

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

When I read the stories of Jacob and David and Solomon having more than one wife, they are not condemned for it. And I don't know of a verse that explicitly forbids polygamy. Yet we believe it is wrong, don't we?

You are right about some people in the Old Testament having more than one wife and the text does not criticize them for it. For example, Jacob married two sisters, Leah and Rachel. And yet by the time of the New Testament (actually for several centuries before the New Testament), there is no evidence of polygamy being still practiced by the Jews.

What happened? Apparently there was a societal change away from polygamy that was not directly addressed by the biblical text. Nowhere in the Bible does it say, "Thou shalt not have more than one wife." Jewish society changed, but if Jewish preachers were part of the move to monogamy, their preaching did not end up in the Bible.

Why did polygamy fall out of favor? We don't know. When did it? Apparently it was in or by the Monarchial Period (roughly 1000 - 587 BCE), when we hear only of kings having multiple wives. Earlier, Esau, Jacob's brother, had three wives.

Gideon, who lived in the Period of the Judges before the Monarchial Period, had many wives. The last example of polygamy in the Bible (except for kings who generally can do as they please and no one can stop them) is Samuel's parents. In 1 Samuel 1, we learn that Elkanah had two wives: Peninnah and Hannah (who bore Samuel).

Then in the Monarchial Period, we hear of David having six wives whose names we know: Abigail, Ahinoam, Maacah, Haggith, Abital, and Eglah. And after David became king, he took more concubines and wives, whose names are not given, though some of their sons' names are. "King Solomon," we are told, "loved many foreign women....Among his wives were 700 princesses and 300 concubines" (1 Kings 11:1, 3).

Polygamy was never officially forbidden in Judaism until the Middle Ages, when the "ban of Rabbenu Gershom" from around the eleventh century outlawed polygamy for Ashkenazi Jews (some say in order to ease relations with Christians, who consid-

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ered the practice barbaric). Some Sephardi and Yemenite Jews have continued to practice polygamy to this day (openly in Muslim countries and secretly in Israel, where it is illegal for all Jewish citizens).

There are verses in the New Testament that may forbid polygamy. 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 both say a bishop should be "a husband of one wife" (literally, "a one-woman man"). 1 Timothy 3:12 has the same requirement for deacons. Scholars argue about what is intended. Does this forbid widowers who have remarried from being bishops? (This has been a dominant interpretation over the centuries.) Is it excluding polygamists from being bishops? Or is it just saying that a bishop should be someone who is faithful to his wife?

Polygamy is very much a live issue in Africa today because the Christian churches (I think without exception) require that when a polygamist is baptized, he divorce all but one of his wives. This forces the former wives to

return to their parents. And, since they are no longer virgins, finding a man to marry them can be difficult.

Some young radical African ministers are advocating a change of policy to not require monogamy, noting that polygamy is never clearly condemned in the Bible. Monogamy, they suggest, should be seen as part of the European "cultural baggage" that missionaries imposed on Africans but not as an essential part of Christianity.

Perhaps someday African Christianity will accept polygamy. But even if it does, Western Christians are unlikely to accept it because of the inherent inequality involved in men being allowed multiple wives but not women multiple husbands. The "Old World" patriarchal character of polygamy will continue to repel most Westerners.

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