

# Polygamy and the Patriarchs

[Delivered to the AZ District Pastoral Conference First Lutheran Church,  
Prescott, AZ May 5-6, 1998]

By William B. Kessel

In the beginning God made one man and one woman. Then He brought the two of them together in marriage. Thus God instituted a monogamous relationship. Not long after the time of Adam and Eve, however, polygamy began to be practiced, first by unbelievers, then by believers. Even some of the great heroes of faith who later were to receive honorable mention in Hebrews 11, were married to two or more women at the same time. The writers of the New Testament, nevertheless, consistently regard monogamy as God's will for man and woman in marriage.

How can this be explained? Was polygamy always a sin? If polygamy was always a sin, then why did God remain silent when the patriarchs engaged in plural marriages? Is it possible that polygamy once was acceptable in God's sight but is no longer?

It is these and similar issues which are addressed in this paper. First, however, a brief summary of Old Testament polygamy is in order.

## Polygamy in the Old Testament

Only seven generations into human history Lamech introduced the practice of polygamy to the human race (Genesis 4:19). Apparently catering to the lust of his flesh, this descendant in the reprobate line of Cain took two wives. Polygamy has been practiced ever since.

Following the flood, polygamy rapidly spread far and wide. By 2100 B. C. Abram left Ur of the Chaldees and ventured as far as Egypt. Not knowing that Sarai was the patriarch's wife, the pharaoh received her into his harem (Genesis 12:19). When Abraham later repeated the charade elsewhere, Abimelech welcomed Sarah into his harem (Genesis 20).

The human convention of polygamy soon seemed a viable alternative to barrenness. At his wife Sarai's insistence, Abram took a secondary wife (Genesis 16:3). Abraham, the founder of the Hebrew and Arab peoples, the initial patriarch, the principal and primary example of a sanctified believer, was a bigamist.

Unlike his father before him, Isaac was monogamous. Both of Isaac's sons, however, were polygamous. Esau married two women (Genesis 26:34) and then added a third wife (Genesis 28:9). Jacob, meanwhile, ended up married to both Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29:28-29) as well as to their two handmaids (Genesis 30).

Following the period of the patriarchs, the judge, Gideon, had many wives (Judges 8:30-31). Still later Elkanah, Samuel's father, had two wives (I Samuel 1:2).

By the time of Israel's kings, plural marriages was a royal institution. Saul rejected monogamy for polygamy (2 Samuel 12:8; 21:8). The great King David, Jesus' notable ancestor, likewise followed this practice (2 Samuel 5:13). In unprecedented fashion, Solomon supported a harem of impressive proportions (I Kings 11:1-3). Even lesser known King Rehoboam claimed 18 wives and 60 concubines (2 Chronicles 11:2-3).

Beyond doubt, polygamy was commonly practiced in Old Testament times, even among believers. The question then becomes, was the practice of polygamy acceptable in God's sight, or was this sinful?

## Monogamy, Ideal or Command?

John D. Davis, in the highly regarded *Davis Dictionary of the Bible*, states: "Monogamy is the divine ideal. The Creator constituted marriage as a union between one man and one woman ... He preserves the number of males practically equal to the number of females in a nation."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> John D. Davis, *Davis Dictionary of the Bible*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977, p. 498

The word "ideal" suggests a guide or standard toward which people should strive. It does not, however, carry the same connotation or denotation as "command" or "law." Likewise, going against an ideal is not tantamount to breaking a law or committing a sin. Was monogamy, as opposed to polygamy, a general guideline or an irrevocable mandate?

Historically there has been some debate on this issue. Not surprisingly, the major religious thinkers of the Reformation expressed themselves:

The Christian attitude to polygamy was a matter of dispute among theologians even in the undivided Western Church of the Middle Ages in Europe. Augustine held it was not an offence if the object was the multiplication of the race. Calvin proscribed polygamy and regarded the Patriarchs as guilty of sin; Luther and Melancthon [sic.], however, held that monogamy was not obligatory under every circumstance, but that whatever was permitted by the law of Moses remained lawful still. Although Luther advised against polygamy, he at one time held that the Christian was at liberty under the Gospel to have more wives than one. The Council of Trent forthwith anathematized all who held this view, and the matter attracted little further attention until the expansion of missions across the world began in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

We may now examine the arguments and Biblical evidence on both sides of the issue.

### Monogamy as Ideal

Luther and others who maintained that monogamy was and is the ideal, but that under certain circumstances polygamy may be tolerated, have gleaned their evidence from various portions of Holy Scripture. First there is the argument from silence. Various Old Testament figures, such as Abraham and Jacob, were polygamous and, at the same time, close to God. Furthermore, God refrained from condemning their plural marriages. Next there are the various passages which seem to condone the polygamous practices of God's people. While the Mosaic law prescribed monogamy for priests (Leviticus 21:13), it allowed other men to marry more than one wife. Exodus 21:10 states that if a married man marries another woman, "he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights." These directions given to the Children of Israel protect the rights of plural wives. In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan the prophet rebuked David for his sins of adultery and murder and then reminded the king of how God previously had blessed Him. "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says... I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives in your arms" (verses 7-8). God gave David plural wives. Meanwhile, the king who served as God's representative was expected to be moderate in marriage. "He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray" (Deuteronomy 17:17)--an admonition not exactly heeded by David or Solomon.

We may now briefly consider the arguments posited by the theologians who consider monogamy as an ideal. Prominent among early theologians, Augustine gave two reasons why polygamy was acceptable in Old Testament times but not now. First, it was considered a necessary means of populating the world according to God's command, "Be fruitful and increase in number. ..." (Genesis 1:28). Since the world is now well populated it ceases to be necessary. Second, he argued that the marriage pattern is defined by custom. When polygamy was a common custom it was acceptable, but it is now a crime since it is no longer the custom.<sup>3</sup>

Based upon his study of Scripture, Martin Luther concluded, "Abraham did not commit adultery by leading a decent life with his second wife also. Abraham was a true Christian. His example dare not be condemned. It is true, one dare not make any laws out of the behavior of our forefathers, but one may not make

---

<sup>2</sup> David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 116-117.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1975, pp. 21-22, 40

sin out of their example."<sup>4</sup> Apparently Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, and Martin Bucer carefully considered the theological and practical considerations of polygamy. In his letter to King Henry VIII of England, dated August 1531, Melanchthon rendered the following opinion:

But what is to be done, if the public welfare renders a new marriage advisable for the sake of succession, as is the case with the King of England, where the public welfare of the whole kingdom renders a new marriage advisable? Here I reply: if the King wishes to provide for the succession, it is much better to do this without any stigma on the previous marriage. And this can be done, without any danger to the conscience or reputation of anyone, through polygamy.... So I hold that the safest course for the King is the first one; for it is certain that polygamy is not forbidden by divine law (*quia certum est polygamiam non esse prohibitam iure divino*), nor is it a thing altogether without precedent. Abraham, David, and other holy men had several wives; hence it is obvious that polygamy is not against divine law (*unde apparet polygamiam non esse ius divinum*).<sup>5</sup>

More recently, Wisconsin Synod scholars like Werner Franzmann argue that since the time of Christ, monogamy is the rule not the ideal. "We live in the full light of the New Testament. The light we have received from God tells us that he wants us to live in marriage as it was first instituted by him." But like Augustine and Luther, Franzmann refrains from calling Old Testament polygamy a sin but sees it as acceptable in God's sight.

Repeatedly in the Old Testament we meet the practice of polygamy. What are we to think of this? A few facts will help us see clearly. Jacob and David were not commanded to end their polygamy in order to remain in a state of grace with God. True, Abraham was told to send Hagar away. But God gave that command only because Hagar and her son Ishmael were wickedly disputing Isaac's position as the heir.<sup>6</sup> Therefore we must conclude: in the Old Testament times God condoned polygamy.

### Monogamy as Command

Notwithstanding the contention of Luther, Melanchthon, and others, many modern Lutheran theologians have resoundingly declared that since the beginning, monogamy has been the only God-pleasing form of marriage. They too have marshaled their evidence from God's Word. In the beginning God brought one man and one woman together in holy matrimony (Genesis 2:22-23). God through Moses then added, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24). Note the use of the singular "man" and "wife." Jesus added an inspired commentary to the latter verse when He said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one" (Matthew 19:5-6). (In Ephesians 5:31, Paul not only quotes Genesis but also Jesus by stating that in marriage, "the two will become one flesh".) A few verses later (Matthew 19:9) Jesus said, "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." Here the man is bound to one wife. No provision is stipulated for a second marriage without divorce. Likewise in Romans (7:2-3) Paul notes that a woman who takes a second husband while the first is still alive is an adulteress. In addition to these passages there are the qualifications of the pastor and elder. "Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife. ..." (I Timothy 3:2). "A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well" (I Timothy 3:12).

---

<sup>4</sup> Paul G. Hansen, Oscar E. Feucht, Fred Kramer, and Erwin L. Lueker, *Engagement and Marriage*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959, p. 71

<sup>5</sup> Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1975, pp. 221

<sup>6</sup> Werner H. Franzmann, *Bible History Commentary, Old Testament*, Milwaukee: Board for Parish Education, Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, 1980, p. 341

We may now review the arguments presented by those who feel monogamy is God's command. As previously noted, the Roman Catholics in the Council of Trent took a firm stand against polygamy. In a statement of November 11, 1563, they insisted, "If anyone says that it is lawful for Christians to have several wives at the same time, and that it is not forbidden by any divine law (Matthew 19:4f): let him be anathema."<sup>7</sup>

Later some Lutherans felt the same way. John Gerhard, a 17 century theologian, pronounced polygamy *illicita ac damnata*, in the New Testament especially. Still later scholars such as C. F. W. Walther and J. H. C. Fritz held that polygamy was a sin.<sup>8</sup> This position has also been maintained by various Wisconsin Synod writers. Based on Scripture passages, the so-called Gausewitz edition of Luther's Catechism states that "God requires that marriage be a life-long union of one man and one woman. ..."<sup>9</sup> Likewise in his discussion of the Sixth Commandment, Kuske limits marriage to the "life-long union of one man and one woman."<sup>10</sup> If these authors seem to imply that this has always been God's rule, Schuetze and Habeck say so in no uncertain terms. "The marriage relationship involves two people. The fact that God-fearing men like Jacob and David were involved in polygamous marriages and divine disapproval in their cases is not directly evident does not change God's original institution, reaffirmed in the New Testament."<sup>11</sup> Likewise Mark Lenz quotes Leviticus 18:18, "Do not take your wife's sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living." He then comments, "God's law did not allow for bigamy or polygamy... in spite of the many examples of that among the patriarchs and other heroes of faith."<sup>12</sup>

### God's Response to Old Testament Polygamy

From the foregoing it seems clear that God established monogamy in the beginning, and the New Testament church recognized no other form of marriage. Whether monogamy in the Old Testament was the ideal or the command of God, however, remains open to debate. If polygamy among the patriarchs was condoned by God, then God's silence on the subject is understandable. If, on the other hand, it constituted a sin, then why did not God denounce the sin and the sinners?

As previously noted, Schuetze and Habeck concede that God was silent about the morality of Jacob and David's plural marriages. The authors then go on to deduce that God "permitted exceptions to His institution" of monogamy. What God does, they maintain, we are not at liberty to do.

If the pastor can grant a "dispensation" from the biblical concept of marriage as monogamous, the door has been opened for departure from Scripture in other practical difficulties. The pastor has no authority over Scripture. He must take great care lest he give even the impression that Scripture is subject to his manipulation.<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding their warning, Schuetze and Habeck decline the opportunity to speculate as to why God permitted polygamy if it was a sin.

The article entitled "Polygamy" in the *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, contains the following statement. "The fact that polygamy was (e.g., in the OT) and is practiced does not justify it. Scripture does not present it as God's intent, or as God-pleasing, or as an example to follow."<sup>14</sup> Is it possible, however, that God permitted polygamy to stand among the patriarchs to serve as a bad example or warning? Consider the plight of Abram and Sarai. Their

---

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1975, p. 218

<sup>8</sup> Willard Burce, "Polygamy and the Church," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, April, 1963, pp.224,229

<sup>9</sup> C. Gausewitz, *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1956, p. 66

<sup>10</sup> David P. Kuske, *Luther's Catechism*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989, p. 93

<sup>11</sup> Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974, p. 265

<sup>12</sup> Mark J. Lenz, *Leviticus*, The People's Bible, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1988, p. 161

<sup>13</sup> Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974, p. 265-266

<sup>14</sup> Erwin L. Lueker (ed.), *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975, p. 626

polygamous household was anything but tranquil (Genesis 16:4-6). Problems between the co-wives translated into difficulties with their children (Genesis 21:9-11). Later Jacob loved his wife Rachel more than her co-wife and sister Leah (Genesis 29:32ff). This led to jealousy between the two (Genesis 30:1, 8). Then again, there was bitter strife between Elkanah's two wives Hannah and Peninnah (I Samuel 1:2). However, if God permitted polygamy to stand as an example not to be followed, then one wonders why conflict among David's wives - Michal, Abigail, Ahinoam, Maacah, Haggith, Abital, Eglah, and Bathsheba - is not mentioned. Likewise familial disputes between Solomon and his 700 wives and Rehoboam and his dozen-and-a-half brides escape the lasting censor of Scripture.

Jeske, meanwhile, observes that Sarai "followed the custom of the day, which allowed a barren wife to give her servant girl to her husband as a secondary wife, with the understanding that any children born of that union would belong to the mistress of the household." Jeske then parenthetically notes that this was a custom of the day which "not only *allowed* a childless wife to give her maid to her husband, but may actually have *demand*ed it."<sup>15</sup> While Jeske immediately condemns her action, he, nevertheless, raises an interesting possibility. Did God fail to sanction polygamy in the Old Testament because it was so ingrained in neighboring societies? This reflects Augustine's argument presented earlier. It is true that polygamy was practiced by Israel's neighbors. God, however, did not fail to condemn other customs he deemed to be wrong, even if they were practiced by nearby societies. The divine rule applies, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29)! A dangerous precedent is established if society is allowed to dictate what is acceptable and unacceptable for believers.

How then does Jeske explain God's silence concerning polygamy among the patriarchs? He presents three truths.

"Truth #1: *The Scripture makes no attempt to hide the sin of God's ancient people. ...*"

"Truth #2: *God does not approve of everything he tolerates. ....* "

"Truth #3: *God can overrule the evil intent of people and bend their wicked deeds to serve his good purposes.*"<sup>16</sup>

While these statements are true, they hardly explain God's inaction in this matter. Having considered God's reaction to polygamy among the patriarchs, we are back to where we started. If God condoned Old Testament polygamy then His failure to censor it is understandable. On the other hand, if polygamy is "A peculiar perversion of the original order of God... amounting almost to a subversion of the real object of the married estate,"<sup>17</sup> then we are left with only speculation or obtuse arguments.

The issue, however, is not trivial or unimportant for Christianity today. It is a theological question of utmost importance for mission-minded Christians.

## Polygamy and World Evangelism

The whole issue of polygamy and the patriarchs may seem like a moot point to most American Christians. It has not been widely practiced in this country in over a century. D.H. Kuehl writes:

Most of the difficulties that befell the Mormon Church in its early years stemmed from the practice of polygamy. A special revelation given to [Joseph] Smith was said to be the basis for the practice. It brought no end of trouble. Six separate efforts to acquire statehood for Utah were

---

<sup>15</sup> John C. Jeske, *Genesis*. The People's Bible, Edited by Roland Cap Ehlke and John C. Jeske, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991, p. 145

<sup>16</sup> John C. Jeske, *Genesis*. The People's Bible, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991, p. 247

<sup>17</sup> L. Fuerbringer, Th. Engelder, and P. E. Kretzmann, *The Concordia Cyclopaedia*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1927, p. 594

unsuccessful because of it. Congress finally passed a law making polygamy a crime. Under such pressure, the Mormon Church in 1890 declared that it no longer countenanced the practice.<sup>18</sup>

The story abroad, however, is considerably different. Anthropologists calculate that today an overwhelming majority of world cultures espouse plural marriages. A full 70 percent of peoples permit the practice of polygamy (plural wives) while a meager one percent of peoples allow for polyandry (plural husbands).<sup>19</sup>

Dealing with polygamy has become an acute and sensitive issue for Christian missionaries, especially in Africa. In his book *Schism & Renewal in Africa*, David B. Barrett shows that the majority of African societies consider polygamy normal and approve of the institution. Christian missionaries sent to that continent, however, have forcefully condemned the practice. Polygamous husbands and their wives and children have been denied baptism. Converted men have been instructed to stay with their first wife and divorce their co-wives. Christians who lapse into polygamy are excommunicated or otherwise disciplined. The net result of such a stand has been to drive Christian African polygamists into independent African sects. Barrett concludes, "Missions in most areas therefore appear to have made a fundamental mistake on this issue by attempting to force African societies to abandon polygamy too rapidly, instead of allowing the indigenous Christian conscience to evolve its own solution."<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile many missionaries have been hard pressed to explain to Africans how polygamy is a sin when it was widely practiced by God's people in the Bible. This leaves the impression that insistence on monogamy is more cultural than theological.

### Conclusion

The debate among missionaries concerning whether monogamy is the ideal or the command of God has raged for decades, yet the issue has not been resolved satisfactorily.<sup>21</sup> World evangelists and missionaries need to know how to respond to those involved in plural marriages. It is commendable, therefore, that our missionaries continue to wrestle with this issue. It is also timely that the faculty of our Wisconsin Lutheran Synod's seminary is currently studying the matter. In the final analysis, only careful exegesis of all the passages involved will shed light on God's will and direct His people to appropriate responses.

---

<sup>18</sup> D. H. Kuehl, *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 58, 1971, p. 85. Reprinted in *Our Great Heritage*, Vol. 1, Lyle Lange, Editor, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991, p. 567

<sup>19</sup> Gary Ferraro, *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective*, Minneapolis: West Publishing House, 1995, pp. 203-207

<sup>20</sup> David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 118-119

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "The Doctrine of Marriage in the Theologians of Lutheran Orthodoxy," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. 24, July, 1953, pp. 465-489

Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "The Theologians of Lutheran Orthodoxy on Polygamy, Celibacy, and Divorce" *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. 25, 1954, pp. 276-283

Willard Burce, "Polygamy and the Church," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, April, 1963, pp. 223-232

Nathaniel G. N. Inyamah, "Polygamy and the Christian Church," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. 43, 1972, pp. 138-143

David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968

Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1975