were pagan (they were Hittites)? Though the verse does not give the reason for their anguish, it certainly must have stemmed in part from their heathen ways, as Esau’s mother later stated: “I loathe my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?”

But his polygamy was almost certainly a concern as well. “When Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please Isaac his father, Esau went to Ishmael and took as his wife, besides the wives he had, Mahalath” (Gen. 28:8-9). The combination of these verses with the

referred to as a ‘concubine’ in 1 Chronicles 1:32.” Ronald A.G. du Preez, *Polygamy in the Bible*, Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series 3 (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1993), 163. (3) A comparison of Genesis 17:17; 23:1; and 25:8 tells us Abraham lived another thirty-eight years after the death of Sarah, ample time to have six sons with Keturah (Gen. 25:2).

²⁵ Kunhiyop, 230.

genealogical record of Esau's marriages in 36:2-14,²⁶ along with each of his wives being called "Esau's wife" throughout the narrative leads Davidson to conclude that Esau remained a polygamist—contra Abraham and Jacob—all his life.²⁷ Once again, though this passage does not give overt assertions against polygamy, it is placed in a negative light.

The Polygamy of Jacob (Genesis 29-34)

The narrative addressing the polygamous relationships of Jacob is the most extensive in Scripture. "This, together with the fact that Jacob became the father of the men who were the progenitors of the tribes of Israel, provides sufficient reason to investigate the marital life of this man."²⁸ Though Jacob's grandfather Abraham lived briefly as a polygamist and his father Isaac lived entirely as monogamous, his taking of four wives (with all of whom he had children) is taken by some as a moral act. I will argue, however, that there are a number of ways in which the narrator actually uses the story of Jacob to critique polygamy.

First, the circumstances of Jacob becoming polygamous were not driven by a heavenly sanction but rather surrounded by trickery and envy. Jacob initially wanted to obey his father, in contrast with Esau, by travelling to the land of his grandfather to find a wife (Gen. 28:1-5). He fell in love with Rachel but was tricked on his wedding day when her father gave him Rachel's older sister Leah instead (29:25). Jacob not only agreed to enter into a polygamous relationship with these sisters²⁹ but also took their maidservants as well when both Leah and Rachel were

²⁶ In all, it appears Esau had four wives.

²⁷ Davidson, 189.

²⁸ du Preez, 164.

²⁹ "Since Abram assents to Sarai's request, one would expect *him* to take Hagar to be his wife, as marriage is usually delineated in the Bible (Gen. 11:29; 24:67; 25:1, 20; 26:34; 28:9; 38:6). That it is Sarai who is doing the protracted taking and giving at once emphasizes her authority in sexual matters, her hegemony over Hagar, and her and Abram's natural antipathy to the scheme." Pamela Tamarkin Reis, *Reading the Lines: A Fresh Look at the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 63.

infertile (30:4, 9).³⁰ Rachel gave Bilhah her servant as a wife to Jacob (30:4) because she was bitter over her barrenness and envious of her sister Leah's fertile womb. When Leah ceased bearing children after birthing four sons, she was envious of Rachel's servant for having two sons, so she gave Zilpah her own maidservant as a wife to Jacob.³¹ This is hardly a commendable milieu to forge a polygamous union.

Second, the story of Jacob's multiple marriages outlines in drama form its disastrous consequences. "That the narrator is not presenting polygamy in a favorable light is apparent from the depiction of the tensions within the family. God's disapproval is shouting at us, as it were, from every detail of the disastrous results of the polygamous union."³² Jacob favored one wife over another (29:30)³³, to the point that Leah "was hated" (29:31). Envy (30:1), anger (30:2), and deceit (30:15) between the sisters followed. Jacob favored the children of the wife he loved (37:3), which brought strife between the children (37:4).

Third, it is possible that that after Jacob's life-altering, name-changing wrestling match with God at Jabbok (32:22-32), he returned to a monogamous marriage. Evidence for this can be found in several facts: (1) Prior to this, Jacob's sexual union with his four wives is repeated often, but afterwards only conjugal intimacy with Rachel is mentioned (35:16-19). (2) Only Rachel gives birth to a child after Jabbok (35:18). (3) Jacob only calls Rachel "my wife" (44:27)

³⁰ All four—Rachel and Leah (30:26) and Bilhah and Zilpah (37:2)—are considered Jacob's wives.

³¹ Bilhah is called both "wife" (37:2) and "concubine" (35:22) and it is assumed that Zilpah was viewed the same way. Davidson says: "[Both Bilhah and Zilpah, based on Gen. 46; Gen. 49; Exod. 1; Deut. 33] seem to have been given the same rights in the household as the legitimate wives, and both Bilhah's and Zilpah's children were given the same status of legal heir as were the children of the legitimate wives." Davidson, 187. Furthermore: "The maidservants were known as Jacob's concubines, a word that is difficult to translate into most African languages because the concept of a concubine is foreign to most African cultures. Therefore, most African translations of the Bible refer to all four women in Jacob's life as his wives." Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 429.

³² Davidson, 187.

³³ On one occasion, Jacob arranged his family in such a way that Rachel was put safely at the rear (Gen 33) when there was possible danger with Esau.

after Jabbok. (4) In the genealogy of chapter 46, the author of Genesis recognizes the four women who bore Jacob's children but only Rachel is called "Jacob's wife" (46:15-25). This may insinuate that Jacob's Jabbok experience where his name (and character³⁴) changed led him to repent of his polygamy and live monogamously with Rachel, though he continued to care for Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah.

The Polygamy of Godly Kings: Solomon and Joash (1 Kings 11 & 2 Chronicles 24)

The polygamous unions of King Solomon and King Joash pose some difficulties. They were not pagan rulers living in opposition to Yahweh. Rather, Solomon, husband to 700 wives, is described as "wiser than all other men" (1 Kings 4:31) and was commended by God upon asking for an understanding heart (1 Kings 3:9). King Joash, with two wives of his own, "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest" (2 Chron. 24:2). Is this proof that godly men may take many wives? Was God angry with Solomon because his wives were *plural* or because they were *pagan*? I will argue that it was only after these men strayed from God that their hearts embraced a plurality of wives.

First Kings 11:1-4 details Solomon's profligate choices and experiment with polygamous licentiousness:

¹ Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, ² from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love. ³ He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. ⁴ For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other

³⁴ There are many examples in Scripture where a person's name reflected their character, such as Nabal ("fool", 1 Sam. 25:25) and Solomon ("peace", 1 Chron. 22:9). Jacob the deceiver (Gen. 27:35-36) had his name changed to Israel, "for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28).

gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.

Though this passage gives the story of Solomon's experiment with polygamy, it is not the *whole* story. In fact, due to historical record³⁵ and the evidence of Song of Solomon,³⁶ King Solomon most likely lived a monogamous life for the first twenty-five years of his reign. He married Pharaoh's daughter about three years into his rule (1 Kings 2:39-3:1) and we have no record of other marriages until after the Queen of Sheba's visit when his life took a striking turn. He began to accumulate money, horses, and women (1 Kings 10-11), the wives most likely in an effort to establish peace that never came (1 Kings 11).

God was "angry with Solomon" (1 Kings 11:9) because his heart turned away from the Lord. This stemmed from forbidden unions with unbelievers (Exod. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-4) and multiple wives (Deut. 17:17, "And he shall not acquire many wives for himself"). Solomon's life soon began to tailspin into the abyss of disobedience, incurring God's wrath. Whereas before he experienced divine blessing, now it was divine judgment. Accordingly, "the LORD raised up an adversary against Solomon" (1 Kings 11:14).

The story of Joash is similar to that of Solomon. The account of his reign is found in 2 Chronicles 24. "And Joash did what was right in the eyes of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest. Jehoiada got for him two wives, and he had sons and daughters" (vv. 2-3). To some, the reasons appears straightforward:

Joash lived a godly life from beginning to end.

³⁵ "This figure of approximately twenty-five years is derived from adding the time Solomon started building (in the fourth year of his reign, 1 Kgs 6:38-7:8), to the twenty years it took to build the temple and the palace (1 Kgs 6:38-7:8), to the fact that it was only after the temple had been dedicated that God appeared to him a second time in a dream (1 Kgs 9:1-9)." du Preez, 242.

³⁶ One woman is singled out in the Song, most likely Pharaoh's daughter. "Since Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter took place at the beginning of his reign, even before he had built his house and the house of the Lord (1 Kings 3:1; 7:8), the Song was probably written early in Solomon's reign, before he apostatized into idolatry and polygamy (1 Kings 1:1-8)." Davidson, 566.

Joash had multiple wives.
Therefore, God approves of polygamy.

A closer look, however, leaves this argumentation wanting. Scripture says Joash lived a godly life “all the days of *Jehoiada the priest*,” not all the days of his own life. While the first portion of his life (in which he restored God’s house) pleased the Lord (v. 4), the latter portion was defined by apostasy. As he lay dying, the prophet Zechariah proclaimed to Joash: “May the Lord see and avenge” (v. 22). This pronouncement was fulfilled later when the king’s own servants assassinated him (v. 25). A life that began so well ended tragically. Paul House sums this up clearly:

After Jehoiada’s death Joash allows idol worship, has a man (Zechariah, son of Jehoiada) stoned for opposing his acceptance of idolatry, and, as a result of these moral failures, is severely wounded by the Syrians in battle. His officials finish him as he lies recovering. Joash becomes so unpopular at the end of his life that he is denied burial in the tomb of his ancestors.³⁷

While Solomon and Joash may have lived godly lives initially, it should not surprise us that their later rebellion and apostasy was also accompanied by the taking of a plurality of wives.

The Examples from Wisdom Literature Regarding Monogamous Marriages

Monogamy is without a doubt the norm in Scripture and the course that receives God’s blessings. It is inaccurate to infer that most or even many of the marriages in the OT were polygamous. Davidson writes: “In the OT there are thirty-three reasonably clear historical cases of polygamy out of approximately three thousand men mentioned in the scriptural record. Most of these examples were the wealthy patriarchs or Israel’s monarchs.”³⁸ Monogamous examples are numerous in the Pentateuch: Adam and Eve (Gen. 2-4), Cain and his wife (Gen. 4:17), Noah

³⁷ Paul R. House, *I, 2 Kings*, vol. 8, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 304, Logos Electronic Edition.

³⁸ Davidson, 210.

and his wife (Gen. 7:7, 17), Noah's three sons and their wives (Gen. 7:7, 13) Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 11:29), Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 24, 27), Joseph and Asenath (Gen. 41:45), Aaron and Elisheba (Exod. 6:23), Eleazar and his wife (Exod. 6:25) and Moses and Zipporah (Exod. 2:21; 18:2, 5).³⁹

The OT wisdom literature assumes monogamy and ignores polygamy entirely. The husband is admonished regarding how to handle his "wife" (singular). "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth (Prov. 5:18). "An excellent wife is a crown to her husband" (Prov. 12:4). "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD" (Prov. 18:22). "A prudent wife is from the LORD" (Prov. 19:14). "Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her... she does him good and not evil all the days of her life" (Prov. 31:10-12). "Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life. . . ." (Eccles. 9:9).

Song of Solomon 5:9 makes no sense if polygamy is morally acceptable. "What is your beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you thus adjure us?" How can a husband have multiple wives, then say that his spouse is the "most beautiful among women" (Song of Sol. 6:1)? The wife is a "lily among brambles [i.e., other women]" (2:2), the husband "an apple tree among the trees of the forest [i.e., other men]" (2:3). A wife who knows she is one of many in her husband's harem could not say: "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (2:16), "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (6:3), or "I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me" (7:10).

³⁹ For an explanation to the question "Was Moses a Polygamist?" See the Excursus, "Was Moses Divorced from Zipporah" in Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 404–408, Logos electronic edition. Stuart concludes: "The evidence, then, suggests on balance that Moses was not divorced from Zipporah and that the Cushite woman he later married was a second wife, married either with Zipporah's knowledge and understanding or, possibly, after Zipporah's untimely death in the wilderness" (408).

Though the wisest man to ever live failed to heed his own advice (“Rejoice with the wife of your youth,” Prov. 5:18), his wisdom and that of the wisdom literature blows the trumpet for monogamy and is utterly silent in any support for the plurality of wives.

New Testament Scripture Opposing Polygamy

1 Corinthians 7:1-5

¹ Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” ² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. ⁵ Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul addresses a wide range of issues relating to marriage: conjugal rights, the decision of celibacy, divorce, and remarriage. And while the first five verses of chapter seven do not address polygamy directly, here are six observations from 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 that at least tacitly broach the subject.

First, marriage and sexuality go together. The closing phrase in 7:1 should be taken as a popular Corinthian slogan, not the words of Paul.⁴⁰ Rather than advocating the saying himself, Paul seems to be addressing those that were saying: “Those who abstain from sex are morally superior.” Paul agrees that it is “good” (beneficial) to remain single and thus sexually inactive,

⁴⁰ Though this phrase is notoriously disputed, I believe the ESV is correct by putting the phrase in quotation marks: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” For a defense of this position, see David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 247–254; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 499–501, Logos electronic edition.

but also realizes that not all have this gifting. But he also disagrees that sexual abstinence is “good” (morally or practically) within marriage.⁴¹

Second, sexual propriety is required for the wife *and* the husband. This is often obscured in the polygamy debate, where the man often speaks of *his* sexual needs. Eight times Paul repeats his instructions to both the man and the woman (7:2, 3, 4, 10-11, 12-13, 16, 28, 32-34). Paul is not coming solely from a male perspective. In verses 1-4, there are sexual obligations for *both* partners, not just the wife.

Third, marriage alone will not solve the issue of sexual immorality. Spouses are to “have” (v. 2) each other not merely in the sense of marriage but also of sexual intercourse, as v. 3 clarifies (see Matt. 14:4; John 4:18). Paul says the way to address the problem of fornication is not marriage, but sex *within* marriage. Polygamy as a means to curb lust is not a good argument since God provides monogamous marriage for just that purpose.

Fourth, marriage carries certain debts. Marriage partners are to give one another the sexual pleasure that is “due” them (v. 3). While some scoff at this, saying reproduction is the primary motive of marital coitus, Paul makes no mention of procreation in this context.

Fifth, sex in marriage must be selfless, kind, and devoted. Men should not look at their wives as objects to be owned. Rather, “the husband does not have authority over his own body” and vice versa (v. 4).

Finally, sexual abstinence in marriage must come by mutual consent (v. 5), and then only for a short time because of prayer. This implies that the husband and wife must ask each other for consent to abstain. If the wife, for example, refuses to approve of sexual self-denial, then the husband has no right to pray about what to do.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the meaning of “good” (*kalon*), see Garland, 252–253.

1 Timothy 3:2

First Timothy 3:1-7 lays out the qualifications for the office of overseer, one of which bears on the matter of polygamy. Most versions of the Bible translate the phrase in v. 2 (also Titus 1:6) the same way: “the husband of one wife.”⁴² Nonetheless, there is still wide debate as to its meaning. This section will narrow the discussion to one question: “Was polygamy being opposed in this verse?”

The phrase “the husband of one wife” is only three words in Greek (*mias gynaikos andra*, literally, “a man of one woman”). Most commentators believe this verse is speaking of the character of the overseer rather than his marital status.

Ed Glasscock lists four common interpretations of this phrase in 1 Timothy 3:2.⁴³ (1) Marriage as a requisite. Those who hold this position believe pastors (=overseers, =bishops) must be married. (2) The person must have had no more than one wife in a lifetime.⁴⁴ This not only prohibits polygamy but remarriage of any kind, even if the spouse has died. (3) The person must not be divorced. This is a common view that prohibits divorced men from being elders or deacons. (4) The person must be faithful to one wife in the present. This view espouses that the character of the man is the issue, meaning the verse is referring to “a one-woman man.”

While all of these views have elements to commend them, there are problems with each of the first three views. The problem with view one is that both Jesus and Paul were single and it is hard to believe that what they lacked would disqualify a man from pastoral ministry. In fact,

⁴² The RSV, however, has “married only once” and the NIV reads: “faithful to his wife.”

⁴³ Ed Glasscock, “The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140, no. 559 (September 1983): 244–256.

⁴⁴ For this view, see Robert Jamieson, A. R. Faussett, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), sec. 1 Tim. 3:2.

both Jesus and Paul saw singlehood as a benefit (Matt. 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:7). Moreover, if a man has to have a wife to be “the husband of one wife,” then consistency demands he must also have children in order to meet the qualification of “keeping his children submissive” (v. 4). View two seems to contradict Paul’s allowance to remarry in Romans 7:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 7:39. While view three is praiseworthy for wanting to keep purity within the pastoral office, it places too much emphasis on the past. Why is this the only qualification that permanently disqualifies a pastor? If he was a drunk, or a thief, or a liar in the past, is he also disqualified?

I believe view four has the strongest arguments in its favor. There are at least three lines of argumentation that support the belief that Paul is emphasizing the *character* of the elder, not his marital status. First there is the grammar of the phrase in question. In the three Greek words *mias* (one) *gynaikos* (woman) *andra* (man), Glasscock believes “it is best to understand this *gynaikos* as being a genitive of quality, that is, giving a characteristic to the noun it modifies.”⁴⁵ So the words “one woman” describe the character of this man. Furthermore, the words *woman* and *man* are anarthrous (without the definite article), a construction that often conveys character.⁴⁶ For example, in the phrase “I like people,” the noun without the definite article describes my character, while the phrase, “I like *the* people” describes an isolated fact.

Second, Paul’s emphasis in the larger context of 1 Timothy 3:1-10 is on the *present character* of the elder, not necessarily what he was in the past. Paul said the bishop must “be” (present tense) the husband of one wife, so it is unlikely he is forbidding those with past marital sins from being a pastor. Of course, other qualifications (e.g. “above reproach”, v. 2) *may*

⁴⁵ Glasscock, 250.

⁴⁶ Glasscock recognizes that this anarthrous construction does not prove the “one-woman man” translation, but agrees with Wuest and Robertson that it at least supports it. *Ibid.*, 251.

prohibit him from the pastoral office, but the requirement to be “the husband of one wife” would not *by itself* exclude him.

Third, Paul’s concern seems to be for a man who is chaste and faithful toward his wife and no other women. This seems to prohibit polygamy. Polygamy may not have been common in Paul’s day, but it certainly existed.⁴⁷ So while polygamy is forbidden in this verse, it is not Paul’s main point, nor is it exclusively in view. Glasscock writes:

This writer does not believe that polygamy was Paul's major concern [Paul’s point is that] even a single man or a man who has been married only once must demonstrate that he is not a "playboy" or flirtatious, but that he is stable and mature in character toward his wife or other females.⁴⁸

In sum, does 1 Timothy 3:2 prohibit polygamy? Yes, but not exclusively. A bishop is to be known for moral chastity and commitment to one woman, thus prohibiting polygamists—along with single people and monogamists who are unchaste—from holding office.

Ephesians 5:25-33

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

⁴⁷ Justin Martyr wrote: “If, then, the teaching of the prophets and of Himself moves you, it is better for you to follow God than your imprudent and blind masters, who even till this time permit each man to have four or five wives” Alexander Roberts, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 266.

⁴⁸ Glasscock, 249 and 254.

Scripture is clear that a husband must love his wife. How does this influence our perspective on polygamy? Jews and Muslims could theoretically agree with several monogamous arguments from the OT, but this passage gives the follower of Jesus distinctively Christian weaponry in his arsenal and allows him to argue consistently from a gospel perspective that polygamy is wrong. In this passage, we find at least five ways in which husbands are to love their wives. After first addressing the wife’s responsibility in vv. 22-24, Paul now deals with the husband—using nearly three times as many words to do so.

First, husbands are to love by the continual choice to seek the highest good in their wives. “Husbands, love your wives” (v. 25). In NT teaching, love is a choice. It is an act of the will.⁴⁹ A husband does not stop loving when he stops *feeling*; he stops loving when he stops *choosing*. Moreover, the present tense of “love” (Gk. *agapaō*) indicates this is to be a continual, ongoing process, the essence of which is seeking, pursuing, and cultivating the highest good for his wife (cf. Matt. 7:12; Rom. 15:2-3).

Second, husbands are to love their wives unconditionally. Just as women are to submit regardless of their husband's character, husbands are to “love their wives” (v. 28) regardless of their character. If Christ loved those who hated Him, shouldn't husbands love their wives with greater ease?

Third, husbands are to love their wives in the same way Christ sacrificially loved the church (v. 25). Christ's love for the church provides husbands with a vivid model of how to love their wives. Christ loved the church by being patient with our weaknesses. He was compassionate, forgiving, and merciful. He provided the ultimate evidence of love by giving His life (John 10:11, 15, 17).

⁴⁹ In 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, love is characterized by a series of verbs, indicating its active nature. According to Thiselton, love “denotes above all a *stance* or *attitude* which shows itself in *acts of will* as regard, respect, and concern for the welfare of the other.” Thiselton, 1035.

Fourth, husbands are to love their wives for the purpose of making them more attractive. “That he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (v. 27). Christ gave himself for the church so that she would become more holy and more appealing. If the wife is unlovable, the husband must love her more. In time, she will become more holy and thus, more attractive.

Fifth, husbands are to love their wives as they love their own bodies (v. 28). A husband's love for his wife should be as natural as loving himself. In verse 31, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 to show that it has always been God's plan for one man and one woman to become one flesh. Husbands are to “hold fast” (Gk. *proskollaomai*) to their wives, a word meaning “to be inseparably bound to” or “joined with devotion.”⁵⁰ This is how intimate the relationship is between a man and a woman.

As a side note, in verses 25-32, Paul has talked about "husbands" and "wives" in the plural. In the final verse (v. 33), he speaks to them very personally in the singular. Perhaps this was another effort to promote monogamy and illustrate that loving (and submitting) is the individual responsibility of the spouse.

God's ideal of monogamy is clear in the way husbands are to love their wives. God's standard for how a husband is to love his wife gives some insight to the pastor who is counseling a polygamist.

Scripture Apparently Approving Polygamy

Though we have analyzed several OT and NT passages that either explicitly or implicitly oppose polygamy, there are a number of OT references that appear to support it. The following

⁵⁰ Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 172.

section will address the Scriptures that fit this category and provide exegetical support for the conclusions.

Legislation Explicitly Approving Polygamy

The law in Exodus 21:7-11 protects the rights of a slave girl who may have been taken as a wife by a man who did not want his second marriage to threaten the condition of his estate. The law reads,

⁷ When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. ⁸ If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. ⁹ If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. ¹⁰ If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. ¹¹ And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.

Regardless of the *reason* for the union between slave girl and master, *that* a second marriage took place is clear. The man has at least one son, and wanting to raise up more (perhaps because his wife is barren), he marries a slave girl. According to Stuart, these verses show that “a regular, legal wife could not be denied any wifely prerogatives simply because she was also technically a servant.”⁵¹ There should be no second-class marriages.

This conclusion, however, is premature. First, this is case law. These laws help those who face less-than-ideal situations, but they do not necessarily endorse the deed. For example, the law addressing the circumstance “When men quarrel” (Exod. 21:18) does not condone fighting. Second, this father is selling his daughter most likely out of love and concern for her well-being. Perhaps facing dire circumstances, this parent voluntarily and temporarily lent out his daughter as a worker so that she could receive food and shelter. The father may also have been seeking a husband with ample means to provide for his daughter. Third, “designated” in v. 8 may refer to a

⁵¹ Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:483.

broken agreement of betrothal for his son with the slave girl.⁵² This passage then does not treat polygamy at all but what to do with a slave girl who broke the betrothal agreement with his son. Fourth, that the master has a son does not guarantee that he also has a wife, for she may have died or left with a bill of divorcement. Fifth, if the master has chosen in fact *not* to marry the servant girl, as the Hebrew text indicates,⁵³ then v. 9 provides a second option: he may give her to his son as a wife.

Sixth, the third option is found in v. 10 and is the source of much debate. The disagreement revolves around two phrases: “another wife” and “marital rights.” Some take the phrase “if he takes another wife to himself” to be an implicit endorsement of polygamy. This passage offers no condemnation for the master taking an additional wife. Further, v. 10b demands that he continue to provide this other wife with marital rights. Others, however, view this interpretation as a misreading. They argue that because he did not take this servant girl to be his wife in v. 8, then v. 10 means he took “another wife” *instead* of her, not *besides* her. But why then does he owe her “marital rights” if they are not married? The word for marital rights (Heb. ‘*onah*) is hapax legomenon, leaving its meaning somewhat ambiguous. Some aver that the root of ‘*onah* is related to the idea of habitation or dwelling, such as “God is a dwelling place” in Deuteronomy 32:27. Copan argues: “We can more confidently conclude that quarters or shelter are in view here, not conjugal rights. So the servant girl should be guaranteed the basic necessities: food, clothing, and lodging/shelter.”⁵⁴

⁵² See Hugenberger, 320–321.

⁵³ The translation “for himself” in v. 8 is from the Septuagint. However, many scholars believe that the textual support follows the MT, and should be translated “not.” Thus, the meaning would be: “If she doesn’t please her master so that he does *not* designate her” The marginal notes in the ESV, NASB, and NIV recognize this as a viable option. For proponents of this view, see Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, 184; du Preez, 66; Davidson, 192.

⁵⁴ Copan, 115.

Even if one does not accept the previous interpretation and demands that a polygamous relationship between the master and his slave girl is envisioned here, this scenario does not encourage or implore polygamy. As case law, it merely gives the reader guidelines regarding what to do should such a scenario arise. At the very least, this law was prohibiting the second wife from being a kind of second-class mistress.

Legislation Disapproving Only Familial Polygamy

Leviticus 18:18 reads: “And you shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive.” This passage appears to condemn only a *form* of polygamy (a second marriage to a biological sister), thus implicitly permitting polygamy in general. Keil and Delitzsch write: “It was forbidden to take a wife to her sister in her life-time, that is to say, to marry two sisters at the same time and so place the sisters in carnal union through their common husband, and disturb the sisterly relation, as the marriage with two sisters that was forced upon Jacob had evidently done.”⁵⁵

Another view sees this passage as a blanket statement against every form of polygamy. The following reasons make a strong case for this position. First, v. 18 is best understood as a transitional verse associated with verses 19-24, contrary to most Bible translations that lump it with the anti-incest laws of verses 7-17. Thus we are not inclined to define v. 18 narrowly as dealing with incest but in broader terms as dealing with sexual sins in general. There are two reasons for this: (1) While each verse in 7-17 begins with “You shall not uncover [so-and-so’s] nakedness,” v. 18 does not. (2) All of these verses (except v. 9) give a reason for the prohibition (e.g. “she is your aunt”). Again, this does not occur in v. 18.

⁵⁵ Karl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 597, Logos electronic edition.

Second, a cognate noun form of the verb translated “rival wife” (Heb. *tsarar*) is found in 1 Samuel 1:6, where it is said that Elkanah took Peninnah as a “rival” who provoked Hannah, even though they were not biological sisters. Copan writes: “This phrase ‘a rival wife to her sister’ (literally, ‘a woman to her sister’), and its counterpart, ‘a man to his brother,’ are used twenty times in the Hebrew Scriptures, and never do they refer to a literal sister or brother. Rather, they are idioms for ‘one in addition to another.’ So this verse doesn’t refer to incest; rather, it refers to the addition of another wife to the first (i.e., polygamy).”⁵⁶ Given this understanding, the context suggests that “sister” be defined as any woman and that verse 18 be associated with verses 19-23. Thus, this legislation should be taken as prohibiting all polygamy.

Legislation Tempering Kingly Polygamy

Deuteronomy 17:17 reads, “And he [the king] shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.” Many believe this verse permits limited—not excessive—polygamy. That is, Scripture is opposed to its abuse, not use. Eugene Hillman takes this view: “Nowhere in the Old Testament is [polygamy] called into question. The one and only admonition against the acquisition of too many wives (Deut. 17:17) is not an attack upon the institution of polygamy; it is, if we take account of the context, simply a warning against an abuse—against the king’s taking *too many wives, foreign wives* specifically, because they would turn his heart toward their foreign gods (cf. 1 Kings 11:1-8).”⁵⁷

In verses 16 and 17, three rules are set out for the king: do not multiply horses, wives, or wealth, the stated reason being that they generally steal his heart from the Lord. A king might wonder how many wives constitute “multiplying.” The answer may be: the number that would

⁵⁶ Copan, 115.

⁵⁷ Hillman, 145.

take his heart from God. Regarding wealth and horses, the number is indeed ambiguous, but in relation to wives there is no uncertainty. Often, the *reason* kings multiplied wives was to build alliances with pagan kingdoms and since marrying foreign women was prohibited (Deut. 7:3-4), polygamy would be forbidden as well. In sum, the Lord explicitly commands that kings not be polygamous. The reason is that multiple wives will pull his heart away from God.

Legislation Presupposing Polygamy

Many believe that Deuteronomy 21:15-17, dealing with the rights of the firstborn son, tacitly supports polygamy. It reads:

¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ 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.

From this passage Hillman argues that polygamy is “clearly regarded as a normal and licit practice.”⁵⁸ The purpose of this passage, however, is to protect the rights of the first-born, not to make judgment on the practice of polygamy. Misappropriation of inheritance rights to the firstborn son was evidently a problem, as can be seen earlier in the story of Jacob. Because his first wife (Leah) was unloved and his second wife (Rachel) was loved, Jacob withheld the birthright from Reuben (the first born of Leah) and gave it instead to Joseph (the firstborn of Rachel). This law appears to criticize this practice.

Further, as Davidson avers, this passage “cannot be used to legitimize polygamy any more than can, for example, Deut. 32:18 be used to legitimize prostitution because it prohibits

⁵⁸ Ibid.

the use of prostitute wages for the payment of vows.”⁵⁹ While this law regulates a polygamous situation, it does not approve it. Rather, its thrust is that fathers provide the inheritance rights that are due to their firstborn sons. Thus, there is nothing here that is inconsistent with other injunctions promoting monogamy.

Yahweh as the Giver of Many Wives

Though many of the rulers in Israel’s southern and northern kingdoms were polygamists, all were in rebellion against God, with three apparent exceptions. The first two were mentioned above (Solomon and Joash). The third is David, whom God called “a man after his own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14). Does God’s approval of these kings imply support for their polygamy? Adding to this difficulty are the words of rebuke from the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:7-11:

⁷ Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. ⁸ And 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. ⁹ Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰ Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ ¹¹ Thus says the LORD, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. ¹² For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.’ ”

Some have concluded that this passage, which identified God as the giver of David’s wives, sanctions polygamy. As Kunhiyop puts it: “If God did not punish David for his polygamy, why should we punish polygamists today? The negative treatment of polygamists is contrary to the spirit of the OT. It is David's adultery, not his polygamy, that was severely punished.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Davidson, 201–202.

⁶⁰ Kunhiyop, 234.

Du Preez offers two helpful observations on these verses.⁶¹ First, he argues that the word “gave” (v. 8) should not be taken literally. Saul’s wife was Ahinoam (1 Sam. 14:50), the mother of Michal, the wife of David. If taken literally, the statement that God had given David “your master’s wives” would imply a form of incest condemned in Leviticus 18:17. Thus, it would be preferable to understand “gave” as meaning God placed all of Saul’s family into David’s care. Also, if “gave” means that God was the active and approving giver of multiple wives, then verse 11, stating the God would give David’s wives to his neighbor, would mean that God was the active and approving giver of David’s wives to his son Absalom who fornicated with them (2 Sam. 16:21-22). Du Preez concludes then that God placed these women under David’s care and even allowed him to take them as wives but in no way morally approved of it.

But what are we to make of Kunhiyop’s assertion that it was David’s adultery and not his polygamy that was punished? Du Preez disagrees with Kunhiyop’s position, arguing that Nathan addresses *three* sins of David in his rebuke: adultery, murder, and polygamy.⁶² (1) The sin of adultery is witnessed in vv. 11-12: “For you did it secretly,” referring to David’s clandestine adultery with Bathsheba. “It” (v. 12) refers to the verb “lie”⁶³ in v. 11, where it is predicted that a neighbor will openly fornicate with David’s wives. (2) The sin of murder is in verse 9: “You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword.” (3) We see the sin of polygamy in vss. 9-10, where twice it says that David has “taken [Uriah’s] wife to be your wife.” This could not be adultery because it took place *after* Uriah had died.

Finally, as we shall see with Solomon later, there is evidence that David lived monogamously in the closing years of his life. 2 Samuel 20:3 explains how, after death of

⁶¹ du Preez, 190–192.

⁶² Ibid., 194–195.

⁶³ This is the Hebrew verb for adultery that is also used in 2 Sam. 11:4 in reference to David’s infidelity.

Absalom, David handled the ten women that had been defiled by his son: “And the king took the ten concubines whom he had left to care for the house and put them in a house under guard and provided for them, but did not go in to them. So they were shut up until the day of their death, living as if in widowhood.” Who were these concubines?⁶⁴ While it is impossible to be sure, the broader context gives some clues. Though Michal, David’s first wife, may have been put away (2 Sam. 6:23), his other wives were Ahinoam, Abigail, Maacah, Haggith, Abital, and Eglah (2 Sam. 3:2-5). In addition, he took more “concubines and wives in Jerusalem” (2 Sam. 5:13). Thus, the ten concubines/wives that David set aside and provided for may have been these women.⁶⁵

To sum up, if God had literally given Saul’s wives to David, this would have been to encourage incest. Most likely, the verse means that David was given charge and responsibility over Saul’s house. Moreover—per the prophet Nathan—David’s sin was not only adultery and murder but also polygamy. Finally, David may have ended his life as a monogamist, no longer being sexually active with his other wives but still providing for and protecting them.

Levirate Marriage Demanding Polygamy

“Levirate Marriage” refers to an ancient Jewish law stating that when a childless man

⁶⁴ The semantic range of the word translated “concubines” (Heb. *pilegish*) can include (1) *woman/harem*, (2) *wife or stepmother*, and (3) *female*. William Holladay, William Lee, and Ludwig Kohler, “פילגש,” in *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 29, Logos electronic edition. As we stated earlier, concubine and wife can be used interchangeably in Scripture. In this verse, the KJV and NASB have “women” instead of “concubines.”

⁶⁵ As to *why* these women were set aside, it is difficult to be sure. Bergen argues it was because David’s son had sexually abused them. Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, vol. 7, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 435, Logos electronic edition. Others believe that when God gave David’s wives to his son to be abused, God was effectively ending his plural marriages. Regardless, we do know that David continued to provide for and protect them, though he never again had sexual relations with these women (2 Sam. 20:3).

died, his surviving brother was required to marry the widow so as to continue his brother's family through the son that might be born of that marriage.⁶⁶ The word "levirate" comes from the Latin *levir*, a husband's brother. The first time levirate marriage is dealt with is in Genesis 38, where Onan refused to impregnate Tamar his brother's widow. As a result, God put him to death.

The formal legislation on levirate marriage is found in Deuteronomy 25:5-10:

⁵ If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. ⁶ And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. ⁷ And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.' ⁸ Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, 'I do not wish to take her,' ⁹ then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, 'So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' ¹⁰ And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, 'The house of him who had his sandal pulled off.'

Some believe this law demanded polygamy, implying that polygamy could not be adulterous but rather "a legally and culturally accepted form of marriage that God permitted and even sanctioned."⁶⁷ To refuse to fulfill the obligation of this law would be a grave social injustice. Rae explores the motive behind levirate marriage:

The reason polygamy seems to have been allowed is not clear, though it may have something to do with the provision of an economic safety net for women. Remember that in the ancient world there were very few 'working women,' at least not working in reputable occupations. For the most part, women were provided for either by their family of origin or by marriage. Women who never married or who were widowed were not generally seen as able to financially provide for themselves, though there were some exceptions. This is one reason

⁶⁶ Allen C. Myers, "Levirate Law," in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 652–653.

⁶⁷ Kunhiyop, 232.

why the biblical tradition of levirate marriage was commanded in the law—to provide financially for childless widows and to ensure that the lineage of the deceased woman's late husband continue (Deut. 25:5-10).⁶⁸

Two questions must be answered. First, what was the sin of Onan? Contrary to popular interpretation, Davidson suggests that Onan's sin was probably not his refusal to act as *levir* for his dead brother. Rather it was his “*pretending* to perform the levirate responsibility when in fact he did not consummate the sex act and thus did not give Tamar the chance to have progeny, since such progeny would one day deprive Onan of his brother's inheritance and of the opportunity for the family line to pass through him.”⁶⁹ When Onan married Tamar and pretended to sire a child, he effectively forbade her from a marriage where she could raise up progeny. This explains Tamar's later act of desperation where she played the prostitute and bore two sons (Gen. 38).

Second, who qualified as *levir*? The opening phrase, “if brothers dwell together” (25:5a), indicates the younger brother was unmarried and lived at home either with his parents or with his elder brother.⁷⁰ Perhaps this is not as explicit as some would like, but Deuteronomy 25:5-10 is not trying to be exhaustive in its explanation of levirate law. For example, it does not address what should happen if the deceased husband has no family at all, though elsewhere the Bible speaks on this issue (Ruth 4) and lays out the guidelines.

In conclusion, the story of Onan and the levirate law in Deuteronomy 25 does not explicitly mandate or even allow polygamy. The oldest unmarried brother was expected to continue his dead brother's family line. If this was not possible, then the next nearest of kin was to take up that role.

⁶⁸ Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 273.

⁶⁹ Davidson, 465.

⁷⁰ See Hugenberger, 114; Davidson, 449.

CHAPTER 4

POLYGAMY ADDRESSED PASTORALLY

There is no easy solution to polygamy. Whenever sinners eschew God’s ideal plan—be it idolatry, divorce, adultery, homosexuality, or polygamy—there will be difficulties. Sin complicates things and reminds everyone that this world is not the way it ought to be. Sin corrupts what is good, parasitically spreading to every part of our lives. Sometimes there is no blueprint directing us how to put the pieces back together.

In tracing the complex, snarled roots of sin, Cornelius Plantinga writes: “Evil contaminates every scalpel designed to remove it.”¹ Sound pastoral counsel is sorely needed and equally difficult because we are advising fallen people when our own hearts are fallen as well. Polygamy cannot be isolated to one area of life, as children, sex, finances, and conversion are all somewhat connected. The farther we go in our counsel, the more far-reaching the matter becomes. “Sin has dug in, and, like a tick, burrows deeper when we try to remove it.”²

Pastoral Counsel and Church History

Among most Protestant pastors and missionaries in Africa, disciplining members who have taken another wife *after* conversion is not problematic if dealt with quickly. The crux is what to do with those who have taken multiple brides *before* conversion. Suppose Themba has

¹ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 79.

² *Ibid.*, 88.

four wives. The first is the oldest³ but barren, the second is most loved, the third has birthed all of his children, and the fourth is a Christian. After conversion, is he to divorce all but one? If so, whom does he choose?

Polygamy has long been among the church's greatest obstacles in Africa. Donald Fraser of Malawi illustrates: "One day an evangelist sat by the kraal⁴ gate and talked with a group of men. He told them of the way of the gospel. And when he had finished, one old man said, 'Ah, if God would only say to us men, "Keep your plurality of wives and drink you beer", there's not a man of us but would follow Him'."⁵ When the Augustinians visited the Guinea Coast at the end of the seventeenth century, they found that polygamy was the obstacle that the blacks could not get over. They might have adapted to the other teachings of Christianity, but confinement to one wife was of insurmountable difficulty.⁶

How have the leaders, missionaries, and pastors throughout church history dealt with the matter of polygamy? Have their conclusions been harmonious or fragmented? clear or uncertain? gracious or vitriolic?

Augustine, the Reformers, and the Catholic Church

Augustine did not believe polygamy was morally wrong as long as the purpose was multiplication of the human race and not sexual pleasure. In regard to Jacob's polygamy, he wrote:

³ "It is significant that in polygamous households the favorite wife was seldom the woman first married, in obedience to the will of the parents, but one whom the husband had afterwards chosen for himself." Isaac Schapera, *Married Life in an African Tribe* (New York: Sheridan House, 1941), 277.

⁴ "Kraal" is an Afrikaans word referring to the enclosure for cattle or other livestock. Sometimes Africans speak of the "chief's kraal", meaning his homestead in general.

⁵ Donald Fraser, *The New Africa* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 88.

⁶ Charles Pelham Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948), 164–165.

Jacob the son of Isaac is charged with having committed a great crime because he had four wives. But here there is no ground for a criminal accusation: for a plurality of wives was no crime when it was the custom; and it is a crime now, because it is no longer the custom. There are sins against nature, and sins against custom, and sins against the laws. In which, then, of these senses did Jacob sin in having a plurality of wives? As regards nature, he used the women not for sensual gratification, but for the procreation of children. For custom, this was the common practice at that time in those countries. And for the laws, no prohibition existed. The only reason of its being a crime now to do this, is because custom and the laws forbid it.⁷

It appears that the reformers Martin Luther and Phillip Melancthon⁸ did not view polygamy as forbidden either. “They held that whatever was permitted by the Law of Moses remained lawful still; that Christ had not forbidden anything which a man had been free to do previously. Hence, since under the Old Covenant a man might have more wives than one, he was equally at liberty to do the same under the Gospel.”⁹

The Catholic Church, however, has maintained a strict position that a valid marriage can only exist between one man and one woman. In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent pronounced anathema upon those who say that it is lawful for Christians to have several wives at the same time and that it is not prohibited by any divine law.¹⁰ Even while the Catholic Church in Africa was making extensive inquiries on the legitimacy of polygamy in the 1980s, the pope would not reconsider.¹¹

⁷ Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vol. 4 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 289.

⁸ “Melancthon had allowed himself, with Luther and Bucer, to give his conditional assent to the scandalous bigamy of Philip of Hesse (May, 1540), which was the darkest blot in the history of the German Reformation, and worse than the successive polygamy of Henry VIII. His conscience was so much troubled about his own weakness that, at Weimar, on his way to the Colloquies at Hagenau and Worms, he was brought to the brink of the grave, and would have died if Luther had not prayed him out of the jaws of the king of terrors.” Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), chap. 11; section 90, Logos electronic edition.

⁹ Lyndon Harries, “Christian Marriage in African Society,” in *Survey of African Marriage and Family Life*, ed. Arthur Phillips (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 336.

¹⁰ The Council of Trent, The Twenty-Fourth Session, Canon 2.

¹¹ Hillman observes: “During his visits to parts of Africa in 1980 and 1982 Pope John Paul II quite bluntly reaffirmed the traditional ecclesiastical discipline in the face of widespread questioning of the rigid application of

Regarding Protestants, Lyndon Harries states that the Reformed tradition “favored partial admittance of polygamists to baptism, following Calvin that baptism was to be given to polygamists in unusual exceptional cases.”¹² In fact, among Protestant missionaries there was great diversity in dealing with converted polygamists:

It is not surprising to find differing practices recorded, culminating in later attempts to restore traditional Christian monogamy. All in the Livingstonia mission and most, if not all, in the neighboring missions adopted the practice of refusing membership to a polygamist. Before becoming a catechumen, he had to put away all his wives except the first (unless she was inherited, in which case he had to put her away also). But this practice was not uniform, for on some mission stations of this society polygamists were accepted for baptism (at Kawimbe, Niamkolo, and Kambole), and some of these polygamists married another wife after admission to the church.¹³

Anglican Missions

In Lyndon Harries’s survey of marriage in African society,¹⁴ he summarizes some of the extended conflict among Anglican missionaries on the issue of polygamy. In 1856, Henry Venn of the Church Missionary Society argued in his Memorandum that a polygamist’s Christian wives (called “involuntary victims”) may join the church but the man may not until he relinquishes all but one wife. Of course, he is still bound to provide for the other wives and children but he is to repudiate cohabitation. The 1861 Conference of the Anglican diocese in South Africa’s Eastern Cape concurred:

the monogamy rule in Africa, even suggesting — to the astonishment of many — that customary plural marriage belongs in the same category with divorce and abortion. By combining a strictly literal interpretation of the man-woman texts of Genesis with a late Western personalist understanding of marriage, the pope argues that polygamy radically contradicts the covenant of married life (‘two’ in ‘one flesh’), so it negates God’s plan.” Hillman, “The Polygamy Debate: A Progress Report,” *Missiology* 10, no. 2 (April 1982): 166.

¹² Harries, 339.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 341.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 344–359.

It is the unanimous and decided conviction of the missionaries of this diocese, that no person living with more than one wife ought to be admitted to Christian Baptism, and that whilst they full admit that such cases require Christian wisdom, delicacy and consideration, especially in regard to the women concerned, yet they are satisfied, from experience, that there are no difficulties which do not soon disappear before a faithful adherence to the Christian law of marriage.¹⁵

No small controversy began in 1861 when John Colenso, the bishop of Natal, South Africa, began baptizing men living as polygamists. Colenso held views differing in many points from the Anglican Church, among them the belief that polygamists who had entered into marriage before conversion should not be asked to dissolve the unions but be permitted to baptism.¹⁶ Accused by many bishops of favoring polygamy, Colenso argued that while monogamy is clearly the highest form of matrimony, plural marriages are lawful—though regulated—in Scripture. Moreover, demanding that polygamists divorce all but one wife presents endless difficulties. Though some supported Colenso, the majority of bishops opposed him.

Henry Callaway, who succeeded Colenso as bishop, argued that multiple marriages were “both unnatural and opposed to God’s expressed will.”¹⁷ Because he regarded a polygamous marriage as both invalid and adulterous, he held that it is lawful to put away all but one wife. In an attempt to compromise, other missionaries regulated polygamists, allowing them to be baptized and join the church but forbidding them to hold office. This was not met with general acceptance.

Conferences at Lambeth and Edinburgh

¹⁵ Ibid., 345.

¹⁶ Charles Pelham Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa: 1840-1878*, vol. 2 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1964), 262.

¹⁷ Harries, 347.

Historian Timothy Jones has observed regarding Anglican missionary practices that “With few exceptions, nineteenth and early-twentieth century missionaries refused to allow men in polygamous marriages to convert to Christianity. This decision was formalized at the 1888 Lambeth Conference, but reversed one hundred years later at the 1988 Conference.”¹⁸ At the Lambeth Conference of 1888, a special committee of thinkers was chosen to make a thorough study of polygamy. The committee drew the following five conclusions: (1) Polygamy is inconsistent with the Law of Christ concerning marriage. (2) The Law of Christ and church history forbids the baptism of active polygamists. (3) Because of the difficulties of moving from polygamy and monogamy, it is impossible to prescribe specific guidelines. (4) The church should instruct converted polygamists until they accept monogamy. (5) The wives of polygamy may in some cases be baptized.

In many regards, however, the committee’s work was regarded as inadequate. The conference was filled with many other topics, yielding little time for the committee to engage in adequate study on polygamy. Some believe the final conclusion—one that essentially condemned polygamy and upheld monogamy—was biased, as the committee was made up of four bishops from South African and only one from India.

While the 1888 Lambeth Conference gave some general guidelines, it failed to answer the difficult procedural questions regarding converted polygamists and their wives. According to Timothy Jones, the Conference “failed to deal with the question of divorce, or with the serious ethical problems surrounding the support of ex-wives.”¹⁹ In the end, “the 1888 resolutions did

¹⁸ Timothy Willem Jones, “The Missionaries’ Position: Polygamy and Divorce in the Anglican Communion, 1888-1988,” *Journal of Religious History* 35, no. 3 (September 2011): 393.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 400.

not resolve the problem [of polygamy], and may even have exacerbated it.”²⁰ In part due to Lambeth’s ambiguous conclusions, the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 outlined five mission disciplines concerning polygamy.

1. To refuse in any circumstances to receive, even as a catechumen, a candidate who is living in polygamy.
2. To accept and keep him under instruction, but without baptism until he be free of polygamous ties.
3. To advise the man to put away all but the first wife, either arranging for the remarriage of those put away or providing for their maintenance with guardianship, and to admit the man to baptism when he has become the husband of one only.
4. [Due to the polygamy] committed in ignorance and the sinful relationship as one which cannot now be undone without greater wrong, to accept a polygamist and to baptize him, under protest against the polygamous relationship which still exists, emphasizing the protest by refusing to persons thus baptized the right of holding any office in the Church.
5. To admit such persons to baptism without any special conditions or precautions.²¹

Although at the Lambeth Conference of 1888 the Church of England formalized its position of refusing baptism to those men who were living in polygamous relationships, the church’s position began to soften until it was finally reversed at the Lambeth Conference of 1988. Jones notes:

Still privileging monogamy as “the ideal relationship of love between husband and wife” the Conference recommended that “a polygamist who responds to the Gospel and wishes to join the Anglican Church may be baptized and confirmed with his believing wives and children.” The baptism was conditional on the consent of the local community; and on the polygamist not marrying again as long as any of his wives at the time of his conversion are alive.²²

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Harries, 356–357.

²² Jones, 406.

Summary

Augustine, Luther, and Melancthon saw monogamy as ideal but allowed for polygamy in certain scenarios. Roman Catholics forbade polygamists to enter the church. Protestant missionaries leaned toward the forbidding of polygamy but never came to a consensus in handling a polygamist who has come to Christ. The decisions handed down by Anglican missionary conferences were ambiguous. Thus, based on church history alone, we should remain reserved in our assertions and conclusions regarding procedures toward converted polygamists.

Pastoral Counsel and the Divorce/Remarriage Issue

Regardless of one's final position on polygamy, the questions of divorce and remarriage should play an important part in reaching that conclusion. In observing the correlation between polygamy and divorce, Jones notes the predicament facing the church: "[The Church's] opposition to divorce was based on largely the same grounds as its opposition to polygamy. The church was thus presented with a terrible paradox: in order to convert indigenous populations where polygamy was traditionally practiced it would have either to accept polygamy or promote divorce." An unclear position on divorce and remarriage will yield an indecisive position on polygamy. Can a polygamous marriage union—or any marital bond—be broken? Of course, we know that this is *physically, culturally, and legally* possible in most nations around the world. But *in God's eyes*, can marriage be broken? Are there grounds for divorce and remarriage even in the case of polygamy?

I chose not to include this section on divorce and remarriage with the exegetical comments above because these passages do not *directly* address polygamy, though we shall see that counseling polygamists adequately is impossible without a right understanding of these

texts. I will attempt to answer five questions on divorce and remarriage in light of the polygamy debate: (1) What are the predominant views? (2) What are the key passages? (3) What is the meaning of the exception clause? (4) Is adultery a state or an act? (5) Is polygamy adultery?

What are the Predominant Views?

Though it is impossible within the limits of this thesis to give any kind of in depth argument for each view, I will briefly summarize the three most prominent positions.

The first position concludes that divorce is disallowed in nearly all cases. I say “nearly” because technically this position does allow divorce in some scenarios, but the exceptions are unusual and do not affect most people. Proponents of this view aver that the marriage bond is unbreakable—that marriage is more than just a contract between people; it is a covenant with God and indissoluble because God himself has put the husband and wife together (Matt. 19:6). Further, the Bible speaks of marriage as a one-flesh union (Gen. 2:24) and that most intimate bond on earth—an alliance that cannot be broken by a mere divorce certificate.

Some who hold this view believe the Greek word *porneia*, used in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 where Jesus forbids divorce “except on the grounds of sexual immorality (*porneia*)”, refers specifically to sexual immorality during the betrothal period as practiced in first-century Jewish culture. Advocates of this view give two primary arguments: First, Jesus uses *porneia* when he easily could have used *moicheia* (the Greek word normally translated “adultery”; e.g., Matt. 15:19). This indicates that Jesus did not have normal adultery in mind. Second, since Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience, *porneia* must be speaking of sexual misconduct during the betrothal period, a strictly Jewish practice. Though not sexually active, Jewish couples were considered married once they became betrothed. Thus, if the woman was sexually immoral

during that time, the husband could (1) allow the woman to be stoned or (2) give her a bill of divorce. This latter option, this view contends, is what Jesus is speaking about in Matthew 19:9. John Piper, who holds such a view, believes that Jesus is allowing for divorce only in the limited case of a violated betrothal. Thus he is “warning his readers that this absolute prohibition against remarriage does not apply to the situation of betrothal, where fornication may have happened.”²³

Others who strictly limit the right of divorce think *porneia* in these passages from Matthew is referring to incest, which Scripture forbids (Lev. 18:6-17). The normal word in the NT for adultery is *moicheia*²⁴ and some understand *porneia* as referring in some contexts to incest (Acts 15:20, 29; 1 Cor. 5:1). Thus, divorce is never permissible except in incestuous marriages.²⁵

A second position regarding divorce and remarriage allows for divorce in certain circumstances but not remarriage.²⁶ This view sees Jesus as allowing for couples to separate in cases of *porneia*, but since *porneia* is not understood as breaking the marriage bond, remarriage is forbidden. Thus, divorce *followed by* remarriage is adultery, but divorce by itself does not constitute adultery. A summary of their arguments is as follows: (1) According to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, the marriage bond is indissoluble. (2) According to Matthew 19:9, separation alone does not constitute adultery. (3) The parallel passages to Matthew 19 in Mark 10 and Luke 16 contain

²³ John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 174.

²⁴ There is a clear distinction between *moicheia* and *porneia* in Matthew 15:19. “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery (*moicheia*), sexual immorality (*porneia*) . . .”

²⁵ Several arguments can be raised against the view defining *porneia* as betrothal or incest: (1) *Porneia* is used often outside of Matthew (Acts 15:20, 29; Gal. 5:19; 1 Thess. 4:3; 1 Cor. 15:1 etc.), making it doubtful that it refers to premarital sex within the Jewish betrothal period. (2) The discussion in Matthew 19 relates to Deut. 24, a passage not discussing betrothal. (3) Jesus in Matthew 19 makes no reference to the matter of betrothal. Regarding incest, while *porneia* may refer to incest in 1 Cor. 5:1 and perhaps Acts 15:29, it does not always mean this and should be defined more broadly, including things beyond (but not exclusive of) incest.

²⁶ See William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus* (Nashville: Nelson, 1985). For a good summary of this second position, though not holding to it themselves, see Feinberg and Feinberg, 307–308.

no provision allowing for divorce. (4) Separation often drives the erring mate to repent and return to his or her spouse. (5) The so-called “Pauline Privilege,” which allows deserted believers to be divorced (1 Cor. 7:15), does not allow them to remarry.

A third position on divorce and remarriage²⁷ believes divorce *and* remarriage are morally permissible in two scenarios: First, if a spouse commits *porneia* (understood as any sexually illicit sin), the innocent party is free to divorce them and remarry. Second, if an unbelieving spouse insists on leaving the marriage, the believing spouse is not bound to remain in the marriage but may remarry (1 Cor. 7:15).

Advocates of this view also argue that it is possible for a marriage to be dissolved. Though Scripture presents life-long marriage as the ideal pattern, it never presents matrimony as unbreakable. Feinberg observes: “Commanding people not to break [the marriage] is no proof that they cannot or will not, just as commanding them not to lie does not guarantee they will always tell the truth.”²⁸ Scripture is clear that at least death can break the marriage bond (Rom. 7:1-3; 1 Cor. 7:39). Jesus used the past tense when he acknowledged that the woman at the well had “had” five husbands (Jn. 4:18), which may imply that the previous marriages were no longer in effect. And while it is impossible to break unconditional covenants, it is possible to break conditional ones, as Israel broke the Mosaic covenant repeatedly (Jer. 31:32). Divorce is always the result of sin (on the part of at least one of the parties) but the decision to divorce and remarry is not always immoral.

²⁷ For a good synopsis of this view, see Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 1986). In sum, he argues: (1) Divorce is heinous and is always the result of sin. (2) The only two grounds for divorce are unrepentant *porneia* (adultery and other sexual sins) and desertion by an unbeliever. (3) The spouse is bound to forgive and remain with a repentant spouse who has fornicated. (4) Divorce breaks the marriage bond, not adultery. (5) Remarriage is morally permissible whenever divorce is morally permissible. Also see William F. Luck, *Divorce and Remarriage: Recovering the Biblical View* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Feinberg and Feinberg, chaps. 11–12.

²⁸ Feinberg and Feinberg, 304.

What are the Key Passages?

There are seven key passages dealing with divorce and remarriage in Scripture, six of them in the NT. Because the 1 Corinthians 7 passage does not deal with adultery, we will not address that passage in this section.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4

¹ When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house,² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife,³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife,⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

This passage is vital not only because it is the only OT law dealing with divorce but it also forms the background of Jesus' discussion on the same topic with the Pharisees. The text contains three elements: the protasis (the "when" part—describes the conditions), the apodosis (the "then" part—the main clause giving a command) and the justification.

The protasis (vv. 1-3) gives the grounds and procedure for divorce. The husband no longer approves of his wife because he has found "some indecency in her" (Heb. *'erwat dābār*). The word *'erwat* often refers to nakedness and the exposure of the private parts.²⁹ Though the meaning of this phrase is hotly contested, there are at least two reasons to define *'erwat dābār* as some kind of indecent or shameful offense that falls short of illicit sexual intercourse (i.e. adultery). First, the only other usage of this phrase in the OT is one chapter earlier in 23:14,

²⁹ Francis Brown, Samuel Driver, and Charles Briggs, "עֲרֻוֹת," *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000), 788–789.

where it clearly refers to excrement. Second, Moses said just two chapters earlier that the punishment for adultery is death (Deut. 22:22; cf. Lev. 20:10-18), so it would be odd for him to describe a different practice here.

The procedure for the divorce is twofold. The man gives a “certificate of divorce,” which legally breaks the marriage covenant and declares that the woman was not guilty of adultery. Next, he “sends her out of his house”—making the divorce final. The next two verses describe a situation where she remarries and her remarriage is followed by another divorce or the death of her second husband. The apodosis (24:4a) gives the punch line—the command.³⁰ “When” the things in vv. 1-3 happen, “then” this is what must follow. The wife may not remarry her first husband.

But what is the reason behind the Law of Moses refusing to allow the woman to remarry her first husband? We are told that “she has been defiled”, the passive verb being a translation of a rare Hebrew *hothpael* stem (*huttammā’āh*), the passive form of the *hithpael* stem. The *hithpael* usually conveys a reflexive idea, where the verb refers back to the subject (e.g., “I washed myself”). With the *hothpael*, the reflexive idea is combined with the passive voice. Davidson recommends this translation: “She has been made to defile herself.”³¹ She is defiled because she married another when in God’s eyes she was still married to her first husband, who divorced her on inadequate grounds. Hence, it is an “abomination” (a word hearkening back to a host of sexual sins described in Lev. 18) for her to remarry her first husband because she was made an adulteress by the second marriage. Jesus seems to make explicit the intent of this passage in Matt. 5:32, when he says that “whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

³⁰ The KJV puts the apodosis (the “then” part) in verse 1, implying that the law permits divorce. Davidson writes, however, that the apodosis beginning in verse 4 “is the near unanimous consensus of modern biblical scholarship.” Davidson, 390.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 395.

But one might ask: “if her second marriage defiled her in a way tantamount to adultery, why was she not subject to the death penalty?” Scripture implies that it is because the husband was primarily guilty by forcing her into the situation. Feinberg observes:

While she is made an adulteress, she winds up in that condition in ignorance of what she is doing and thus becomes an adulteress unintentionally. Moreover, she was forced into that situation by the actions of her first husband (and thus presumably against her will). But, then, it should be clear why it would be improper to execute her. Under Mosaic Law sins committed unintentionally were treated with greater leniency than sins done with premeditation.³²

A number of reasons might be suggested for the inclusion of this specific law in Deuteronomy 24. One was to protect the rights of women, who were often dispensed of at will by disgruntled husbands. This law protected women from exploitation either through divorce without cause or the loss of their dowry. It also discouraged easy divorce and multiple remarriages, since it forced the woman to “defile herself” and commit something tantamount to adultery.

In sum, the reference to “some indecency” in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, though it envisions a situation in which a husband gives his wife a bill of divorce and sends her away, refers to a circumstance that provides inadequate grounds for divorce. The wife was not guilty of adultery or other sexual sins for which the penalty in the OT laws was death. Rather, the intent of the statute is to prevent the wife, who has been pressured into a situation of remarriage, to return to her first husband.

Matthew 5:31-32

³¹ It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the

³² Feinberg and Feinberg, 314.

ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

In Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus first quotes the typical first-century Jewish understanding of Deuteronomy 24:1-4: men are doing their duty when they give a bill of divorcement to the woman after leaving her over “some indecency”. After all, she will be able to get remarried and be cared for by someone else. But Jesus’ comment on the practice shows that in actuality this man has put his wife in a very difficult position, as he is causing her and her second husband to commit adultery (since she would almost certainly be remarried). So, the divorcing husband thinks he is keeping the law by giving her the bill, but in actuality he is ignoring the underlying spirit of the law of protecting his wife from adultery.

Matthew 19:3-12

³ And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” ⁴ He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” ⁷ They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” ⁸ He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

¹⁰ The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” ¹¹ But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. ¹² For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.”

The motive behind the Pharisees’ question to Jesus about divorce and remarriage was to “test” him (Gk. *peirazō*, the same word used for Jesus’ temptation by the devil in John 4:1). This alone should serve to warn Matthew’s readers that a comprehensive treatment of marriage and divorce is not forthcoming. Perhaps the Pharisees had in mind John the Baptist’s reaction to

Herod's divorce and remarriage, a reply that eventually led to the prophet's execution (Matt. 14:1-12). Perhaps they thought the same fate awaited Jesus if he misspoke. Regardless, Jesus' intent seems to have been to address enough of the issue to avoid their trap.

In v. 3, the phrase "for any cause" (absent from the lengthy Markan account) warns the reader that the notorious debate between the great first-century rabbis Hillel and Shammai was on the table, a dispute that centered on the meaning of "some indecency" in Deuteronomy 24:1. The followers of Shammai allowed divorce only for overt "indecency", while Hillel's disciples allowed it "for any cause" the husband might deem legitimate, indicating that the questioners in v. 3 were probing Jesus regarding his reaction to Hillel's perspective.

Jesus answers their question with a question in order to reframe the debate. The Pharisees' emphasis, as reflected in the rabbinic debate, is on grounds for divorce, when God's intent is permanence in marriage. Jesus rejected the categories of their questions, and did not allow them to use the OT law as an easy escape from God's purpose for marriage. In so doing, Jesus goes back to Genesis 2 and the creation ordinance of marriage to remind them of God's original plan. Jesus affirms in v. 5 that marriage is defined by serious commitment ("leave" and "hold fast") and sexual consummation ("one flesh"). Contrary to the view claiming that infidelity automatically ends the marriage bond, sexual infidelity breaks the union only if it is accompanied by a formal decision to end the divorce.³³

Even though "separate" (Gk. *chorizō*) in v. 6 is a different word than "divorce" (Gk. *apoluō*) in v. 3, it must still refer to divorce because that is the question at hand. Further, Jesus will reuse *apoluō* later in vv. 8 and 9. Some use v. 6 to argue that marriage is unbreakable, but to

³³ Blomberg states: "Sometimes [the view stating that adultery *de facto* breaks the marriage bond] stems from a misreading of 1 Cor. 6:16—Paul does not say relations with a prostitute create a marriage, merely some kind of 'one-flesh' (deeply intimate) relationship inappropriate for the lack of exclusive commitment involved." Blomberg, 168.

say marriage is indissoluble is to interpret Jesus as saying: “Do not divorce (even though in reality this is not even possible).” Rather, Jesus teaches that divorce is *undesirable*, not that marriage is *unbreakable*.

Prior to v. 7, Jesus has only affirmed that marriage should be permanent. Now the Pharisees responded again, asking why Moses commanded a bill of divorcement (v. 7) if there can be no divorce. Though Jesus grants that divorce was allowed due to Israel’s stubborn unwillingness to be faithful to the marriage covenant, it is simply not true that Moses “commanded” divorce. Rather, Moses (Gen. 2:24) and Jesus (Matt. 19:5-6) commanded *permanence* in marriage.

Verse 9 is crucial as it is the only single verse in the NT referencing grounds for divorce and remarriage.³⁴ We will discuss this exception clause below as we deal with the synoptic parallels to this passage in Mark and Luke.

Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18

² And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” ³ He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” ⁴ They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” ⁵ And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. ⁹ What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

¹⁰ And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

³⁴ Of course many believe there are other *passages* dealing with divorce and remarriage. First Corinthians 7 is one example, though as stated earlier, this passage will not be discussed in depth.

Mark 10:2-12 is very similar to the Matthew 19 passage and aside from it is the longest NT passage about divorce. As in the Matthean parallel, Jesus resorts to the Genesis account and confirms that those who divorce *and* remarry commit adultery (vv. 11-12). This passage makes explicit what was implicit in Deuteronomy 24. Luke 16:18a is a close parallel to Mark 10:11a and 16:18b is similar to Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:32b. Taken together, the passages make explicit what was implicit in Deuteronomy 24—that spouses who divorce and the new spouses they marry all commit adultery if the divorce was based merely on “some indecency”.

What Is the Meaning of the Exception Clause?

The two Matthew passages above (Matt. 5:32; 19:9) both reveal what has been referred to as Jesus' “exception clause” to his standards forbidding divorce and remarriage. In both passages Jesus states that *except for reasons of immorality* (Gk. *porneia*), the man who remarries after divorcing his wife commits adultery. This exception clause has often been taken to mean that divorce and remarriage are acceptable before God in cases where one of the partners has been guilty of sexual immorality. In addressing this exception clause, we will attempt to answer two questions: what is the meaning of *porneia* and who is guilty of adultery—the one who divorces only or the one who divorces *and* remarries?

I conclude that *porneia* in these passages refers not to adultery *only* but more broadly to all illicit sexual intercourse. There are three reasons for this conclusion. First, divorce on the grounds of *porneia* (defined more broadly) is stricter than the basis for divorce as seen in Deuteronomy 24, where the woman is released based on *'erwat dābār*—which we argued previously was some kind of indecent offense short of illicit sex. The disciples response of shock to Jesus' position on divorce in Matthew 19:9-10 is not surprising then, since he was taking a

harder line than that to which they were accustomed. Jesus' standard is even stricter than that of the conservative Rabbi Shammai.

Second, Davidson makes a strong case that the relationship between Acts 15 and Leviticus 17-18 provides a strong foundation for determining how the early church defined *porneia*.³⁵ In Acts 15 we find clear allusions to Leviticus 17-18 when the Jerusalem Council gives four prohibitions to the Gentile Christians: “that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality [*porneia*]” (15:29). Acts 15 lists the same forbidden items in the same order as those in Leviticus 17-18: (1) sacrificing to idols (Lev. 17:7-9), (2) eating blood (17:10-12), (3) eating that which has not been drained of blood (17:13-16), and (4) assorted sexual practices (Lev. 18), such as incest, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and—if our interpretation of Leviticus 18:18 above is correct—polygamy. Davidson deduces: “The Jerusalem Council undoubtedly concluded that the practices forbidden to the alien in Leviticus 17-18 were what should be prohibited to Gentile Christians in the church. The parallel of the fourth prohibition in each passage is unambiguous: what Acts 15 labels *porneia* are the illicit sexual activities included in Lev. 18.”³⁶

Third, according to OT law, those who committed unlawful sexual intercourse were “cut off from among their people” (Lev. 18:29). The death penalty for such sins, however, had most likely been abolished among the Jews during the time of Jesus, as Davidson explains:

[Being cut off from God's people] entailed the death penalty at least in the case of adultery (Lev. 20:10), some instances of incest (v. 12), homosexual relationships (v. 13), and bestiality (vv. 15-16). By the time of Jesus, the death penalty for illicit sexual intercourse had all but died out (both the Babylonian Talmud [*b. Sanh.* 41a] and the Jerusalem Talmud [*y. Sanh.* 18a, 24b] indicate that the death penalty

³⁵ Davidson, 634–635.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 635.

was abolished forty years before the destruction of the temple, i.e., about 30 C.E.).³⁷

Some have argued that since the exception clause is absent from Mark and Luke, it should not be considered valid. I deduce, nonetheless, that the exception clause is valid for several reasons. First, material contained in one synoptic account that is not found in another does not necessarily make the extra material invalid. Indeed, some Gospel accounts seem to be conscious abridgments of their synoptic parallels. For example, Mark 10:12 contains unique material, stating that if “a woman” divorces her husband and remarries she commits adultery, while the Matthew 19 passage only addresses the issue only from the male perspective. Clearly, the longer narrative of Mark is not invalidated just because some of the material is absent from Matthew. Second, additional material in one synoptic account is not altogether uncommon. In Matthew 16:4, Jesus promises the Pharisees no sign from heaven “except the sign of Jonah”. Mark 8:12, however, excludes this exception.

Third, a passage with unique material is often *explicit* where the other passage is *implicit*.

For example, consider these two sentences:

If anyone drives on the left side of an American road, he has broken the law.
If anyone drives on the left side of an American road, except to avoid a fallen tree, he has broken the law.

Both are accurate. The second sentence contains explicit material that is implicit in the first. Now the OT is clear that the punishment for illicit sexual intercourse is death (Deut. 22; Lev. 20). This would de facto end a marriage should there be adultery, so Jesus in Mark and Luke would not have to include the exception clause, since it is implied.³⁸ That is, a Gentile believer who knew the OT law but not the modern Jewish customs would understand Mark and Luke to teach that he

³⁷ Ibid., 655.

³⁸ “Mark and Luke present the fundamental teaching of Christ while Matthew in a much longer treatment includes more detail.” Robert Saucy, “The Husband of One Wife,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131 (1974): 232.

could remarry if his wife cheated on him, because she would have been executed. A Jew reading Matthew in the latter half of the first century would not conclude this, however, since that rule had been done away with years prior. This may have been Matthew's rationale for including the exception clause.

We must also decide *who* it is that "commits adultery" in Matthew 19:9. Is it the one who divorces only or the one who divorces *and* remarries? Some believe "commits adultery" refers only to the first phrase ("whoever divorces his wife")³⁹ while others believe it refers to the whole verse ("whoever divorces his wife. . . and marries another). If the latter view is correct, then the verse should read: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery" and "whoever divorces his wife for *porneia* and marries another does not commit adultery." Though a final conclusion is difficult, I embrace the latter view.

Is Adultery a State or an Act?

Jesus' teaching is that those who divorce and remarry on unlawful grounds commit adultery. But are those guilty of adultery living in a *state* of adultery or have they simply committed a one-time *act* of adultery that can be forgiven? Some who argue for the former position point to the present-tense verbs in Matthew 5:32 and 19:2. The Greek present tense often communicates continuous action or a state of being. Thus according to this view, the one who marries a divorced person "is committing adultery" in a continual, ongoing way.

³⁹ Feinberg interacts with the position allowing divorce without remarriage held by Heth and Wehham. According to them, Jesus could have put the exception clause at any point in the sentence. It could have come: (1) after "whoever" (making divorce and remarriage mandatory), (2) after "commits adultery" (defining divorce and remarriage as adultery unless *porneia* has taken place), or (3) in its actual position in v. 9. Heth and Wenham take the actual placement to mean that divorce, except in cases of unchastity, is wrong and that remarriage for any reason is wrong. But Feinberg argues that "commits adultery" qualifies the entire protasis ("if" clause), not just part. That is, adultery results from both divorce *and* remarrying, not just from one or the other. "Except for sexual immorality" is an exception to the general rule that divorce and/or remarriage is adultery. Feinberg and Feinberg, 329–332.

However, there are several reasons to reject this view. First, in the indicative mood, present tenses are not always progressive.⁴⁰ Second, an analysis of the tenses connected to adultery reveals that both the present (Matt. 5:32b; 19:2; Luke 16:18; Rom. 2:22) and aorist (Matt. 5:32a; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20) tenses are used. The Greek aorist tense normally communicates action without any nuance about its continuation. Third, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 lists numerous sins, including adultery, that are forgiven by Christ. “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers . . . will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” No doubt some of the Corinthian believers were divorced and remarried in their pre-conversion life, yet Paul could think of them as *former* adulterers.

Is Polygamy Adultery?

Some authors strongly oppose the notion that polygamy is adultery, giving a number of supports for their position. Though the OT lists a large number of sexual sins (e.g. bestiality, incest, homosexuality), polygamy is never among them. Robert Holst remarks: “It seems certain that in the Old Testament polygamy was not considered adultery and that no one was punished in any way for the sin of polygamy.”⁴¹ Furthermore, Paul states that adulterers will not inherit the kingdom of heaven (1 Cor. 6:9-10; cf. Heb. 13:4), but he never implies that the conversion of a polygamist is in doubt. The syllogism would look like this:

Adulterers will not enter heaven (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

⁴⁰ See D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 67; Saucy, 235–236.

⁴¹ Robert Holst, “Polygamy and the Bible,” *International Review of Missions* 56, no. 222 (1967): 209.

Abraham, a polygamist, went to heaven.
Therefore, polygamists are not adulterers.

Therefore, polygamy is not adultery.

This is a delicate issue. Jesus did a hard thing when he called a divorced man who marries another woman an “adulterer”. Nevertheless, there are several factors leading to the conclusion that polygamy is indeed adultery. First, adultery is being unfaithful to one’s spouse. According to Jesus’ teaching, a man who divorces unlawfully and marries another still commits adultery because he is having intercourse with someone other than the woman who should have remained his wife. It is difficult to conclude, then, that adultery is avoided if a man simply keeps the original wife but marries another. He is still being intimate with someone other than the one who should have remained his only wife.

Second, Romans 7:2-3 teaches that a woman is an adulteress if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, and vice versa. Thus, if Mark marries Lydia while his wife Mary is still alive, he is an adulterer. It is true that the main thrust of Romans 7 is not an exposition on divorce or adultery, but there is no doubt that it uses marriage as a real-life illustration of the authority of the law. A spouse is free to marry another through death. *Porneia* (Matt. 5 and 19) and desertion (1 Cor. 7) are given as the exceptions for remarriage, but polygamy is never given as such an exception.

Third, we have defended the position that *porneia* speaks of sexually illicit sin as found in Leviticus 18, including adultery, incest, bestiality, and homosexuality. We argued earlier that Leviticus 18:18 suggests that polygamy should also be included in that list.

Finally, the 1 Corinthians 6 passages cited above does *not* teach that all who have committed adultery will be exempted from heaven, for some of the Corinthians themselves were former adulterers (6:11). Rather, those who *continue* in such sins with no signs of contrition or

repentance have no assurance from Scripture that they are converted. Therefore, I do not believe that a Christian polygamist, who with a pure (yet misinformed) conscience chooses to continue in that state, falls into the category of unrepentant sinners devoid of salvation. Further, it is not altogether clear whether polygamy constitutes an act or a state of adultery. If it is just an act, 1 Corinthians 6 would not apply.

Conclusion

As a result of the exegetical considerations discussed above, we conclude that permanence in monogamous marriage is God's plan, and though divorce is sometimes permissible, it is always the result of sin on behalf at least one of the parties. We are convinced that in the Matthew passages containing the exception clause, *porneia* refers to sexually illicit sin as defined in Leviticus 18, a passage we suggest includes a prohibition against polygamy. Since Jesus recognized *porneia* as valid grounds for divorce, this understanding would indicate that those within a polygamous union have sufficient cause to leave the marriage and would be eligible for remarriage with God's blessing thereafter.

Nonetheless, proceeding with divorce must be done cautiously, humbly, and prayerfully, especially since the annulment of a marriage is uncommon African culture. Kahiga explains:

In respect to the mindset of the African man, the cultural wives are married to him legally, the marriage is binding and forever because, according to African traditions, divorce is a foreign concept. In advising the man or woman to dismiss his/her extra wives/husbands, [those who propose this action are thought to be encouraging} divorce in the African culture, a concept that is foreign.⁴²

⁴² Joseph K. Kahiga, "Polygamy: A Pastoral Challenge to the Church in Africa," *African Ecclesial Review* 49, no. 1-2 (June 2007): 132.

Pastoral Counsel and Practical Objections

Pastors who exclusively promote monogamy should expect to hear objections from those who seek to maintain polygamy as a virtuous African custom. In the sections that follow, I will address some of the most common arguments in favor of polygamy.

Polygamy is an Enormous Economic Benefit

The thinking in many poor cultures is that because labor is difficult, having multiple wives (and thus multiple sons and daughters) will help alleviate some of the work responsibility for one woman. John Mbiti writes: “Within the context of life, polygamy is not only acceptable and workable, but is a great social and economic asset.”⁴³ However, several objections to this line of thinking can be offered.

First, while it is true that African women desire financial security, it is fallacious to assume this is their *primary* desire. A wife wants to feel close to her husband and covets intimate time with him, indicating emotional security is more important than financial. Leah knew she was “hated” by Jacob (Gen. 29:31), so she named each of her sons in such a way as to woo him back to her, saying: “*Now my husband will love me*” (v. 32) and “*This time my husband will be attached to me*” (v. 34).

Second, Scripture rebukes efforts to circumvent God’s plan in order to attain temporal blessings. Abraham, using similar logic, failed to trust in God’s plan and took another wife in order to bring about a perceived greater good (having the promised son). God chastised him for failing to trust.

⁴³ John S. Mbiti, *Love and Marriage in Africa* (London: Longman, 1973), 82.

Third, it is the husband's responsibility to lead, provide for, and protect his family, and Scripture never indicates that polygamy is necessary to attain this goal. Rather, he is encouraged to trust God who will provide for all of our needs. A Tsonga proverb says: "An elephant is not borne down by the weight of his tusks" which means, "A man is not discouraged by his responsibility toward his family."⁴⁴

Finally, polygamy is more often a hindrance than a help regarding economic growth in the family. Maintaining multiple wives is expensive, and Africa as a whole is poor. Many of my polygamous neighbors struggle just to support themselves, let alone their wives and children. Moreover, as globalization and technology permeates Africa, subsistence farming dwindles, making polygamy as a means of gaining more labor less likely.

Polygamous Marriages Experience Love, Harmony and Fidelity Just like Monogamy

Some authors argue that love equally thrives in polygamous unions as it does in monogamous marriages. Hillman writes: "It is, moreover, demonstrable that all of the positive values urged in these same texts—love, faithfulness, indissolubility, and mutual respect for conjugal rights—are capable of realization within the plural marriage system found throughout sub-Saharan Africa."⁴⁵ Mbiti concurs: "I believe that where there is deep love and understanding on the part of the couples (or triples) concerned, and where their community accepts and assimilates them, polygamous marriages can be as successful and happy as monogamous ones, even if monogamy is ideally better."⁴⁶ Elizabeth Isichei agrees with Hillman and Mbiti:

⁴⁴ Henri Philippe Junod, *Vuthari Bya Vatsonga: The Wisdom of the Tsonga-Shangana People* (Braamfontein, South Africa: Sasavona, 1990), 14.

⁴⁵ Hillman, 140.

⁴⁶ Mbiti, 82.

“Missionaries familiar with the story of Jacob and Rachel were, for the most part, blind to the way in which love could flourish in a plural marriage.”⁴⁷

But contrary to many contemporary claims, there are a number of factors that make mutual love unattainable within a polygamous marriage. First, there is no biblical evidence that the partners in the polygamous marriages described in Scripture enjoyed equal love. Several examples point in the opposite direction. Contrary to Isechei’s claim, Jacob clearly loved Rachel more than her sister. God saw that Leah was “hated” (“unloved” [KJV]; Gen. 29:31) and blessed her with children. Leah thought six sons would win Jacob’s love (even naming her last son Zebulun, meaning “to live with”; Gen. 30:20), but it did not. Elkanah cared more deeply for Hannah than Peninnah, giving her “a double portion, because he loved her” (1 Sam. 1:5).

In speaking of the Ashanti people in Ghana and the Ivory Coast, Meyer Fortes notes that unequal love is a common occurrence in polygamous relationships. “It is notorious that co-wives often show great jealousy of one another. They call each other *kora*, ‘jealous one’, and the usual practice is for a polygynist's wives to live separately. A polygynist must be scrupulously fair in sharing his time, his sexual attentions, and the material provision he makes for them, equally among his wives.”⁴⁸

Second, 1 Corinthians 13:4 claims that genuine love does not envy, but envy is exactly what we find in several of the polygamous examples in the OT, even spilling over to the children as well. Ishmael mocked his younger stepbrother Isaac (Gen. 21:9). Joseph’s stepbrothers plotted his death (Gen. 37). Solomon executed his stepbrother Adonijah for attempting to steal the throne (1 Kings 2:12-24).

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: from Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 76.

⁴⁸ Meyer Fortes, “Kinship and Marriage among the Ashanti,” in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, ed. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 281.

Third, a faithful husband to one wife pictures Christ's love for His church (Eph. 5:25). How did Christ demonstrate this deep love for his bride? He gave himself for her. That is, his own "economic success" was not the priority, but rather that protection and safety of his wife.

This is not to say that polygamous marriages are devoid of all love and moral virtue. Many polygamists experience God's common grace within their marriages. Polygamists who have since been converted but are still constrained to continue in that state are commanded to love, provide for, and protect their wives in the best way they know how. But Scripture is clear: monogamy is by far the best channel by which love, harmony, and mutual respect is exemplified.

Polygamy is Valid Because it is Never Explicitly Condemned in Scripture

This may be the most common objection of all. Mbiti encapsulates this approach when he writes:

Christians who uphold monogamy as the only acceptable form of marriage before God, tell us that this is what the Bible teaches. They go on to tell us that polygamy is a sin. I have searched the Bible carefully and one of the staggering things concerning marriage is that the Bible does not treat marriage in terms of either monogamy or polygamy.⁴⁹

With the possible exception of Leviticus 18:18, it is true that the Bible nowhere explicitly forbids polygamy. However, as we have noted earlier, we must not assume that the absence of an explicit prohibition indicates divine approval. The editors of *The Apologetics Study Bible* give two helpful ways to understand how Scripture is normative beyond explicit commands and prohibitions regarding marriage.⁵⁰ First, "God's mind and will can be gauged from positive statements like Genesis 2:21–25, which mandates the divine pattern of monogamous marriage

⁴⁹ Mbiti, 190.

⁵⁰ Ted Cabal et al., eds., *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), 12–13.

(see Mal 2:14, 16; Mt 19:4–6).” Second, as the disastrous marriages of Jacob, David and Solomon show, “God’s mind and will may also be expressed implicitly through story and description.”

We do not know exactly why God did not more overtly denounce polygamy, but we should not take the lack of direct condemnation as an indication that God was uninterested in polygamy or that he approved it.

Polygamy Prevents Prostitution and Infidelity

Because of the common infidelity among married men who work far from home, Mbiti suggest that polygamy is the best solution.

For [men who work a long distance from home] the most practical way of leading faithful lives, is to have one wife looking after the family on the land, while the other is with him in the distant town or city where he works. This to me seems like a very plausible, practical and understandable way of facing the situation of life honestly and fairly. It is more sensible and moral than chasing after prostitutes.”⁵¹

Sam Owusu concurs, posing the question: “Is it more Christian for a woman to commit infidelity or fornication than to become the second or third wife of a respected member of the community?”⁵²

This kind of argumentation is sometimes called the excluded middle. It offers two less than desirable options while leaving out a third (or middle) choice. For example: “Keeping a cabin full of slaves is not ideal, but it is better than letting your family starve.” Certainly leaving one’s family without food is sinful (1 Tim. 5:8), but Scripture does not condone slavery either. Mbiti appears to accept this logic, saying: “Certainly [polygamists] are better in so doing than in

⁵¹ Mbiti, 195.

⁵² Sam Owusu, “Towards a Theology of Marriage and Polygamy,” *Direction* 36, no. 2 (2007): 195.

keeping prostitutes or concubines.”⁵³ This statement assumes the situation is either/or, as though the menu has just two items: a monogamous marriage that succumbs to infidelity or a polygamous marriage. But there is a third option: chaste monogamy.

This leads us to the question of whether or not God will ever place us in a position where we have to choose between two forms of evil. First Corinthians 10:13 is clear: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” Here Scripture promises that if the only two apparent options are sinful, God will provide a third alternative (i.e., “a way of escape”). This verse does *not* mean that all temptation will be removed. Enticing women may still call from the shadows and neighbors may continue to offer their daughters to married men. But God can be trusted to provide an exit path for our own good.

Polygamy Should Be Free of Jealousy

John Mbiti counsels women in polygamous marriages to suppress jealousy: “If you fully flood your husband with that love, without any outward signs of jealousy, almost certainly you will win him back to you—you will make him wholly yours, entirely yours, exclusively yours.”⁵⁴

Mbiti speaks of jealousy in marriage as though it is an undesirable trait. Scripture tells us differently. While comparing his jealousy for the Corinthians to God’s jealousy for his people, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:1: “For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.” Douglas Wilson maintains that jealousy is a virtue in marriage that must be encouraged and cultivated. “It is true that jealousy can be

⁵³ Mbiti, 193.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 194–195.

wrong and destructive whenever it is driven by any bitterness, resentment, or malice. But the same could be said for many other attitudes; if mixed with sin, they become sinful! Jealousy does not need to be mixed with sin. And under numerous circumstances, it is a sin *not* to be jealous.”⁵⁵

Suppressing jealous feelings of one spouse for another is like chastising a dog for barking at intruders. The animal’s ability to discern trouble is praiseworthy, not blameworthy. Likewise, God not only created monogamous marriage, but also the righteous feelings of jealousy when a monogamous relationship is attacked. If a jealous husband will show no mercy to his wife’s potential paramour (Prov. 6:34), should we then expect a wife to be neutral when the tables are turned? Indeed, a good spouse is a jealous spouse (2 Cor. 11:2).

Mbiti spoke of “outward” signs of jealousy, but spouses should have both outward *and* inward emotions of protection for each other. Yahweh, whose name is Jealous (Exod. 34:14), was not only jealous for His people’s affection (inward) but demanded that they stay away from idols and foreign gods (outward). Thus, when a wife sees a lusty woman reaching for the hand of her husband, the solution is not suppressing resentment, but expressing jealousy.

Polygamy Prevents Childless Marriages, a Shameful Thing in African Culture

Many in African culture believe that barrenness is a curse and that procreation is the primary purpose of marriage. A barren marriage is a marriage that did not achieve its goal. Kunhiyop gives a practical example: “Among the Bajju of Nigeria, [a barren woman] is referred to as *anakwu*, meaning ‘one who is distressed for a child’. The word is closely related to the word *dukwu*, meaning ‘death’, and indicates that she is as good as dead. When she does die, a

⁵⁵ Douglas Wilson, *Reforming Marriage* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1995), 45.

priest steps between the legs of the corpse and says, ‘go away, you worthless woman.’”⁵⁶ Mbiti concludes, then, that polygamy for the sake of progeny should be acceptable:

If the man marries another wife for the sole reason that his first wife is medically proven to be barren and she agrees to his marrying another wife, then the marriage should be given the blessing of the Church and the wedding performed in the Church. . . . Of course a childless marriage could work and be a happy one, but children in African marriages are an absolute necessity and a couple without them is simply miserable.⁵⁷

A few observations on children and barrenness are in order before giving some practical responses to the argument above. First, children are cherished in Scripture and precious in God’s sight. Because children are a blessing (Prov. 17:6; Ps. 127:3-5), parents pray for (e.g. Gen. 15:2-3; 1 Sam. 1:27; 2:20), celebrate (Jer. 20:15), and provide for their offspring (Ps. 17:14; 1 Tim. 5:8).

Second, it is God who opens and closes the womb. He closed the wombs of Sarah (Gen. 16:2), Hannah (1 Sam. 1:5) and Abimelech’s house (Gen. 20:17-18) and made Leah fertile (29:31).

Third, though all of the matriarchs—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah—experienced childlessness, there is no indication that this was due to anything sinful on their part. As far as we know, they were under the pleasure of God and, as Davison observes, “still able to enjoy sexual pleasure and intimacy with their husbands for its own sake, regardless of whether it leads to the propagation of children.”⁵⁸ Fourth, saying that children are essential is effectively saying that marriage is essential, since this is the only righteous way in which children may be born. But Paul, who was single and childless, said the opposite. “I wish that all were [single] as I myself

⁵⁶ Kunhiyop, 199.

⁵⁷ Mbiti, 192.

⁵⁸ Davidson, 454.

am” (1 Cor. 7:7). So it is wrong to present childbirth as a necessary cause for joy and happiness in a marriage.

Here are some practical observations for the couple that is childless and considering polygamy as a channel to obtain offspring. First, adoption is a beautiful way to deal with childlessness.⁵⁹ Moses was adopted (Exod. 2:1-10) and became the leader of Israel. Due to poverty, HIV and low life expectancy, Africa is filled with orphans that need nurturing and godly homes. In the Shangaan village where I reside, I have been amazed and humbled by the overwhelming love that Africans express toward children. African believers should use this affection as a tool to bring orphans into a godly family through the process of adoption. John Piper believes those who cannot conceive can still make followers of Jesus:

God’s purpose in making marriage the place to have children was never merely to fill the earth with people, but to fill the earth with worshippers of the true God. One way for a marriage to fill the earth with worshippers of the true God is to procreate and bring the children up in the Lord. But that’s not the only way. When the focus of marriage becomes “Make children disciples of Jesus,” the meaning of marriage in relation to children is not mainly “Make them,” but “Make them disciples.” And the latter can happen even where the former doesn’t.⁶⁰

Second, even if polygamy were morally acceptable, there is no guarantee that a second marriage would fix the problem. God is sovereign over all procreation, regardless the methods we may use to sidestep his plan. He can close the womb of the first wife *and* the second.

Finally, Jesus implies that there are ways to have children *spiritually* in the family of Christ. He said: “There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children [*biologically*] or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children

⁵⁹ For a cogent manifesto calling Christians to adopt children in light of the priorities set out in the Great Commission, see Russell Moore, *Adopted for Life: the Priority of Adoption for Christian Families and Churches* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009).

⁶⁰ Piper, 139.

[*spiritually*] and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30, emphasis added). In other words, those who leave blood family for the cause of Christ will receive back one hundred fold *spiritual* children in this life. This emboldened Paul, who had no progeny of his own, to call his disciple Timothy “my own son in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2). He could say to the believers in Corinth, “For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15). He understood that parenthood might be expressed through shared affection—not just shared blood—when he said: “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well” (Rom. 16:13).

Pastoral Counsel in the Local Church

In the African setting where I minister, I have had dozens of Bible studies with polygamists. I consider them friends and have shared the gospel in hopes that they will trust in Jesus alone and be converted. But then what? How should a pastor counsel a newly converted polygamist who wants to be baptized and join the church? How should a minister advise a woman who has lived in a polygamous marriage for half of her life? This next section will seek to answer some of these questions based on the biblical analysis completed above.

“To Join the Church, Must I Put Away All My Wives but One?”

Before I give my perspective on this heavily disputed question, let me offer a few disclaimers. As noted earlier, historically, Christian groups—especially the large missionary counsels of the past two hundred years—have not come to a unified position on this matter. Thus, it would be wise to withhold dogmatic assertions here. Second, the pastor must approach

this matter with prayer, counsel and meditation upon the Scriptures. Third, though I will give arguments suggesting that a polygamist should live monogamously with only his first wife prior to baptism and church membership, I do not believe that he must *formally* divorce the other wife or wives. Paul gives a general formula in 1 Corinthians 7 that believers should “remain” in the state in which they have been placed (7:17-24). Even a slave is to remain in that condition (v. 21), though Paul tells him “if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity” (v. 22). In the same way, we could apply this to the other wives who seek freedom from a polygamous marriage.

Here are seven reasons I would tell a newly converted polygamist that he should live intimately and monogamously with only his first wife before he can join the church. (1) As I argued earlier, the OT suggests that several of the OT polygamists (e.g. Abraham, David, and Solomon) returned to monogamy while their other spouses were still alive. (2) As noted above, *porneia* includes a wide range of sexual sins, including polygamy (Lev. 18:18), meaning that at the very least polygamy is an *act* of adultery. (3) With *porneia* defined this way, Jesus gives grounds for divorce within a polygamous relationship (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). (4) A man can only follow the rules of conjugal rights in 1 Corinthians 7:2-5 if he has one wife. (5) As we shall see below, living with only the first wife does not alleviate a husband’s responsibility to provide financial care for his other wives and her children. (6) This will give his other wives, if they so choose, a chance to enter new monogamous marriages. (7) This act of repentance, while still paying restitution for past sins, will be a glowing testimony to his family and his church regarding the power of the gospel.

“If I May Not Live as a Polygamist After
Conversion, What is My Duty to my Other Wives?”

First, you must live intimately with only one wife in following the pattern of the loving care a husband must show to his wife in Ephesians 5:25-32 and in respecting your wife’s conjugal rights as described in 1 Corinthians 7:2-5.

Second, you must provide for the physical needs of your other wives and children. Polygamists who return to monogamy are not exempt from all responsibility. Mbiti misunderstands this, concluding that a polygamist who is told to remain with only one wife will “escape” from his duties. He writes: “Polygamous marriages have their own problems, and it does not solve those problems simply to tell those involved in them to dissolve their marriages and escape from the problems.”⁶¹ But 1 Timothy 5:8 demands that a man provide for his “family” and in some sense, a polygamist’s other wives and children still are his “family.” The father, then, must make a concerted effort to meet the emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of his children, even if their mother is the second or third wife that no longer lives intimately with him.

“I am the Second Wife in a
Polygamous Marriage. May I Divorce?”

Mbiti counsels women to remain in the polygamous marriages for the sake of love. “If you sincerely love your husband and have children by him, love covers a multitude of sins and ultimately you have to decide to remain with him and cling to him for the sake of the love you have Clearly this will not be easy for you. . . . But your love may in the end succeed in turning your husband into the man that he could be.”⁶²

⁶¹ Mbiti, 192.

⁶² Ibid., 194.

Certainly genuine love is paramount in every marriage but I find Mbiti's counsel unconvincing. If the "multitude of sins" potentially covered by love includes polygamy, then I would argue that this is sufficient ground for the wife to be released from the marriage. Polygamy at the very least is an act of adultery. Furthermore, on a number of occasions in my own village, I have seen husbands in polygamous marriages pressure their wives to love them unconditionally while in the meantime multiplying his harem. There may be an example of this in 1 Samuel. As Hannah wept, Elkanah bemoaned her fruitless womb, saying: "Am I not more to you than ten sons" (1:8)? How would he have responded had Hannah said: "If I were more to you than ten sons, would you have taken another wife?"

Closing Words of Counsel

Unless the gospel is the foundation of the pastor's counsel, his instruction toward polygamists will be undermined. The pastor must show love, humility and care for those in polygamous marriages and not feel obligated to address immediately the issue of their marriage. Rather, he must first explain the glories of the gospel, the freedom of contentment, and the power of forgiveness.

Know and Love the Gospel

God is the creator. He fashioned humans in his image in order to glorify himself and has the authority to tell us how to live. God is not only loving but also righteous, meaning that he is incapable of overlooking sin or leaving the guilty unpunished.

The first humans rebelled against their creator by desiring to be equal with him. They became the enemies of God and their fellowship was broken. Since then, the hearts of humanity

have been darkened by sin. God's punishment for their sin is separation from God and eternal death in hell.

But Jesus came to fix the problem. The divine Son of God has the power to save sinners and out of love laid down his life on the cross to bring them forgiveness. This is good news because Jesus is no longer dead. He is risen. In the "great exchange", Jesus bore the iniquity of sinners on the cross and in return, gives his righteousness to all those who trust in him. Salvation does not come through good works, but only through repentance and belief in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Analyze Your Motive

In order for an action to be moral, both the deed and the motive must be pure. A man who gives food to the poor may have performed a good deed, but he has done evil if he gave only to be seen by others. Jesus reminded us that good deeds should be accompanied with good motives (e.g. Matt. 6:1-4).

The need for pure motives is one of the reasons why polygamy is immoral. The desire for more children, protection from infidelity, the obligation of levirate marriage, and the pursuit of economic wealth are not sufficient motives to overturn God's plan for monogamy. Men and women must search their motives. Many African men view polygamy as status symbol. Pamela Mann believes "men prefer [polygamy] over monogamy as a status symbol. All know that only a rich man can afford two or more bride prices."⁶³ For the Westerner, having three cars in the garage shows wealth; for the African wealth means three wives in his home.

⁶³ Pamela S. Mann, "Toward a Biblical Understanding of Polygamy," *Missiology* 7, no. 1 (January 1989): 13.

How else can polygamy proceed if not by discontent? Irritation over a barren womb or unmet sexual desires leads many to multiply wives. But a husband must be content with his wife (Prov. 5:15-23). The Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs defined contentment as “That sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”⁶⁴ Contentment means satisfaction and delight with the spouse God has given us.

Seek Forgiveness

Some in the polygamy debate feel that to take a strong stand against polygamy is unmerciful and harsh. Mann notes: “It is now impossible for any polygamist to be baptized or for any baptized member who becomes polygamist to receive communion. Church policy has, in effect, made polygamy *the* unforgivable sin.”⁶⁵

Christians should be the most merciful people because we are the most forgiven. Polygamy is not the unforgiveable sin. The blood of Jesus can wash away all the transgressions of which humans repent. Thus, gospel-centered churches should be places where polygamists go to receive warmth and love and encouragement. But this does not mean that we condone their polygamous marriages. Rather we pray for and encourage them to provide faithfully for their wives while returning to a monogamous union with their first wife that pictures Christ’s marriage to the Church.

⁶⁴ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), 19.

⁶⁵ Mann, 12.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Since the majority of passages dealing with polygamy are found in the OT, we have laid down several principles that will guide us in our interpretation. One is that Christians must follow OT truth but only as it reflects the teaching, ethical principles and implications found within the NT. Another is that in our study of polygamy, we must determine which passages are asserting and which are illustrating, knowing that the former carries more weight. Still another is that understanding the genre and culture of the passage is also crucial.

The clearest explanation of marriage is found in the second chapter of the Bible (Gen. 2:18-24), where it is defined as monogamous, restricted, permanent, and intimate. This definition does not even tacitly permit a polygamous marriage. The polygamous unions of Lamech, Abraham, Esau, Jacob, Solomon, Joash, and David illustrate the disastrous consequences that follow partnerships not in keeping with God's plan. None of these unions were created while these men were seeking and trusting God. Their wives could not say: "My beloved is mine [only], and I am his [only]" (Song of Sol. 2:16).

The OT consistently upholds God's created pattern for marriage, despite the examples of polygamy found therein. After careful scrutiny, none of the OT passages that appear to tolerate polygamy are found to do so. The NT confirms the OT antipathy toward polygamy, with 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 and Ephesians 5:25-32 modeling a righteous and monogamous relationship and 1 Timothy 3:2 forbidding polygamists from holding pastoral office.

Though historically various branches of the church have upheld this biblical standard, various branches of the modern missionary movement have increasingly been at odds regarding what to do with converted polygamists.

Regarding the NT evidence on divorce and remarriage, we have seen that Jesus upheld a very high standard of marriage in forbidding divorce except where *porneia* is involved. We have argued further that the term *porneia* be understood as including the sexual sins found in Leviticus 18, including polygamy. Thus, polygamy may be a legitimate ground for divorce. Though I have not argued that polygamists must *formally* divorce all of their spouses but the first, I did give seven reasons why a pastor should withhold church membership from a polygamous man until he chooses to live intimately with only his first wife, all the while continuing to provide for the needs of his other wives and children. If they should so choose, he should free them to enter a monogamous marriage.

Thus, I restate my thesis: Scripture never condones or legislates polygamy, nor does it mandate the formal divorce of converted polygamists, thus freeing African pastors to be shrewd and gracious in their counsel of them. The African pastor must approach this issue with a focus on the gospel, a love for people, humility in speech, and a desire for the marital unions of his flock to reflect Christ's love for his church.

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