

Concubines

Can you explain to me what a “concubine” is in the Bible?

When your average person encounters the subject of concubines in the Tanach or Old Testament, it can be difficult if the reader is not informed as to what a concubine was in ancient times. The term *pilegish* (פִּילְגֵּשׁ) “seems clearly to be a word of non-Semitic origin...The fact that there are clear cognates in Greek (*pallakís/pallekē*) and Latin (*paelex*) suggests that the word is Indo-European in origin, borrowed into all three languages” (*EDB*).¹

Concubinage in the Tanach is often associated with some kind of slavery, as Bilhah was called both a slave (Genesis 29:29; 30:3) and a concubine (Genesis 35:22). Likewise, Gideon’s unnamed concubine (Judges 8:31) is also called his slave (Judges 19:19), with him actually being considered her “husband.” *TWOT* explains, “A concubine was a true wife, though of secondary rank...the concubine was not a kept mistress, and did not cohabit with a man unless married to him. The institution itself is an offshoot of polygamy.”² Among those who practiced concubinage, the concubine was “A female slave regarded as part of the Israelite family, generally designated as bearing children...In addition to providing offspring and sexual activity (Eccl. 2:8), concubines were responsible for care of the those (2 S. 15:16; 16:21; 20:3...)” (*ISBE*).³

As concubinage is connected to polygamy, it was often only the rich and/or powerful who were able to afford concubines, as most of those who had concubines were kings (i.e., Esther 2:17; Song of Songs 6:8; Daniel 5:3, 23). Keturah, taken as Abraham’s wife after Sarah’s death, was considered both his wife (Genesis 25:1) and concubine (1 Chronicles 1:32), perhaps as a way to honor Sarah as Israel’s matriarch with Keturah being considered of lesser status. Unlike those women who would have been considered wives, “concubines were of a lower status than primary wives because no brideprice (*mōhar*) was paid for them, or they brought no dowry (*šillûhîm*), or both” (*EDB*).⁴ As a result, any children born of concubines only inherited land at their father’s discretion (i.e., Genesis 25:6), rather than those children born of actual “wives.”

The Torah’s legislation is mute on regulating the practice of concubinage, as “Concubines are mentioned almost exclusively in the patriarchal period and early monarchy” (*ISBE*).⁵ “The fact that the word *pilegish* is nowhere mentioned in the legal collections of Exodus and Deuteronomy, nor in the lists of proscribed sexual relationships in Lev. 18, 20, should further caution against too quickly positing that this form of connubial arrangement was widely practiced” (*EDB*).⁶ Indeed, the fact that the families of Israel’s kings suffered from polygamy—with concubinage as an extended form of this practice with added “lesser-wives”—demonstrates that it was indeed a practice never blessed or sanctioned by God.

With the unfortunate rise of a sector of Messianic polygamist men among us today, it should not be surprising that some are now discussing whether or not concubinage is also acceptable. If polygamy is unacceptable given the Genesis ideal of marriage being between one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24), a principle upheld by Yeshua and His Apostles (Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7-8; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:31)—then just as polygamy would be absolutely unacceptable in view of the equality of the genders He has restored (Galatians 3:28), **so would concubinage be even more unacceptable!** Messianic men today wanting to take concubines to themselves or “lesser-wives” into their homes are doing so only for the purpose of having a sexual outlet. They forget the fact that the Hebrew Tanach depicts both the ups *and the downs* of its chosen people, and

¹ Peggy L. Day, “Concubine,” in *EDB*, 273.

² Victor P. Hamilton, “pilegish,” in *TWOT*, 2:724.

³ Allen C. Myers, “concubine,” in *ISBE*, 1:758.

⁴ Day, “Concubine,” in *EDB*, 273.

⁵ Meyers, “Concubine,” in *ISBE*, 1:758.

⁶ Day, “Concubine,” in *EDB*, 273.

simply practicing polygamy or concubinage because the Patriarchs or kings of Israel did it fails to consider the severe negative consequences that both brought upon their households and the Kingdom as a whole.

(For a further discussion, consult the author's articles "**Is Polygamy for Today?**" [appearing in *Men and Women in the Body of Messiah: Answering Crucial Questions*] and "**Addressing the Frequently Avoided Issues Messianics Encounter in the Torah**" [appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*].)