

# Is Polygamy for Today?

## the case against polygamy 2008/2013

In recent days a number of issues have hit various sectors of the Messianic community. Each one of these issues has had a variety of distinctly negative effects as people have denied Yeshua's Divinity, questioned His Messiahship, and have questioned whether certain books of the Apostolic Scriptures are trustworthy. Our ministry has stood firmly against the false teachings that have entered into our midst, standing up for Yeshua's Divinity and Messiahship, and engaging with the text of various Biblical books under fire to provide reasonable answers. We have done our best to stop the tide of error sweeping through parts of the Messianic world, knowing full well "if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet and the people are not warned...his blood I will require" (Ezekiel 33:6). People who see extreme problems, possessing the skills and abilities to address them—and who do nothing—will be held accountable by the Almighty.

There are an entire host of issues seen in the Torah that today's Messianic movement is either unwilling or unable to address. Some of it has come about because various teachers or leaders "just don't want to go there" or "open that can of worms." Others do not know what to do. *But avoiding the controversial issues seen in the Torah is not an appropriate course of action.* The Lord Himself has said, "this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach" (Deuteronomy 30:11). With a little research into the Scriptures, and with some basic engagement of Ancient Near Eastern history, many of the tough questions we have about the Pentateuch and its instructions can be adequately answered.

Messianics too quickly jump over issues like murder, genocide, and slavery as seen in the Torah.<sup>1</sup> You cannot totally blame people for wanting to not discuss these sorts of things, as they are surely not pleasant subjects for one living in the Twenty-First Century to

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<sup>1</sup> Consult the author's article "Addressing the Frequently Avoided Issues Messianics Encounter in the Torah," appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.

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contemplate. But they are a part of the Biblical narrative, and if we are mature Believers we will consider them (cf. Hebrews 6:1-2). Yet many of those issues can be relegated to the more philosophical disciplines. We do not practice slavery or indentured servitude in modern society today, and very few of us will ever have to serve on a jury where the prosecution is seeking the death penalty.

However, a controversy has just arisen (2008) regarding a subject that is seen in the Scriptures,<sup>2</sup> was practiced by some people within Ancient Israel, and could adversely affect not only the growth of the Messianic movement—**but also severely shake up families and our youth**. It has the capacity to grind our faith community and the work God has called us to do *to a grinding halt* if not stopped immediately. Even if people just hear echoes about it, it will still stir up tension and a great deal of discomfort.

No one who reads the Bible denies that polygamy—the practice of a man having more than one wife—is seen within the text. The Patriarch Jacob, who was the progenitor of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, had two wives and two concubines (Genesis 31:17; 37:2). King David, who was testified by the Lord to be “a man after His own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14), had multiple wives (1 Samuel 18:17-30; 25:38-43; 2 Samuel 3:2-5). King Solomon, whom many consider to be the wisest man who ever lived, had hundreds of wives and concubines (1 Kings 3:1; 11:3) that made up an entire harem (Song of Songs 6:8).

“So what is the problem?” it is said. “Some of the most important figures in the Tanach Scriptures had multiple wives, and so Messianic men today should be able to have multiple wives as well. *YHWH is restoring Biblical patriarchy!* Women need to learn their place.”

There are, in fact, many problems to be explored when considering whether or not polygamy is an acceptable practice for today’s Body of Messiah. Was it the ideal at Creation for the man to have more than one wife? When a man has more than one wife, is he truly fulfilled emotionally and spiritually with his multiple spouses? Is the household where one man has multiple wives and children from those multiple wives truly a place of love and affection, or one of discord and suspicion? Does the Bible portray men who had polygamous relationships as being genuinely fulfilled, and children who were true

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<sup>2</sup> This may be largely attributed to the release of the publication by Moshe Koniuchowsky, *Sex and the Believer: Shocking Freedom of Sexuality in Torah* (Margate, FL: Your Arms to Israel Publishing, 2008).

Concurrent with this, no substantial response or analysis of the issue of polygamy has at all been issued, by anyone in the broad Messianic community (as of Summer 2013).

examples of godliness? Does a man having multiple wives express the sentiment that he places great value on women, or that they are simply property to be acquired? And, how many in the Biblical period actually had the financial means to afford more than one wife? **Does the Bible really lend support to the practice of polygamy today?**

In this critical article, we will directly answer these questions and many more. Make no mistake about it, while polygamy is recorded to have been practiced in Scripture—it **by no means is endorsed by Scripture!** Not a single commandment in the Torah condones the practice of polygamy. (More specifically, the practice of polygyny or a man having multiple wives, compared to polyandry or a woman having multiple husbands.)<sup>3</sup> God never intended a man to have more than one wife, families where the husband is polygamous have suffered immensely from it, and male polygamists today are motivated by uncontrollable sexual urges that demean women and the equality that Messiah Yeshua has restored to the genders (Galatians 3:28).<sup>4</sup> And not only will we consider these factors, but we will also take a look at many of the Tanach examples where polygamous relationships are portrayed, later weighing in the teachings and thoughts of Yeshua and the Apostles. How do we stand against this new wave of aberration? Will Messianic men arise who recognize women as having great value *and* recognize them as their equals?

## Genesis and the First Marriage

The prototype for a proper marriage relationship is seen at the very beginning with the creation of the first two human beings: “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, NRSV). Both the male and the female bear the image of God, meaning that aside from their anatomical differences, they possess the same capacities of intelligence, reason, and spirituality. While the male was created first, this *by no means* is an indication of God’s preference of the male gender over the female gender.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, the Lord says of Adam, “It is not good for the

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. John L. Berquist, “Marriage,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp 861-862.

<sup>4</sup> Consult the author’s article “Galatians 3:28: Biblical Equality and Today’s Messianic Movement.”

<sup>5</sup> God’s creation of the male first, and His own portrayal as male in Genesis, directly combated pagan teaching of the Ancient Near East (i.e., the Mesopotamian creation myth *Atrahasis*) where the first humans were birthed by a mother goddess. The Genesis 1-3 account runs completely contrary to this, as man and woman are made by the Lord *ex nihilo* or out of nothing (cf. Hebrews 11:3). Females must join with males in order to conceive a

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man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18). The woman, Eve, was to be Adam’s *ezer kenegdo* (עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ), a significant ally for him who would fulfill all of those things *and more* that he needed.<sup>6</sup> Victor P. Hamilton comments,

“It suggests that what God creates for Adam will correspond to him. Thus the new creation will be neither a superior nor an inferior, but an equal. The creation of this helper will form one-half of a polarity, and will be to man as the south pole is to the north pole.”<sup>7</sup>

Genesis 2:21-24 tells us how God made the first female:

“So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”

Here, we see that the woman was brought out of the man’s *tzeila* (צֵלַע) or “side,” and that Adam’s response was to admire God’s creation of Eve. The man is the “head” of the woman, meaning that he is her origin (1 Corinthians 11:3).<sup>8</sup> The respect that a man is to give to a woman is most severe in the Scriptures. From the beginning of human history, the marriage relationship was intended to be between one man

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child, similar to how the womb-goddess must give birth. But from the Biblical point of view, God portrayed as male cannot give birth. On the contrary, He must create the first two human beings out of nothing. **The male being made first by no means is an indication that females are somehow “worthless.”**

<sup>6</sup> The term “helper” or *ezer* is derived from the root *a-z-r* (עֵזֶר), which generally regards military alliances or reinforcements seen throughout the Tanach (i.e., Joshua 10:4; 2 Samuel 8:5; Ezra 10:15; Isaiah 41:6). Consult Carl Schultz, “עֵזֶר,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:660-661.

Also consult John H. Walton’s comments in *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 176.

<sup>7</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 175.

<sup>8</sup> This interpretation of *kephalē* (κεφαλῆ) in 1 Corinthians 11, “head” viewed as “source” like that of “a river” (H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], 430), has grown considerably in the past two to three decades. It is not without controversy, though. Linda L. Belleville describes, “Can 1 Corinthians 11 really get a fair reading from an author who assumes it teaches ‘the timeless principles of male headship and female subordination?’” (“Response to Craig Blomberg,” in James R. Beck, ed., *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 199).

For a further evaluation, consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Male Headship.”

and one woman. One way that v. 24 can be translated is “Therefore a man forsakes his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh,”<sup>9</sup> which could be taken, as Hamilton notes, “to leave father and mother and cling to one’s wife means to sever one loyalty and commence another.”<sup>10</sup> Surely while sons are to be loyal and respectful to their parents (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16), in the marriage relationship a man’s primary loyalty and duty is now to the wife.

V. 24 is clearly a piece of the narration in Genesis 2 designed to call those reading or hearing back to an important principle established at Creation. It is introduced by the words *al-ken* (עַל־כֵּן), “Therefore” (RSV), “For this reason” (NASU), or “This is why” (CJB, HCSB). Nahum M. Sarna explains, “*al ken*...introduces an etiological observation on the part of the Narrator; that is, the origin of an existing custom or institution assigned to some specific event in the past. In this case, some interrelated and fundamental aspects of the marital relationship are traced to God’s original creative act and seen as part of the divinely ordained natural order.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in Genesis 2:21-24 marriage is most definitely *not defined* as being between two people of the *same* gender joined in a homosexual relationship.<sup>12</sup> But also, marriage is presented as being a relationship between *one man* and *one woman*—as opposed to one man and multiple women. This is a teaching upheld by Yeshua the Messiah (Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7-8). The Jewish and Christian theological traditions have both looked to Genesis 2:24 as presenting the ideal for a monogamous marriage relationship, and Genesis 2:24 is often quoted in the liturgy of most Jewish and Christian weddings, with the latter often joining the Messiah’s word, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matthew 19:6; cf. Mark 10:9).

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<sup>9</sup> Hamilton, 177.

This is realized by the verb *azav* (אַזַּב), appearing in the Qal stem (simple action, active voice), meaning “leave, forsake, loose” (Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979], 736).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>11</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 23.

<sup>12</sup> Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Romans 1:26-27.”

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As a direct result of the Fall,<sup>13</sup> the tranquility and unity that was to exist between the male and female genders was quickly lost (Genesis 3:16 compared to 4:7), with a battle erupting between the two. While the man and woman were to originally be equal partners and allies of each other in the marriage relationship, now with sin entering onto the scene, the physically stronger man would inevitably dominate a physically weaker woman who would try to be his boss: “your urge [*teshuqah*, תְּשׁוּקָה] shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16, NJPS).<sup>14</sup>

The restoration of what Sarna calls “the absolute equality of the sexes”<sup>15</sup> that once existed in Paradise, would have to come when the Seed promised to Eve would arrive and crush the serpent (Genesis 3:15; 1 Timothy 2:15, Grk.). Any instance where men are portrayed as having more than one wife *runs completely against* the Edenic ideal *and against* the trajectory back toward the original egalitarianism.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes we see polygamy being tolerated by God when in view of *more severe sins* like the idolatry and child sacrifice that erupted in the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Ancient Israel, which eventually brought His judgment down upon them.

## Marriage in the Tanach: One Man and One Woman

While the full restoration of equality between males and females would only come when Messiah Yeshua arrived on the scene (Galatians 3:28), *with the Torah working forward toward that end*,<sup>17</sup> the witness of the commandments in the Torah upholds the ideal marriage as being between one man and one woman as originally seen in Genesis:

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet **your neighbor’s wife** or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17).

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<sup>13</sup> Note that the introduction of sin did not come about because the woman Eve was “stupid” or inferior to the male Adam; the Scriptures are clear that she was deceived (Genesis 3:13; 1 Timothy 2:14). Adam chose to listen to his wife when she handed him the fruit (Genesis 3:17), rather than instruct her that what she did was wrong and immediately plead God’s mercy and forgiveness. Far from there being any fault with the female Eve, humanity’s expulsion rests with the sin of the male Adam (Romans 5:12) who was not deceived and knew *exactly* what he ate.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Hamilton, 201.

<sup>15</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 28.

<sup>16</sup> The term “egalitarian” is simply derived from the French *égal*, meaning “equal.”

<sup>17</sup> An analysis of this is offered in the section on “Development and Advances of Gender Relations” in the author’s article “Addressing the Frequently Avoided Issues Messianics Encounter in the Torah.”

"But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, **my wife** and my children; I will not go out as a free man'" (Exodus 21:5).<sup>18</sup>

"You shall not uncover the nakedness of **your father's wife**; it is your father's nakedness...The nakedness of **your father's wife's** daughter, born to your father, she is your sister, you shall not uncover her nakedness...You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother; you shall not approach **his wife**, she is your aunt. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law; she is **your son's wife**, you shall not uncover her nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of **your brother's wife**; it is your brother's nakedness...You shall not have intercourse with **your neighbor's wife**, to be defiled with her" (Leviticus 18:8, 11, 14-16, 20).

"If *there is* a man who commits adultery with **another man's wife**, one who commits adultery **with his friend's wife**, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death" (Leviticus 20:10; cf. Deuteronomy 22:22).

"He [a priest] shall take **a wife** in her virginity" (Leviticus 21:13).

"Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'If **any man's wife** goes astray and is unfaithful to him..." (Numbers 5:12).

"You shall not covet **your neighbor's wife**, and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field or his male servant or his female servant, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Deuteronomy 5:21).

None of these passages describe "wives" in the plural, as meaning that one is prohibited from lusting over or adulterating with "*one of someone else's wives,*" but it might be acceptable to sin with a single woman who is unmarried. A man having a single wife is what is clearly portrayed, a wife who he is to be faithful toward.

Now, it is not at all impossible that some commandments listed above may concern a man having a later second wife because the first wife has died. When Leviticus 18:18 prohibits a son from sleeping with "his father's wife," this could very well not be his mother, but be his stepmother. The death of a man's first wife, often by childbirth, was not something uncommon in the Biblical period, and there is no Torah

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<sup>18</sup> An historical analysis of this passage is offered in the section on "Slavery" in the author's article "Addressing the Frequently Avoided Issues Messianics Encounter in the Torah."

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prohibition on remarriage (except remarriage to a divorced spouse in Deuteronomy 24:4). In fact, the Apostle Paul uses the Torah's instructions on proper sexuality within marriage to describe how Believers in Yeshua are like the widow released from "the law concerning the husband"<sup>19</sup> (Romans 7:2), meaning that they have been discharged from the Torah's condemnation upon sinners (cf. Galatians 3:13). But remarriage and a man having children from a sequence of marriages brought about by the unfortunate death of his wife/wives is *different* than polygamy.

The witness of the Tanach's Wisdom literature is also clear about the ideal marriage being between one man and one woman:

"An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who shames him is like rotteness in his bones" (Proverbs 12:4).

"He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD" (Proverbs 18:22).

"A foolish son is destruction to his father, and the contentions of a wife are a constant dripping" (Proverbs 19:13).

"Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 9:9).

"I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?...If my heart has been enticed by a woman, or I have lurked at my neighbor's doorway, may my wife grind for another, and let others kneel down over her. For that would be a lustful crime; moreover, it would be an iniquity *punishable by* judges. For it would be fire that consumes to Abaddon, and would uproot all my increase" (Job 31:1, 9-12).

Proverbs 12:4 and 18:22 should particularly stand out: **a wife is a singular treasure that a husband should greatly value**. Once you begin to add more wives—to that single wife who is the *ateret ba'lah* (אֶרֶת בַּעֲלָהּ, Proverbs 12:4) or "crown (of her) husband"—it is then that the woman becomes devalued and demeaned and/or cheapened in comparison to a man. Such a lessening of a woman's worth should *never* be present in today's Kingdom of God! It is not unlike that common, *sinful* urge today for men to "conquer" women as sexual exploits.

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<sup>19</sup> Grk. *tou nomou tou andros* (τοῦ νόμου τοῦ ἀνδρός), "the law of the husband" (YLT) or "the law of marriage" (NIV).



Scores of examples of how women are treated as less valuable than men—even in today’s world—can be considered. It is not uncommon in various third world countries for women to have abortions when it is revealed that the child she is carrying is female. Worse yet, if a child’s gender is unknown and a female is born, sometimes it is left out in the open to die, in spite of orphanages that would gladly take the child. And even when there are families whose children are both male and female, when the male child is sick it is given preferential treatment over the female child. *These are abominations that God will rightly judge.*

God made men to have a single wife in a monogamous marriage relationship. **This wife is to be a person whom her husband values above all others, save only God Himself.** The only reason that a man should have another wife would be in that terrible instance of his first wife being taken from him by death, or a justifiable reason for divorce such as adultery (cf. Matthew 19:19). Even so, the monogamous marriage relationship is a privilege to those who participate in it.

## Problem Texts that Appear to Support Polygamy

While men having multiple wives is clearly not the ideal as originally portrayed by Adam and Eve in Paradise, outspoken voices in the fringe of the Messianic community believe that the Torah actually allows men to have multiple wives. A review of some of the passages that would seem to suggest that polygamy is an acceptable practice is certainly in order, especially as we confront this danger in our faith community. Is polygamy permitted—or is there more to consider?

### Exodus 21:7-11

**“If a man sells his daughter as a female slave, she is not to go free as the male slaves do. If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He does not have authority to sell her to a foreign people because of his unfairness to her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters. If he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights. If he will not do these three things for her, then she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.”**

These regulations are given as “judgments” (Exodus 21:1, KJV) or *mishpatim* (מִשְׁפָּטִים), indicating that they compose Pentateuchal case law. There are some translation and textual issues that need to be considered in any interpretation of Exodus 21:7-11. It does concern the selling of a young woman to a family as an intended wife for either the man or for

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his son (vs. 7-9), in a kind of indentured servitude vis-à-vis an arranged marriage for a family that is destitute and needs a daughter provided for. But how this is applied and whether or not polygamy is even a factor are things we must examine carefully.

V. 8a in most Bibles is rendered as "If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself" (NIV). There is a very subtle, yet significant, difference in the reading *lo* (לֹ), "for himself," versus *lo* (לֹא) or "not,"<sup>20</sup> with only a handful of Hebrew witnesses reading with *lo* "for himself."<sup>21</sup> Both sound exactly the same audibly, yet textually the superior reading is *lo* or "not." When "not" is recognized as the correct reading, the clause *asher-lo ye'adah* (אֲשֶׁר-לֹא...יַעֲדָהּ) translates as "so that he does not choose her"<sup>22</sup> or "so that he did not designate her."<sup>23</sup> The textual issue of v. 8a is important because of what is seen in v. 10, "If he takes to himself another woman..." Because of the man's rejection of the woman contracted to him (v. 8a), he is now free to take another as his wife (v. 10). **No polygamy need be present.**

Another issue regards v. 10b, where it is said that the woman rejected may not be refused "conjugal rights" (NASU) or "marital rights" (RSV). Here, it would seem that the woman contracted to him, whom he has now rejected and taken another in her place, should still be allowed some sexual pleasuring (perhaps by a male prostitute?) even though she is unmarried! The term *onah* (עֲנָה) is a difficult one to translate, as *BDB* simply defines it as "cohabitation."<sup>24</sup> The challenge with viewing *onah* this way is that it does not follow the standard Ancient Near Eastern formula of "food, clothing, and ointment"<sup>25</sup> (cf. Hosea 2:8; Ecclesiastes 9:7-9). Sarna notes for us that "Rashbam and Bekhor Shor favor another rendering of 'onah as 'dwelling,' 'shelter,' which is supported etymologically by the Hebrew noun *ma'on*, *me'onah*, 'dwelling, habitation.'"<sup>26</sup> *Onah* does come from the root *a-v-n* (עֲנָן), a verb form for "dwell" (*BDB*).<sup>27</sup> So, far be it from the woman being

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<sup>20</sup> *The Keter Crown Bible* Jerusalem: Chorev, 2006), Heb. p 93.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph, eds., et. al., *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977), 120; Aron Dotan, ed., *Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 110.

<sup>22</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 184.

<sup>23</sup> *The Holy Bible: Updated New American Standard Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), note on Exodus 20:8, p 72.

<sup>24</sup> *BDB*, 773.

<sup>25</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 121.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

See also Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 185.

<sup>27</sup> *BDB*, 732.

refused “her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights” (NASU)—it would be more akin to “her food, her clothing, or her shelter,” or perhaps even “her oil.”<sup>28</sup> Not providing these things for the woman he rejected, she is then free to leave and cannot be sold by him (v. 11).

Exodus 21:7-11 is not about polygamy; it is about what to do with a woman contracted to a man as his wife, and how he is to properly treat her should she not be what he wants. If he rejects her as a wife, he still has to provide for her basic needs. If he fails to do this or fails to see that she is redeemed (v. 8), she is free to leave *ein kesef* (עֵין כֶּסֶף וְאֵין). He has to let her go “without any exchange of money” (HCSB).

### Leviticus 18:18

**“You shall not marry a woman in addition to her sister as a rival while she is alive, to uncover her nakedness.”**

Some have seen hints at polygamy in Leviticus 18:18. One way of looking at this is as a prohibition to a man to marry his wife’s sister while the wife is still alive, as the two wives would become rivals and cause chaos in the house. Another view is that this permits a man to take another wife, just one who is not the sister of a man’s first wife while the wife is still alive. The second view permits polygamy.

There is some difficulty with how to understand the phrase *ishah el-achotah* (אִשָּׁה אֶל־אָחוֹתָהּ), literally meaning “a woman to her sister.” In many cases, this is understood idiomatically as meaning “one woman to another,” with “sister” taking on a more generic sense. While viewing “sister” generically would not be inappropriate elsewhere, Walter C. Kaiser does indicate, “There is no reference to a *relationship by blood* in the [various] other”<sup>29</sup> cases where such language is used, unlike in Leviticus 18. Previously in Leviticus 18:16, the Lord decreed “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother’s wife; it is your brother’s nakedness.” A woman was not permitted to have sexual relations with her brother-in-law, as a part of the prohibitions against incest. Leviticus 18:18 makes a reciprocal remark about a man having sexual relations with his sister-in-law. All of the legislation needs to be kept within the scope of the legislation where God demands of Ancient Israel, “not [to] do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes” (Leviticus 18:3). Both the Egyptians and the

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 98.

<sup>29</sup> Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 186.

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Canaanites were sexually lewd people whose deviant practices—which included polygamy—the Israelites were not to follow. Leviticus 18:18 is a specific prohibition against one, particularly abhorrent type of polygamy.

Kaiser correctly concludes, “The closeness of relationships given in the text would seem to force us to say that the text prohibits...marriage between a man and his sister-in-law (wife’s sister). Leviticus 18:18, then, is a single prohibition against polygamy and abides by the law of incest stated in the same context.”<sup>30</sup> A man is not permitted to marry his wife’s sister. Not following the ways of the Egyptians or Canaanites, for that same matter, a man may not marry any one of his wife’s “generic sisters” (meaning females in the community), while she is alive. He is only permitted to take another wife when his current wife is no longer living. If a man could marry his wife’s actual sister, even with a previous sister now deceased, it cannot be overlooked how this still often came with complications of rivalry.

### Deuteronomy 21:15-17

**“If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, then it shall be in the day he wills what he has to his sons, he cannot make the son of the loved the firstborn before the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn. 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 beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the firstborn.”**

Deuteronomy 21:15-17 on the surface, at least to some Bible readers, does appear to reflect a condition of polygamy within Ancient Israel. After all, “If a man has two wives...” (v. 15). But is the context of this passage a man who *presently has* two wives, one whom he loves and one whom he does not love? Or is the context of the passage the proper dispensing of inheritance to the firstborn son, perhaps a son born to an unloved wife (v. 17)?

Kaiser indicates that in v. 15 “The Hebrew verb is not so easily translated.”<sup>31</sup> The clause in question opens v. 15, *ki-tih’yeyna l’ish she’tey nashim* (כִּי־תִהְיֶינָה לְאִישׁ שְׁתֵּי נָשִׁים), “If a man have two wives” (JBK). The verb *tih’yeyna* appears in the Qal imperfect tense, which is normally

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 187.

translated as a future tense verb in English,<sup>32</sup> i.e., “If a man will have two wives...” Kaiser goes on to say, “Hebrew is notoriously disinterested in our Western preoccupation with the tense of the verb and time in general.”<sup>33</sup> This means that when one translates the Hebrew Tanach into English, context must always be considered, and value judgments have to be made. So, is Moses issuing a ruling based on whether a man has two wives at the same time, or has had two wives in a sequence, with one dying and being replaced by another?

*Ki-tih’yeyna l’ish* was translated into languages with more specific verb tenses long before English came on the scene. The Greek Septuagint renders v. 15 with the clause *ean de genōntai* (ἐάν δὲ γένωνται), meaning “If there have been...” This is similarly followed by the Latin Vulgate’s rendering *si habuerit homo* or “If a man have had...”<sup>34</sup> These ancient versions reflect a second view that it is not a man who *presently* has two wives as being the issue, but rather a man who has had two wives throughout the course of his life.

The concern of Deuteronomy 21:15-17 is that proper inheritance is offered to the firstborn son. If the man has had two wives, with one wife dying and him marrying a second time, he cannot disregard children born from his first marriage. He must still consider the firstborn son from his first marriage to be *the* firstborn son, one who is to be granted a greater share of inheritance. **Deuteronomy 21:15-17 cannot be viewed as endorsing any kind of polygamy** as that is not the central focus of the text; inheritance is the focus of the text.

## 2 Samuel 12:7-8

“Nathan then said to David, ‘You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul. I also gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if *that had been* too little, I would have added to you many more things like these!’”

In 2 Samuel 12:7-8, we see a declaration by the Prophet Nathan to King David. The Lord tells King David how He has “anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul” (NIV). He also says, “I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into

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<sup>32</sup> C.L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*, revised edition (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), pp 205-213.

<sup>33</sup> Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 187.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

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your arms” (NIV) or “possession of your master's wives” (NJPS). Here, some would stop and say that God Himself did not allow, but instead gave, King David the previous King Saul’s multiple wives. So, God must endorse polygamy as a valid practice, at least here for Israel’s monarch.

King Saul only had two wives: Ahinoam (1 Samuel 14:50) and the concubine Rizpah (2 Samuel 3:7). If a Divinely allowed polygamy is considered here, then it is not insignificant for us to note that this Ahinoam was David’s mother-in-law (cf. 1 Samuel 18:20, et. al.). This would have been a form of incest directly condemned by Leviticus 20:14: “If *there is* a man who marries a woman and her mother, it is immorality; both he and they shall be burned with fire, so that there will be no immorality in your midst.” It is notable that Ahinoam is the name of one of King David’s later wives, but there is a difference between “Ahinoam the daughter of Ahimaaz” (1 Samuel 14:50) and “Ahinoam of Jezreel” (1 Samuel 25:43; 27:3; 30:5; 2 Samuel 2:2; 3:2; 1 Chronicles 3:1) and they are *not* the same woman.<sup>35</sup>

The difficult phrase to translate appears in v. 8, *v’et-nashei adonekha b’cheqekha* (וְאֵת־נָשָׁי אֲדֹנָיִךְ בְּחֵיקֶךָ). Here, the imprecision of Hebrew can reflect on interpretation, which has King David practicing incest and hence liable to being burnt alive. Or, “the wives of thy lord, into thy bosom” (YLT) is more akin to “the women of your lord into your care,” as *nashei* can be rendered as either “wives” or “women.” This would mean, as Kaiser describes, “everything that was Saul’s, including all his female domestics and courtesans, passed over into David’s possession.”<sup>36</sup>

When the four passages in the Tanach (Exodus 21:7-11; Leviticus 18:18; Deuteronomy 21:15-17; 2 Samuel 12:7-8), which seem to allow for polygamy, are carefully considered—they by no means allow for this aberrant practice. Each one of them has a specific context that reflects a specific situation in the Ancient Near East, and anyone claiming that polygamy is specifically condoned in the Tanach is not guided by the ideal as established in Genesis.

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<sup>35</sup> Diana V. Edelman, “Ahinoam,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:117-118.

<sup>36</sup> Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 188.

## The Tanach's Testimony on Polygamy: Was it really worth it?

Even though there is no verse in the Scriptures that would somehow give Divine approval for polygamy, no objective reader denies that it appears in the Tanach. "Indeed, the OT is replete with illustrations of polygamous marriages" (*ABD*),<sup>37</sup> including men such as: Abraham (Genesis 16; 25:1-2), Jacob (Genesis 29:15-30), Esau (Genesis 26:34; 36:2; 28:9), Gideon (Judges 8:3), Elkanah (1 Samuel 1:2), David (1 Samuel 18:17-30; 25:38-43; 2 Samuel 3:2-5), Solomon (1 Kings 3:1; 11:3), and Rehoboam (2 Chronicles 11:21). One of the obvious errors of those believing that polygamy can, or should, be practiced today, is in failing to recognize the types of men who had multiple wives. Both liberal and conservative Biblical scholarship recognizes that the examples of polygamy seen in Scripture are limited. The common man simply did not have the financial wherewithal to support multiples wives and families:

- "Looking at these lists of polygamists, one is led to the conclusion that polygyny may have been limited to men who occupied leadership positions who were well off, or who had some other claim to distinction...[T]he books of Samuel and Kings record little about any commoner, or the marriage of any commoner" (*ABD*).<sup>38</sup>
- "Polygyny (the practice of having multiple wives) was largely confined to the ruling and upper classes" (*ISBE*).<sup>39</sup>

Most are in agreement that Genesis 2:24 lays forward the grounds for a proper Biblical marriage, but that does not always mean that the ideal was necessarily followed. In fact, some have attributed polygamy as being one of the reasons that God was required to send the Flood to destroy ancient humanity (Genesis 6:1-7), save Noah—who was monogamous—and his family. Yet we see it revived again in the lives of the Patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, and observed by many of the monarchs of Israel, both of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. So what happened? Perhaps things were a bit different for those before the formal giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai—after all, Abraham and Jacob could easily have been following Mesopotamian traditions inherited from their homeland in Ur. But after Mount Sinai and the

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<sup>37</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, "Marriage (OT and ANE)," in *ABD*, 4:565.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> R.K. Bower and G.L. Knapp, "Marriage," in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 3:262.

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codification of the Torah, surely the understanding that polygamy was not something intended by God was understood?

Many find support for polygamy on the basis of the harsh conditions of the Ancient Near East. "Women's life expectancy was much shorter than that for men, and pregnancy was among the leading causes of death for Israelite women. In this situation, polygyny became a way to maintain the supply of women in the household as well as to increase its fertility" (*EDB*).<sup>40</sup> Such a position obviously feeds some kind of male dominance. "Wherever the emphasis of marriage is placed on procreation or the sexual satisfaction of the man, more than likely polygyny will flourish" (*ABD*).<sup>41</sup> Yet, how frequent was this observed in Ancient Israel given the economic realities for most households? This is where the Scriptures are clear that most polygamists were wealthy men, as opposed to the common man. And today in the Twenty-First Century West, the stark economic reality is that rather than having more children, *having less children* is more financially feasible for monogamous married couples.<sup>42</sup>

The testimony of Israel's monarchy leads many to conclude that the practice of polygamy by many of its kings makes it acceptable. As Kaiser observes, "Some will wonder: Why was no punishment inflicted on these polygamists by the government?"<sup>43</sup> The answer is blatantly obvious to anyone who reads through 1&2 Kings or 1&2 Chronicles: the significant majority of Israel's kings were absolute monarchs who could seldom be reprimanded for any issue. Kaiser continues, "there was censure for this type of adulterous action in the Decalogue and in the law of Moses. In addition to this, the narratives of Scripture imply that this state of affairs is the major reason for much of the misfortune that comes into the domestic lives of these polygamists."<sup>44</sup> It is rightly summarized: "polygyny created problems for Hebrew married life" (*ISBE*),<sup>45</sup> notably including:

- Abraham's and Hagar's unhappiness (Genesis 21:8-16)
- Rachel's bitterness (Genesis 30:15)
- The death of Gideon's offspring (Judges 9)
- Hannah's anger (1 Samuel 1:6ff)

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<sup>40</sup> Berquist, "Marriage," in *EDB*, 862.

<sup>41</sup> Hamilton, "Marriage (OT and ANE)," in *ABD*, 4:565.

<sup>42</sup> Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, "Birth Control."

<sup>43</sup> Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 183.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 183-184.

<sup>45</sup> Bower and Knapp, "Marriage," in *ISBE*, 3:263.



- David's complicity with the death of Bathsheba's husband (2 Samuel 11)
- Solomon's idolatry (1 Kings 11:1-8)<sup>46</sup>

Any Messianic men today who somehow think that HaShem is restoring polygamy to the Body of Messiah have an immense problem when they encounter Deuteronomy 17:17 in the Torah, where it is said of Israel's future kings, **"He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself."** We see specific warnings here that a monarch shall not "acquire many wives for himself" (CJB) nor seek after great wealth. The *ArtScroll Chumash* commentary on this verse is quite valuable:

"Self-aggrandizement was typical of monarchs...Not so [an Israelite] king...because his glory was the glory of the nation, he was required to maintain the dignity of his office, but he had to curb his appetites and make himself an example of moderation and obedience to the Torah."<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, this is followed by the instruction, "Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests" (Deuteronomy 17:18). One might say that *ha'torah ha'zot* (הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת) could apply to the singular decree for the king not to multiply wives. Yet it is clear that even though Moses issued a direct command against polygamy for Israel's future monarchs, they did it anyway. Why did they do this? Was it because Deuteronomy became a forgotten book of the Torah, only to be rediscovered during the time of the Josianic reforms (2 Kings 22:3-13; 2 Chronicles 34:9-21)? T.D. Alexander explains,

"It is hardly surprising...that knowledge of the 'book of the law' should have been neglected, if not deliberately suppressed, by the Judean and Israelite monarchies. As the book of Kings reveals, the contents of Deuteronomy offer a serious indictment of the practices of many kings. To take but one example, Solomon's desire for wealth (1 Kings 9:10-10:29), horses from Egypt (1 Kings 10:28-29) and many wives (1 Kings 11:1-8) stands in marked contrast to the advice given in Deuteronomy 17:16-17. Given the overall spiral of spiritual and moral decline that followed on from the reign of Solomon and eventually led to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Babylonians, it is

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Nossou Scherman, ed., *ArtScroll Chumash, Stone Edition* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2000), 1029.

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hardly surprising that specific references to the 'book of the law' are few and brief."<sup>48</sup>

The Book of Deuteronomy gives a most serious indictment against the kings of Israel being polygamous and multiplying wives for themselves, something that hit its lowest point in the life of King Solomon. In spite of his wisdom, the post-exilic testimony of Nehemiah 13:26 is that "the foreign women caused even him to sin." Solomon's polygamy, and the state-sponsored idolatry that came with it (1 Kings 11:4-7), was a *direct cause* of the division of Israel into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms (1 Kings 11:31).

The only way one can get around Moses' decree against polygamy in Deuteronomy 17:17 is by resorting to a source critical view of the Pentateuch. Rather than being a product of Mosaic origin, the Torah is only the compilation of the J, E, D, and P sources after the Babylonian exile. Rather than being re-discovered during the time of King Josiah, the critical view holds that the Book of Deuteronomy was a "pious fraud" written by an anonymous "Deuteronomist." It was "discovered" (actually, found for the first time) during the refurbishment of the Temple, and Deuteronomy's view against polygamy would thus only be an observation looking back on how the practice brought devastation and gross instability to the people of Israel<sup>49</sup>—rather than Moshe Rabbaenu's (Eng. *Moses our Teacher*) future warning. I do not know about you, but I just do not see the Messianic movement shifting itself from adhering to Mosaic authorship of the Torah to the hypothetical sources of JEDP!

When we honestly consider the problems caused by polygamy, and how it does little more than serve the so-called sexual needs of the man, it is clear that HaShem is not in the process of restoring a practice to His people that He never intended! *Polygamy was a major cause of Ancient Israel's division and exile.* Yet, we do need to consider some of the examples of polygamy as seen in the Tanach, especially as they may be offered as "proof" that the Lord somehow approves of it.

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<sup>48</sup> T.D. Alexander, "Authorship of the Pentateuch," in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), pp 68-69.

<sup>49</sup> Consult the author's entry for the Book of Deuteronomy in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

## Examples of Polygamy to be Considered: Good or Bad?

The following are some specific individuals from the Tanach who are often provided as examples of why polygamy should be an acceptable practice for Messianic men today. Is it? Given what we have just mentioned about whether or not it was “worth it” for the ancients, it is necessary that we survey a number of the men who had, or are claimed to have had, multiple wives. Take important note of the fact that advocates of polygamy have to provide examples of *evil men* to support their view that it is acceptable.

**Lamech** is the first person we see in the Bible who was polygamous. “Lamech took to himself two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other, Zillah” (Genesis 4:19). Lamech is a poor figure, however, to appeal to for the value of polygamy. He is one who is a boastful speaker and vengeful, who says “For I have killed a man for wounding me; and a boy for striking me; if Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold” (Genesis 4:23b-24). He compares himself as being greater than Cain, the first murderer (Genesis 4:8). Lamech’s descendant, Tubal-cain, was responsible for forging instruments of bronze and iron (Genesis 4:22), arguably some of the first weapons of war. Lamech is a figure associated with violence whom we should not be emulating, having set his lot with Cain.

It also behooves us to take a look at one of the Rabbinic views of who Lamech was to his two wives: “[he] would take two wives, one to bear children and the other for pleasure. The latter was meant not to have children and would be pampered like a bride, while the former would be bereft of companionship, and left mourning like a widow throughout her life” (*ArtScroll Chumash*).<sup>50</sup> This is exactly the kind of situation that polygamous marriages often end up demonstrating: a husband will have to pick which wife he favors and which wife he does not favor. Should we be following after a man who likened himself as greater than Cain?<sup>51</sup>

**Abraham**, because of being credited as the father of faith (Romans 4:16), is widely considered by polygamists today to be the example of

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<sup>50</sup> Scherman, 23.

<sup>51</sup> Some say that Lamech must be considered a righteous figure as he was the “father” of Noah, but this is a misreading of Scripture. The first Lamech is a descendant of Methushael (Genesis 4:18), but the second Lamech is a descendant of Methuselah (Genesis 5:26). It is notable that many examiners are in agreement that the Lamech of Genesis 4:19-24 is *not* the same as Genesis 5:28-31.

Cf. W. Baur and R.K. Harrison, “Lamech,” in *ISBE*, 3:63-64.

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the appropriate polygamist to emulate. Abram was the husband of Sarai, originating from Ur in Mesopotamia (Genesis 11:29). Was he a polygamist? This is a hasty conclusion drawn by people who while rightly noting Abraham's trust in God's promises (Genesis 15:6), fail to note Abraham's mistakes as a human being. His wife Sarah was barren and could not have a child (Genesis 16:1-2), and so she gave Abraham her handmaiden Hagar: "Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife" (Genesis 16:3). It is debated whether the clause *lo l'ishah* (לו לְאִשָּׁה) represents "for him, for a wife/woman," or "as [a] concubine" (NJPS). But what is not debated is that in giving Hagar to Abraham, Sarah is employing pagan practices from Mesopotamia. Sarna details,

"The custom of an infertile wife providing her husband with a concubine in order to bear children is well documented in the ancient Near East. The laws of Lipit-Ishtar (early 19th cent. B.C.E.) deal with the case of a harlot who produces children for the husband of a barren wife; these become the heirs. An Old Assyrian marriage contract (19th cent. B.C.E.) stipulates that if the wife does not provide him with offspring within two years she must purchase a slave woman for the purpose."<sup>52</sup>

The results of what transpire immediately after Hagar conceives speak for themselves. "[W]hen she [Sarah] saw that she [Hagar] had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight" (Genesis 16:4b). Sarah was not happy at what had happened, actually telling Abraham, "May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight" (Genesis 16:5a). Sarah is completely distraught at the conception of the yet-to-be-born Ishmael, and so God Himself must send an angel to reassure her that *her own* descendants will be quite numerous (Genesis 16:10). Serious problems were caused by Abraham and Sarah thinking that they could "help God," rather than waiting on Him and conceiving naturally as was done in the case of Isaac (Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7; cf. Hebrews 11:11-12).

The Apostle Paul uses the comparison of Hagar's child and Sarah's child in his letter to the Galatians, saying "the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise" (Galatians 4:23). The Galatians were to be children of the free woman, the Heavenly Jerusalem (Galatians 4:25), as God's process of salvation history had progressed forward to the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; cf. Hebrews 8:8-12) as the previous covenant had

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<sup>52</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 119.

devolved (not because it was “bad” nor on its own) into a system of improper proselytic circumcision—often prioritized before faith in God—for covenant inclusion (Galatians 5:2-3).<sup>53</sup> In Paul’s mind Abraham’s sexual bond with Hagar and the resultant Ishmael was *kata sarka* (κατὰ σάρκα) or “according to flesh,” compared to Abraham’s wife Sarah and their son Isaac who was *di’ epangelias* (δι’ ἐπαγγελίας) or “through promise.” The Galatians were in danger of embracing a similar mistake.<sup>54</sup>

Trying to do anything without steadfast trust in God will bring problems, and both Hagar and Ishmael ultimately have to be sent away (Genesis 21:10-21). This shows that Abraham’s bond with Hagar was not as her husband, but instead *ishah* is rightfully extrapolated as a “woman” akin to “concubine.” Abraham maintained a monogamous relationship with Sarah until her death (Genesis 23), and is said to have later taken a wife named Keturah with whom he had six sons (Genesis 25:1-2). Genesis 25:6 makes a reference “to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east,” speaking of *b’nei ha’pilagshim* (בְּנֵי הַפִּלְגְּשִׁים) or “sons by concubines” (NJPS). Some assume that these are additional women, but Jewish interpreters view these as the sons born of Keturah and/or Hagar,<sup>55</sup> and their descendants (cf. Genesis 25:3-4).

We cannot forget that when dealing with the early chapters of Genesis, especially the Patriarchal narratives, that Abraham was the first Hebrew (Genesis 14:13) to cross over into the new destiny that God had set for him. He was leaving behind a different way of life in Mesopotamia, and entering into a new way that God would show him. Yet as can be easily seen by Sarah giving Hagar to her husband, there were still some of the old ways that they practiced—that they reaped the consequences for following. Abraham may have joined with Hagar, **but it was by no means a good thing** that Messianics should follow today! (This is only intensified by us realizing that Ishmael’s descendants largely became the Arab Muslims who largely want Israel and the West destroyed today.)

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<sup>53</sup> Note that in Galatians 5:3, Paul speaks to *panti anthrōpō* (παντὶ ἀνθρώπῳ) or “all humans,” employing the generic *anthrōpos* (ἄνθρωπος) as opposed to the more specific *anēr* (ἄνθρω) or “male.” This is an excellent clue that more than just males were affected by this “circumcision.” It speaks more of a religious rite than a medical procedure.

<sup>54</sup> Consult the author’s article “The Message of Galatians,” and his commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, for a further analysis.

<sup>55</sup> Scherman, 121; J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino, 1960), 88; Sarna, *Genesis*, 173.

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*Isaac* is notably absent from the list of those who would be considered polygamous, or having flirted with any kind of concubine (Genesis 24), but his son *Jacob* was not immune from this. At the insistence of his mother Rebekah, Jacob flees the wrath of his brother Esau by going to Haran, to his uncle Laban (Genesis 27:41-45). He is specifically instructed from his mother and father not to take a wife from among the locals, but instead to return to the ancestral home country to find a wife (Genesis 27:46-28:2). As he makes his way to Laban, he is smitten by Laban's daughter Rachel, agreeing to work seven years so he may be her husband (Genesis 29:11, 18). Rachel was the younger of Laban's two daughters (Genesis 29:16-17).

When the seven years have expired and the time comes for the wedding, "Laban gathered all the men of the place and made a feast" (Genesis 29:22). In the midst of what was sure to be some heavy drinking, "in the evening he took his daughter Leah, and brought her to him; and *Jacob* went in to her" (Genesis 29:23). Jacob is stunned the following morning that it was Leah, and not Rachel, with whom he had sexual relations, and he confronts Laban: "What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?" (Genesis 29:25). Laban broke the agreement for Jacob serving to marry the younger Rachel. Laban's response cannot be under-emphasized if we are to understand Jacob's polygamy properly:

"It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the firstborn" (Genesis 29:26).

While it is clear that Laban deceived Jacob in sending the undesirable Leah to him, Laban says *lo-yei'aseh kein b'meqomeinu* (לֹא-יֵעָשֶׂה כֵּן בְּמִקְוֵמֵינוּ): "It is not done so in our place" (YLT). Laban broke the agreement he made with Jacob by subjecting him to local Mesopotamian customs. *IVPBBC* indicates, "It is the practice of people of the ancient Near East...for the oldest daughter to be married first."<sup>56</sup> And so what does Jacob do? He contracts with Laban for another seven years so he can marry Rachel (Genesis 29:27-30). The scene that is depicted is, "the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren" (Genesis 29:31). Leah's having children should have caused Jacob to love her (cf. Genesis 29:32), versus the wife he wanted in Rachel. And not only does Jacob gain children from Leah (Genesis 29:32-35; 30:16-21), but also from her handmaiden Zilpah (Genesis 30:9-13) and Rachel's handmaiden Bilhah (Genesis 30:1-8). Leah and Rachel giving Jacob their respective handmaids was no different

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<sup>56</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, 62.

than Sarah giving Hagar to Abraham, as the family is still observing some pagan Mesopotamian customs.

The scene of Jacob's family depicts that Rachel and Leah argue with one another. Rachel asks Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But she said to her, 'Is it a small matter for you to take my husband? And would you take my son's mandrakes also?' So Rachel said, 'Therefore he may lie with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes'" (Genesis 30:14-15). Here, we can see the rivalry between the two wives of Jacob not only among two sub-families—but over "mandrakes" (Heb. *dudaim*, דודאים)<sup>57</sup> which made up an ancient aphrodisiac! Rachel is remembered by God and He allows her to conceive (Genesis 30:22-24), although she later dies after giving birth to Benjamin (Genesis 35:16-18).

It is commonly argued by Messianic polygamists that since it is quite obvious that the Twelve Tribes of Israel were descended from children of a plural marriage relationship that Jacob had with two wives, in addition to two concubines, that it should be acceptable for today. But was Jacob's family the ideal for any of us to emulate? Consider the fact that Joseph, the first son of Rachel, became Jacob's favorite (Genesis 37:3). And also consider the intense jealousy that Joseph's brothers bore toward him by selling him into slavery (Genesis 37:18-35). Is the ideal "Israelite family" one where the siblings, born from different mothers, plot against one another? Keep in mind that the reason the Lord chose Israel was because "you were the fewest of all peoples" (Deuteronomy 7:7). Is this because they were just a small people, or because their character traits epitomized a fallen humanity that needed to be redeemed? The Patriarch Jacob may have been the progenitor of the Twelve Tribes, but he was still a human being who made mistakes.

Jacob's brother *Esau* was also a polygamist, but by no means should he be considered the ideal person to emulate. "When Esau was forty years old he married Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite" (Genesis 26:34). This is followed by the summarizing remark, "and they brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah" (Genesis 26:35). Esau was a largely independent man, against the wishes of his parents, being one who "made life bitter" (RSV) for them. Because Esau married some of the local women, Rebekah tells Isaac, "if Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of Heth, like these, from the daughters of the land, what good will my life be to

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<sup>57</sup> Walter E. Brown, "Mandrakes," in *EDB*, 853.

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me?" (Genesis 27:46). And later we see that Esau took more wives into his harem: "Adah the daughter of Elon the Hittite, and Oholibamah the daughter of Anah and the granddaughter of Zibeon the Hivite; also Basemath, Ishmael's daughter, the sister of Nebaioth" (Genesis 36:2-3). The polygamy of Esau was not something that made his parents very happy.

The figure of *Judah*, who would sire the most prominent of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, is sometimes offered as an example of a polygamist, when this is really not the case, although his situation does need to be evaluated. Judah took a Canaanite woman named Shua as his wife, with whom he had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah (Genesis 38:1-5). Er's wife was Tamar, although he died young (Genesis 38:7). Not performing the ritual of the levirate marriage he had agreed to, Onan also died (Genesis 38:8-10).<sup>58</sup> Tamar agrees to continue to live in the house of Judah, so she can be married to the youngest son Shelah when he is mature (Genesis 38:11). Judah's own wife Shua dies, somehow concurrent with the season of sheep-shearing (Genesis 38:12-13).

It was at this time when Tamar notices that even though Shelah has grown up, he has not yet been given to her, so she takes off her widow's garments (Genesis 38:14). Judah encounters her, and "he thought she *was* a harlot, for she had covered her face" (Genesis 38:15). And so what does Judah do? He contracts to spend the night with Tamar—thinking she was a prostitute—giving her his seal and staff. Sleeping with his daughter-in-law that night, Tamar is impregnated (Genesis 38:17-18). Later he is unable to find this prostitute, because Tamar changes back into her widow's garments (Genesis 38:19). Judah inquires of his friends as to where the *qadesh* (שִׁדְדָּה) or "temple prostitute" (Genesis 38:21-22) had gone.

Three months later Judah is informed that his daughter-in-law Tamar "has played the harlot, and behold, she is also with child by harlotry." Judah's response to this is straightforward: "Bring her out and let her be burned!" (Genesis 38:24). And so what does Tamar do? "I am with child by the man to whom these things belong...Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?" (Genesis 38:25). We see that Judah recognizes these as his own, and he can do nothing more than say "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah" (Genesis 38:26). Judah never had

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<sup>58</sup> Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, "Levirate Marriage."



relations with Tamar again, and she gives birth to the twins Perez and Zerah (Genesis 38:27-30).

Judah is not a figure who was in a polygamous marriage relationship, but he was hypocritical in consorting with a prostitute later discovered to be his own daughter-in-law. Judah made a very foolish mistake in wanting his sexual appetites appeased for one night, unknowingly giving Tamar his seal and staff. In the end, though, when he was confronted with his sin he recognized that he had done wrong. The example of Judah is present in Scripture so none of us *ever has to repeat* such a mistake.

The life of *Moses* is very interesting for us to consider, especially when we weigh in the fact that Moses spent a considerable time of his early life as a prince of Egypt. Many Messianics consider Moses to be a figure worthy of emulation, and advocates of polygamy often claim that Moses had multiple wives. The testimony of Exodus 2:21 is that the Midianite Jethro “gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses.” All are agreed that Moses had at least one wife.

Moses’ life in Egypt prior to him finding out that he was a Hebrew (cf. Exodus 2:13-15) is a period that is left quite vague in the Scriptures. The author of Hebrews gives us a few clues as to what Moses’ Egyptian life might have been like, looking back on it and asserting, “He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward” (Hebrews 11:25-26, NIV). Egypt here is associated with “the fleeting pleasures of sin” (RSV). There is every reason for us to believe that Moses did have a “pre-Israelite” life of sin as an Egyptian—his experiences prior to meeting the Lord at the burning bush. One of the experiences could very well have been having a wife prior to Zipporah. The Jewish historian Josephus records how Moses, as an Egyptian warrior, was wed to an Ethiopian princess named Tharbis:

“Tharbis was the daughter of the king of the Ethiopians; she happened to see Moses as he led the army near the walls, and fought with great courage; and admiring the subtilty of his undertakings, and believing him to be the author of the Egyptians' success, when they had before despaired of recovering their liberty, and to be the occasion of the great danger the Ethiopians were in, when they had before boasted of their great achievements, she fell deeply in love with him; and upon the prevalence of that passion, sent to him the most faithful of all her servants to discourse with him about their marriage. He thereupon

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accepted the offer, on condition she would procure the delivering up of the city; and gave her the assurance of an oath to take her to his wife; and that when he had once taken possession of the city, he would not break his oath to her. No sooner was the agreement made, but it took effect immediately; and when Moses had cut off the Ethiopians, he gave thanks to God, and consummated his marriage, and led the Egyptians back to their own land" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 2.252-253).<sup>59</sup>

There is no difficulty in recognizing that Moses could have had a wife prior to Zipporah; the difficulty is in recognizing what Moses' flight from Egypt did to that marriage. After killing the Egyptian, "When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he tried to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the presence of Pharaoh and settled in the land of Midian..." (Exodus 2:15). We can safely assume that when Moses had fled Egypt that all of his property in Egypt was confiscated, and his position in the royal court—including any marriages he had—were also nullified. Moses, the Egyptian who discovered he was a Hebrew, quickly became *persona non grata* after having left. Moses as a wealthy and ambitious Egyptian prince or noble could have easily gotten away with killing as many Egyptian taskmasters as he wanted, but the fact that he was a Hebrew changed everything for him and the previous relationship to whatever previous wife he had before Zipporah.

Moving forward to the wilderness trek of Ancient Israel, some find evidence for Moses being a polygamist in the words of Numbers 12:1: "Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had married a Cushite woman)." Some consider this *ha'ishah ha'Kushit* (הַאִשָּׁה הַכּוּשִׁית) to be another woman independent of Zipporah, but since no proper name is mentioned we have to consider some possible background issues. Jewish and Christian commentators are largely agreed that this Cushite woman is, in fact, Zipporah, and Miriam and Aaron are criticizing their brother for marrying a foreigner as leader of Israel. J.H. Hertz notes that this is "Probably Zipporah, a native of Midian, which is a synonym of Cushan."<sup>60</sup> J.A. Thompson concurs, "the reference may even be to Zipporah, who was, of course, a Midianitess...for Midian and Cushan are linked."<sup>61</sup> The linking together of Midian and Cushan is seen in Habakkuk 3:7:

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<sup>59</sup> Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 70.

<sup>60</sup> Hertz, *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, 618.

<sup>61</sup> J.A. Thompson, "Numbers," in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 182.

"I saw the tents of Cushan under distress, the tent curtains of the land of Midian were trembling."

J.K. Hoffmeier indicates, "'Cushan' and 'Midian' occur in parallelism, which suggests that the terms could be synonyms. Since the peoples of Nubia and Ethiopia were black-skinned, possibly the term was applied to other darker-skinned nomadic peoples like the Midianites. Therefore the 'Cushite' woman...could well have been the Midianite Zipporah" (*ISBE*).<sup>62</sup> Hertz does not hide the fact that others have taken "the Cushite woman" to be another wife of Moses, but the problem with this view, as he states, is "Further details are not given, which fact led legend to step in and fill the gap..."<sup>63</sup> So, any claims that Moses had multiple wives at the same time can be seriously challenged, and there is no conclusive evidence that Moses was polygamous.

The judge *Gideon* is sometimes offered by advocates of polygamy as being someone worthy of emulation, especially as he is considered to be an example of faith due some kind of attention (Hebrews 11:32). Judges 8:30 summarizes, "Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives" or *nashim rabot* (נָשִׁים רַבּוֹת). Gideon also had a concubine (Judges 8:31). So again, what is the problem? Perhaps we need to consider the major theme of the Book of Judges, here: "[E]very man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6; 21:25). This is something that influences almost everything one reads in Judges, and should not be underemphasized.<sup>64</sup>

Gideon's life was a very interesting one, as he often tested the Lord to make sure that He really was present. Prior to an engagement with the Midianites and other eastern peoples in the Valley of Jezreel, Gideon placed a wool fleece on a threshing floor, requesting "confirmation" of the Lord by it being wet (Judges 6:36-38). The next day after the Lord had allowed the fleece to be wet, Gideon asked that the Lord make the fleece be dry (Judges 6:39-40). It is debated among interpreters whether Gideon tested God or not, demonstrating a lack of faith. It is clear that Gideon had doubts, and the incident of the fleece has since passed into the vernacular as a person requiring a specific "sign" of God before making a decision on something.

Gideon was successful in the military battle (Judges 7), saving the struggling and fledgling nation of Israel from cultural extermination. At the same time, though, it is also likely that after the Midianites were

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<sup>62</sup> J.K. Hoffmeier, "Zipporah," in *ISBE*, 4:1201.

<sup>63</sup> Hertz, *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, 618.

<sup>64</sup> Consult the author's entry for the Book of Judges in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

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defeated and then pursued by Gideon, that he had a personal vendetta to finish. He tells the fleeing Midianite leaders, "What kind of men *were* they whom you killed at Tabor?...They *were* my brothers, the sons of my mother..." (Judges 8:18-19). P.E. Satterthwaite remarks, "Gideon's sole concern has not been God's glory or Israel's deliverance; he also has been avenging a private grievance. There is no reference to God's involvement in any of these events."<sup>65</sup> Subsequently, this includes Gideon's later erection of an ephod emphasizing his own authority (Judges 8:24-28), not that much different than the golden calf (Exodus 32:2-4). When Gideon dies, Israel returns to its syncretistic form of Baal worship (Judges 8:33). There is no reason for us to doubt that Gideon's polygamy was connected with the spiraling down of Israel's religious environment. In fact, in later life Gideon was known by the name of Jerubbaal (Judges 8:35).

The result of Gideon having many sons *from many wives* is evident in Judges 9. Gideon's successor, Abimelech, goes to his mother's family in Shechem, saying "Which is better for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you?" (Judges 9:2). Abimelech, the ambitious leader that he is, **sees to it that his own siblings are eliminated.** "[H]e went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone" (Judges 9:5). It should be no surprise that Satterthwaite can conclude,

"Gideon's legacy is negative: he has encouraged an idolatrous cult, and he has acted like a king in all but name. His son Abimelech follows these paths to their logical conclusion: he is an idolater whose rise to power is supported by the shrine of Baal-Berith (Judg 9:4), and his life reflects all the worst aspects of monarchy—murderous family intrigues and the destructive and vindictive abuse of power (Judg 9:5, 34-52)."<sup>66</sup>

So should Gideon's polygamy be something that is followed by Messianics today? Only if we want one son arising who kills the other sons once the father is dead.

*Elkanah*, the father of the Prophet Samuel, is attested as having two wives: "He had two wives: the name of one was Hannah and the name of the other Peninnah; and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children" (1 Samuel 1:2). To some degree or another, he was faithful to the Lord, going up to sacrifice to Him at Shiloh (1 Samuel 1:3), giving

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<sup>65</sup> P.E. Satterthwaite, "Judges," in Bill T. Arnold and H.G.M. Williamson, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 586.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 587.

portions to Penninah and her children (1 Samuel 1:4). But to Hannah “he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah” (1 Samuel 1:5). And what did this do to their household? “Her rival, however, would provoke her bitterly to irritate her” (1 Samuel 1:6a), as Penninah was actually referred to as the *tzarah* (צָרָה)<sup>67</sup> of Hannah, rendered by the KJV as “her adversary.” This is once again a good indication that Elkanah’s household was not a place of great peace and tranquility. Hannah urgently desired a son to please her husband (1 Samuel 1:9-11), and likely also to stop the taunting of Penninah toward her barrenness. Hannah only received Samuel when she pledged him to the Lord’s service (1 Samuel 1:19-22). Even while Elkanah is not depicted as an evil man, polygamy forced him to favor one wife over another, and his two wives were not friendly toward one another.

The first monarch of Israel, *King Saul*, was a polygamist to some degree. His wife was Ahinoam, daughter of Ahimaaz, who bore him five children: Jonathan, Ishvi, Malchi-shua, Merab, and Michal (1 Samuel 14:49-50). King Saul also had a concubine, Rizpah, who bore him the sons Armoni and (another) Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 21:8). While King Saul was never censored for having this concubine, his administration was not known for his great wisdom and he is testified as having disobeyed the Lord. Saul had the responsibility given to him to transfer Israel from being a loose confederation of tribes to an organized state with a central military (cf. 1 Samuel 14:52), a real power in the region. Saul’s reign as king did see a number of military victories (1 Samuel 11:1-11; 13:23-14:23), but he was also rebuked by the Prophet Samuel for not obeying the Lord in the matter of attacking Gilgal (1 Samuel 13:1-15; 15). Samuel specifically told Saul, “your kingdom shall not endure. The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you” (1 Samuel 13:14). We now know this person to be David, with whom Saul frequently fought (1 Samuel 18-24; 26-27).

Whether or not King Saul is a proper man to emulate could ultimately be determined by the circumstances surrounding his death. We see from very early on that “an evil spirit from the LORD terrorized him” (1 Samuel 16:14), meaning that he was open to demonic forces. Before his last engagement, it is recorded that “Saul had removed from the land those who were mediums and spiritists” (1 Samuel 28:3; cf.

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<sup>67</sup> While *tzarah* can mean “vexer, rival-wife” (BDB, 865), it is also a common noun used for “straits, distress” (Ibid.) or “tribulation.”

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Leviticus 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:11). Yet in spite of this, what does Saul do? When he sees the Philistine army, he seeks out a medium so that he may call up Samuel from Sheol (1 Samuel 28:11). The king of Israel who had routed out all of the necromancers, actually swore by the Lord to the witch of Endor, “As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing” (1 Samuel 28:10). When the disembodied Samuel appears, Samuel tells Saul that he and his sons will be joining him in Sheol the following day, and the Philistines will achieve victory (1 Samuel 28:13-19).<sup>68</sup>

The common argument would be that King Saul as the monarch of Israel had important sexual “needs” that had to be fulfilled—and that is why he had a concubine. But King Saul would be a poor man to emulate in any capacity as some kind of “spiritual giant.” King Saul made foolish decisions as Israel’s monarch that led to his dynasty stopping with himself.

*King David* is a much more complicated story than his predecessor. David is touted in Scripture as being a man after God’s own heart (1 Samuel 13:14), yet the Biblical record is clear that he practiced polygamy. What are we to do about this? Messianic advocates of polygamy being practiced today think that the example of King David closes the deal, and that monogamy is not necessarily always the best. But we need to carefully examine the home life of King David’s family to see if polygamy for him indeed was the best, and if what resulted of his many unions is something that we should want.

David’s first wife was Michal, the daughter of King Saul (1 Samuel 18:27). During the conflict between the House of Saul and the House of David, David acquired six wives: Ahinoam, Abigail, Maacah, Haggith, Abital, and Eglah (2 Samuel 3:2-5). Bathsheba also became David’s wife after the affair that he had with her, and the subsequent death of her husband Uriah (2 Samuel 11). David also had ten concubines within the royal house (2 Samuel 15:16). Obviously, as a monarch who had achieved some military exploits, David had the financial means to support multiple families. But, one would also think that with multiple wives David would not have needed to have had an affair with Bathsheba, something thoroughly rebuked by the Prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 12:1-14), especially for David’s order regarding the death of her husband Uriah (2 Samuel 11:14-24). It is not unfair to say that David had

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<sup>68</sup> The complexities of this scene are addressed in the author’s publication *To Be Absent From the Body*.

a sexual problem, perhaps best seen in his confessions in Psalm 51, composed shortly after being confronted with his sin:

“For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba. Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom. Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness, let the bones which You have broken rejoice. **Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.** Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit. *Then* I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will be converted to You. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; *then* my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise. For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. By Your favor do good to Zion; build the walls of Jerusalem. Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices, in burnt offering and whole burnt offering; then young bulls will be offered on Your altar” (Psalm 51).

Psalm 51 is an excellent testimony to the kinds of problems that polygamy will entail. Here, after his affair with Bathsheba—which *seemingly would not have been necessary if he already had a harem of wives to choose from*—David must entreat the Lord. He cries out to Him, “Don’t thrust me away from your presence, don’t take your *Ruach Kodesh* away from me” (CJB). He was very much afraid that God would stop demonstrating His favor upon him for this sin. We do know that the child conceived by this affair dies (2 Samuel 12:15-23). The sin of having Bathsheba’s husband Uriah being put on the front lines to die is a stain on King David remembered long after his own death (1 Kings 15:5).

Like those who had practiced polygamy before him, David’s household had some extreme problems. Amnon was the crown prince

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of David, and son of his wife Ahinoam (2 Samuel 3:2). He had fallen in love with his half-sister, Tamar, daughter of David's wife Maacah and full-brother of Absalom (2 Samuel 3:3). 2 Samuel 13:1-14 records a scene of seduction and rape, where Amnon acts like he is sick, and Tamar comes into his bedroom with the cakes she has made. He demands that she have intercourse with him, and Tamar exclaims, "No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this disgraceful thing!" (2 Samuel 13:12). Tamar is then raped, and Amnon hates Tamar for not returning his love, sending her away (2 Samuel 13:13-19).

Absalom discovers what has happened, trying to reassure his full-sister (2 Samuel 13:20). King David hears of this, and is obviously not happy (2 Samuel 13:21). A strong hatred erupts between Absalom and Amnon over the rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:22). Two years later, we see that while Absalom and Amnon are alone with the sheepshearers, that Absalom instructs his servants to kill Amnon when he is drunk (2 Samuel 13:23-29). It is reported back to King David, "Absalom has struck down all the king's sons, and not one of them is left" (2 Samuel 13:30), then specified to only be Amnon in retribution for Tamar's rape (2 Samuel 13:33). Absalom flees to Geshur, and King David desires some kind of restitution with his son (2 Samuel 13:34-49). Later, this leads to an insurrection against King David by Absalom, with David and his court actually having to flee Jerusalem. Absalom ultimately does end up dead with the rebellion quelled (2 Samuel 15-18).

When we consider not only the rivalry that ensued from the sub-families of King David, but also the civil war that he fought against his own son Absalom, is polygamy something that really benefited him? Perhaps the testimony of Shimei should not be so easily dismissed: "The LORD has returned upon you all the bloodshed of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. And behold, you are *taken* in your own evil, for you are a man of bloodshed!" (2 Samuel 16:8). Satterthwaite summarizes it well:

"The portrayal of David [is] this: he is zealous for God's honor, talented and brave, and at his best represents the ideal of an Israelite kingship, but he does not always live up to that ideal, and the disappointments of his later years point up some of the problems that later come to haunt the monarchy."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Satterthwaite, "David," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books*, 201.



Appealing to the example of King David for the validity of a polygamous marriage is a poor one. No one wants siblings from various sub-families to be raping other siblings, and then rising up against the family in some kind of revolt, insurrection, or grossly disloyal action.

The foolish polygamy of King David does not even come close, however, to the negative sexual exploits of his son, *King Solomon*. First of all, it could be argued that Solomon was the product of an improper marriage, being the son of Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:24) who David married under spurious circumstances. There is a small crisis that erupts prior to David's death over who was to succeed him, with Adonijah, the son of his wife Haggith, expecting to be king (1 Kings 1:5-11). Bathsheba must entreat David to make sure that Solomon does become king (1 Kings 1:12-21, 28-31), and so King David has his son Solomon paraded around Jerusalem on his own mule, with the command to cry out "*Long live King Solomon!*" (1 Kings 1:34ff). Adonijah, who had already declared himself king, is afraid (1 Kings 1:49), yet his half-brother Solomon shows him mercy (1 Kings 1:50-53). In spite of this, Adonijah requests King David's concubine Abishag as his wife (1 Kings 2:12-22), and the new King Solomon has his half-brother executed for such a rebellious petition (1 Kings 2:23-25). This only reinforces the familial problems caused by polygamy and related sexual indulgences.

King Solomon appears to be a sincere monarch in the early years of his reign, asking the Lord for great wisdom to rule. He says, "give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" (1 Kings 3:9). The Lord grants such a proper request, and honors King Solomon for not asking Him for great wealth (1 Kings 3:10-13). However, the Lord is also clear to tell King Solomon, "If you walk in My ways, keeping My statutes and commandments, as your father David walked, then I will prolong your days" (1 Kings 3:14). He renews the alliance King David had with King Hiram of Tyre, as the Temple in Jerusalem is constructed (1 Kings 5-6, 8-9). But then as King Solomon is granted success by the Lord, his weakness begins to quickly manifest itself: "King Solomon loved many foreign women" (1 Kings 11:1).

The narrator is very clear to state that King Solomon fell for many *nashim nak'riyot* (נָשִׁים נְכַרְיֹת) or "foreign wives" (Keter Crown Bible). These included "foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: [the] Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the sons of Israel, 'You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for

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they will surely turn your heart away after their gods” (1 Kings 11:1-2). This is a direct reference to specific prohibitions issued in the Torah (Exodus 23:31-33; 34:12-16; Deuteronomy 7:3). Appealing to 1 Kings 11:3 as a support for polygamy that can be practiced by Believers today is beyond bad exegesis:

“He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, **and his wives turned his heart away.**”

Here, King Solomon’s polygamy is directly attested to be the cause of his spiritual downfall: “they turned his heart away *from the LORD*” (HCSB). King Solomon “was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father *had been*” (1 Kings 11:4), and he goes after the false gods Ashtoreth and Milcom (1 Kings 11:5), and later Chemosh and Molech (1 Kings 11:7)—with Molech being worshipped with child sacrifice (cf. Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5). “Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not follow the LORD fully, as David his father *had done*” (1 Kings 11:6). It is specifically said of King Solomon, “he did [this] for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods” (1 Kings 11:8). God was not at all approving of these actions:

“Now the LORD was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he did not observe what the LORD had commanded” (1 Kings 11:9-10).

What ensues as a direct result of these heinous sins is the division of Israel into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. The Lord tells King Solomon, “Because you have done this, and you have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant” (1 Kings 11:11). The caveat is that the splitting apart of the kingdom would not take place in King Solomon’s lifetime, because the Lord loved his father King David (1 Kings 11:12). King Solomon’s reign is then bereft with problems (1 Kings 11:14-27), with Jeroboam the son of Nebat promised the ten northern tribes (1 Kings 11:28-40).

Many consider King Solomon to be the wisest person who ever lived, as he was the author of many of the Proverbs, and is the traditional author of the Book of Ecclesiastes (although this can be seriously *and* validly challenged).<sup>70</sup> It is much better, though, to say that

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<sup>70</sup> Consult the author’s entries for the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*, and his article “The Message of Ecclesiastes.”

King Solomon was **the wisest fool who ever lived**. Most of the marriages of King Solomon were likely political arrangements, and were probably not even consummated sexually. But the results of such polygamy and the sexual exploits he did have are plain to the reader of the Biblical text: **they resulted in state-sponsored idolatry that led to the division of Israel**. King Solomon in the end was not the leader he had prayed to be at the beginning. The epitaph that one can offer of King Solomon's reign is not a positive one:

"His real undoing was his lack of moderation. His extravagance in his harem, court luxury, and building schemes laid an impossible burden on his subjects, and moreover served to emphasize the contrast between his happy position and their own increasing poverty. Because of these failings, Solomon brought his empire to the brink of disruption from which Rehoboam, his son and successor, was unable to rescue it" (*ISBE*).<sup>71</sup>

The post-exilic testimony of Israel's division is clear: "the foreign women caused even him to sin" (Nehemiah 13:26). Polygamy was undeniably a direct cause of Ancient Israel's division into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. Anyone believing in a greater restoration of Israel to come, *and the so-called restoration of polygamy*, **will actually do more to deter or stop such a restoration than accelerate it!**<sup>72</sup> If anything, the Messianic community today would be more prudent to offer some kind of repentance on behalf of King Solomon's polygamous sins, endeavoring to never see such things happen again.

**King Rehoboam**, the son of King Solomon, was a polygamist. Two of his wives are named Mahalath and Abihail, apparently having taken eighteen wives and sixty concubines in total (2 Chronicles 11:18-21). The problem with polygamy is seen in the description of King Rehoboam's family: "Rehoboam loved Maacah the daughter of Absalom more than all his *other* wives and concubines" (2 Chronicles 11:21a). Among his harem, he had to choose his favorite, which inevitably happens among men who have multiple wives.

If King Solomon's sin is known for causing the split of the Kingdom of Israel, then King Rehoboam's accession to the throne is known for finalizing it. When Rehoboam goes to Shechem to be made

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Do note that the author is one of the few Messianic teachers at present, who does not hold to Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes, favoring instead a dating of 715-686 B.C.E. during the reign of a later monarch of the Southern Kingdom.

<sup>71</sup> D.F. Payne, "Solomon," in *ISBE*, 4:568.

<sup>72</sup> Consult the relevant sections of the author's book *Israel in Future Prophecy: Is There a Larger Restoration of Israel?*

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king by all Israel, he is entreated by the people, "Your father made our yoke hard; now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke which he put on us, and we will serve you" (1 Kings 12:4). The elders who counseled his father advised him, "If you will be a servant to this people today, and will serve them and grant them their petition, and speak good words to them, then they will be your servants forever" (1 Kings 12:7). King Rehoboam, however, did not listen to these older counselors (1 Kings 12:8-9), but listened to his own contemporaries:

"The young men who grew up with him spoke to him, saying, 'Thus you shall say to this people who spoke to you, saying, "Your father made our yoke heavy, now you make it lighter for us!" But you shall speak to them, "My little finger is thicker than my father's loins! Whereas my father loaded you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions"'" (1 Kings 12:10-11).

King Rehoboam was foolish enough to actually say this to the people gathered, not realizing that it would cause massive social upheaval (1 Kings 12:12-14). The Prophet Ahijah's word to Jeroboam began to come to pass, as the Israelite tribes other than Judah reconsidered their allegiance to the House of David (1 Kings 12:15-17), later seceding. Adoram, an official who oversaw the forced labor, was stoned to death by the people and King Rehoboam had to flee to Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:18). The narrator's remark is quite striking: "So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day" (1 Kings 12:19). Hence began the establishment of the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim as an independent state ruled by Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:20-33).

During the reign of King Rehoboam, resources are wasted by Judah trying to recapture the Israelite tribes that had seceded (1 Kings 12:21-24), seen best in the statement, "There was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam continually" (1 Kings 14:30). While much attention is often given to Jeroboam's rebellion against the Lord, and the establishment of the Northern Kingdom's idolatrous shrines (1 Kings 12:27-13:34), King Rehoboam also oversaw evil activities in the Southern Kingdom:

"Judah did evil in the sight of the LORD, and they provoked Him to jealousy more than all that their fathers had done, with the sins which they committed. For they also built for themselves high places and *sacred* pillars and Asherim on every high hill and beneath every luxuriant tree. There were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They

did according to all the abominations of the nations which the LORD dispossessed before the sons of Israel" (1 Kings 14:22-24).

The Pharaoh of Egypt, Shishak, swept into Jerusalem and took away the treasures of Solomon's Temple and those belonging to King Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:25-26). While the Northern Kingdom might have rebelled against the Lord, the ungodly actions that King Rehoboam of Judah oversaw were not that much better.

Is King Rehoboam someone we want to emulate? He heeded foolish advice that split Israel into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. He did not heed the mistakes made by his father King Solomon. While a polygamist just like him, King Rehoboam no doubt had a smaller harem because he did not have the same influence and treasures as his father. On the contrary, King Rehoboam's treasures were looted from him! Biblical history does not look fondly on King Rehoboam, and he should not be a man any of us try to emulate.

King Rehoboam's son and successor, *King Abijam (Abijah)*, was a polygamist who had fourteen wives (1 Chronicles 13:21). His reign is only briefly recorded, but it was bereft with the problems ensuing from the split of Israel into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. "He walked in all the sins of his father which he had committed before him; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, like the heart of his father David" (1 Kings 15:3). Yet, because of the Lord's love for King David, he allowed King Abijam to live long enough to have a son to succeed him (1 Kings 15:4-5). King Abijam's reign does not appear to be that much better than his father's, as all that is said is, "There was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam all the days of his life" (1 Kings 15:6). King Abijam is not a person to whom we should be looking to follow.

Appearing later in the history of the Southern Kingdom, *King Joash*, the successor to Queen Athaliah, is a unique case to be considered. He arose as monarch of Judah after a period of extreme instability in which Athaliah, the daughter of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel of the Northern Kingdom, controlled the Southern Kingdom of Judah. She sought to eliminate the House of David, but the infant Joash was hidden from her plot (2 Kings 11:1-3; 2 Chronicles 22:10-12). After a staged coup by the priests against Queen Athaliah (2 Kings 11:12-20; 2 Chronicles 22:13-21), Joash was made king at age seven (2 Kings 12:1; 2 Chronicles 24:1). The priest "Jehoiada took two wives for him, and he became the father of sons and daughters" (2 Chronicles 24:3). The reason for King Joash's polygamous marriage, authorized by the religious authorities, should be fairly obvious. Queen Athaliah was

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responsible for eliminating all members of the House of David save Joash. King Joash had to repopulate the royal household with heirs lest the House of David end with him. And indeed, history does show examples where the religious authorities have allowed for polygamy when the population of a country has been utterly devastated by war.

King Joash, however, is still not someone that Messianic Believers today should emulate. It is only said, "Joash did what was right in the sight of the LORD all the days of Jehoiada the priest" (2 Chronicles 24:2) or the "days in which Jehoiada the priest instructed him" (2 Kings 12:2). While Jehoiada the priest was alive, King Joash was loyal to the Lord and oversaw some kind of refurbishment of the Temple (2 Kings 12:4-16; 2 Chronicles 24:2-14). During his reign, though, there were still idolatrous high places in Judah (2 Kings 12:3). When Jehoiada died, King Joash's reign began to decline, notably as he listened to the advice of various officials that encouraged the re-introduction of idolatrous practices into Judah:

"But after the death of Jehoiada the officials of Judah came and bowed down to the king, and the king listened to them. They abandoned the house of the LORD, the God of their fathers, and served the Asherim and the idols; so wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this their guilt. Yet He sent prophets to them to bring them back to the LORD; though they testified against them, they would not listen. Then the Spirit of God came on Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest; and he stood above the people and said to them, 'Thus God has said, "Why do you transgress the commandments of the LORD and do not prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, He has also forsaken you.'" So they conspired against him and at the command of the king they stoned him to death in the court of the house of the LORD. Thus Joash the king did not remember the kindness which his father Jehoiada had shown him, but he murdered his son. And as he died he said, 'May the LORD see and avenge!'" (2 Chronicles 24:17-22).

King Joash forgot how Jehoiada had helped preserve him in early life, and taught him how to be a good king. The Lord raised up the Arameans to attack Judah and Jerusalem, taking away great spoil (2 Chronicles 24:23-24; cf. 2 Kings 12:17-18). King Joash did not die of natural causes, and was instead assassinated because of killing Jehoiada's son Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:25-26; cf. 2 Kings 12:20-21). King Joash was polygamous only because Jehoiada saw the need to repopulate the line of David, but King Joash should not be the example of someone we follow. Once the priest Jehoiada was dead, King Joash heeded ungodly instruction that re-introduced idolatrous ways to

Judah. King Joash was also a murderer, and he paid for his crime with his own life.

The *Prophet Hosea*, our final example, may be provided as one who practiced polygamy—and a God-ordained polygamy at that. Most are agreed that the Prophets were a unique group of people, often called upon by the Lord to do some pretty drastic things to get the attention of sinners. Yet, when we carefully consider the Prophet Hosea, we see that he was neither polygamous nor was he called to marry a known prostitute. The Book of Hosea begins with the words,

“When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, ‘Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the LORD’” (Hosea 1:2).

Did God Himself tell Hosea to not just take an *eshet zenunim* (זְנוּנִים אִשָּׁה), but have *yaledei zenunim* (יְלֵדֵי זְנוּנִים) with her? Hosea is obedient to the Lord’s request, marrying Gomer and having children from her (Hosea 1:3-9). The problem with drawing the assumption that Hosea married a known prostitute is given to us in the latter half of v. 2: “because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD” (NIV). Kaiser explains, “Gomer was not a harlot when Hosea married her just as her unborn children were not ‘children of harlotry’ until after they had been born and received a stigma on their name from their mother’s loose style of life.”<sup>73</sup> It is not until later that Gomer left her husband and committed adulterous acts (Hosea 2:2, 5, 7), likely after her children’s infancy, that she became a known prostitute. Gomer is a woman of harlotry in that she will represent what was happening within the Land of Israel.

Gomer’s unfaithful relationship to her husband was to serve as a model of Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, and how He shows mercy. This is an overarching theme throughout the Book of Hosea,<sup>74</sup> and it would not fit well if Hosea just married a prostitute with whom he had children, unless she were first a faithful wife who later turned to prostitution. Leon J. Wood agrees:

“The parallel is not well maintained by the assumption that Hosea’s wife was a prostitute before he took her. But it is maintained if she became unfaithful after her marriage and if her children, in turn,

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<sup>73</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 198.

<sup>74</sup> Consult the author’s entry for the Book of Hosea in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

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followed her example; for Israel became unfaithful after God chose her, and her descendants then followed in the same pattern of life."<sup>75</sup>

With such a view in mind, Hosea 1:2b designates the result, rather than the purpose, of what the Prophet Hosea will face when marrying Gomer.<sup>76</sup> In a similar way, the Lord was joined to an Israel that would later adulterate itself with other gods.

Some find support for polygamy in the command that follows in Hosea 3:1, where the Lord says, "Go again, love a woman *who* is loved by *her* husband, yet an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the sons of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes." Is this woman another prostitute, independent of the Gomer from ch. 1? **No responsible interpreter** (conservative or liberal) **advocates that the woman mentioned here is anyone other than Hosea's unfaithful wife Gomer**, as Hosea's marriage to Gomer is intended to depict God's relationship with unfaithful Israel.<sup>77</sup> For just as Hosea loves his unfaithful wife and will have her again, so will God have an unfaithful Israel. The Prophet Hosea is not an example of one who entered into a polygamous marriage, but did marry a woman who later became a harlot, depicting the idolatry of Israel toward the Lord.

## Polygamy Largely Died Out in the Jewish Community

Compared to the normal Israelite, there are not that many examples of polygamy to be considered in the Tanach. When they are actually considered, those who practiced polygamy did not particularly benefit from it. By the First Century C.E. the Jewish Synagogue had largely abandoned the practice. Hertz summarizes,

"The Biblical ideal of human marriage is the monogamous one. The Creation story and all the ethical portions of Scripture speak of the union of a man with *one* wife. Whenever a Prophet alludes to marriage, he is thinking of such a union—lifelong, faithful, holy. Polygamy seems to have wellnigh disappeared in Israel after the Babylonian Exile. Early Rabbinic literature presupposes a practically monogamic society; and out of 2,800 Teachers mentioned in the Talmudim, one is only stated to have had two wives. In the fourth century Aramaic paraphrase (Targum) of the Book of Ruth, the kinsman (IV, 6) refuses to 'redeem' Ruth, saying, "I cannot marry her, because I am already

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<sup>75</sup> Leon J. Wood, "Hosea," in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:171.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, pp 197-198.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. J.J. Reeve and R.K. Harrison, "Gomer," in *ISBE*, 2:525; David W. Baker, "Gomer," in *ABD*, 2:1074.



married; I have no right to take an additional wife, lest it lead to strife in my home.' Such paraphrase would be meaningless if it did not reflect the general feeling of the people on this question."<sup>78</sup>

As one gets closer to the ministry of Yeshua and His Apostles, we find that only a few wealthy kings such as Herod the Great (Josephus *Wars of the Jews* 1.562), and those in their immediate sphere of influence (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 17.14; *Wars of the Jews* 1.477) were polygamous. Just like the kings of Ancient Israel, Herod's household too was a place of extreme problems. "Herod's 10 wives and at least 15 children created very difficult family arrangements" (EDB).<sup>79</sup>

C.S. Keener describes how "the vast majority of Jewish men and all Jewish women were monogamous, and some conservative sectarians forbade polygamy, including for rulers."<sup>80</sup> The Dead Sea Scrolls especially ban the practice of polygamy, as the Qumran community did not want outside marriages because of the likelihood of pagan practices brought into the camp, perhaps a reflection on King Solomon:

"The Shoddy-Wall-Builders who went after 'Precept'—Precept is a Raver of whom it says, 'they shall surely rave' (Mic. 2:6)—they are caught in two traps: fornication, by taking two wives in their lifetimes although the principle of creation is 'male and female He created them' (Gen. 1:27) and those who went into the ark 'went into the ark two by two' (Gen. 7:9)" (CD 4.19-5.1).<sup>81</sup>

"Concerning the Leader it is written 'he shall not multiply wives to himself' (Deut. 17:17); but David had not read the sealed book of the Law in the Ark; for it was not opened in Israel from the day of the death of Eleazar and Joshua and the elders who served the goddess Ashtoret. It lay buried <and was not> revealed until the appearance of Zadok. Nevertheless the deeds of David were all excellent, except the murder of Uriah and God forgave him for that" (CD 5.1-6).<sup>82</sup>

"He shall not marry as wife any daughter of the nations, but shall take a wife for himself from his father's house, from his father's family. He shall not take another wife in addition to her, for she alone shall be

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<sup>78</sup> Hertz, *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, 932.

<sup>79</sup> Peter Richardson, "Herod," in EDB, 580.

<sup>80</sup> C.S. Keener, "Marriage," in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 683.

<sup>81</sup> Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 55.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

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with him all the time of her life. But if she dies, he may marry another from his father's house, from his family" (11QTemple 56.18-19).<sup>83</sup>

The great Jewish Sage Hillel significantly frowned upon polygamy, saying, "lots of women, lots of witchcraft; lots of slave girls, lots of lust" (m.*Avot* 2:7).<sup>84</sup> The viewpoint of Hertz on this saying is that "Rival wives resorted to witchcraft in order to retain or regain their husband's affection. Hillel's saying thus condemns polygamy."<sup>85</sup> Elsewhere in the Mishnah, though, we do see discussion regarding the regulation of polygamous relationships (m.*Yevamot* 4:11; m.*Ketuvoth* 10:1, 4, 5; m.*Kiddushin* 2:7; m.*Sanhedrin* 2:4; m.*Bekorot* 8:4). How much of this discussion is hypothetical, versus being realistic, can probably be disputed. The statements appearing in m.*Sanhedrin* 2:4 remark how "He should not multiply wives to himself (Dt. 17:17)—only eighteen. R. Judah says, 'He may have as many as he wants, so long as they do not entice him [to abandon the Lord (Dt. 7:4)].' R. Simeon says, 'Even if there is only one who entices him [to abandon the Lord]—lo, this one should not marry her.'"<sup>86</sup> The overall Rabbinic position on polygamy is most negative.

## Yeshua and His Apostles Weigh in on Polygamy

Yeshua the Messiah's teachings on marriage cannot be excluded from the equation over whether or not polygamy is a valid practice for Believers today. It is absolutely true that our Lord upheld the validity of the Torah (Matthew 5:17-19), yet as we have previously examined the Torah does not condone the practice of polygamy. Yeshua certainly teaches on marriage, particularly issuing some corrections on divorce (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18). In every instance where Yeshua teaches on marriage, the Messiah upholds the principle established in Genesis of a proper marriage existing between one man and one woman:

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<sup>83</sup> Geza Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 213.

<sup>84</sup> Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 676.

<sup>85</sup> Joseph H. Hertz, *Sayings of the Fathers* (New York, Behrman House, 1945), 34.

Concurrent with this, though, there are various negative stereotypes in Ancient Judaism that tended to associate all women with witchcraft, or at least negative speech and influence. This is addressed in the author's commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic*, in the instruction of Ephesians 5:21-33.

<sup>86</sup> Neusner, *Mishnah*, 586.

“But from the beginning of creation, *God* MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE. FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH; so they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Mark 10:6-9).

“And He answered and said, ‘Have you not read that He who created *them* from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, “FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH”? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matthew 19:4-6).

Yeshua’s appeal in both instances here in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew is to Genesis 2:24, and how one man and one woman are to join in marriage, a monogamous relationship of two becoming one. A proper marriage is a Divine privilege which no human institution should be allowed to tear apart. The sacredness of marriage is also highlighted by the Apostle Paul’s appeal to Genesis 2:24 in his rebuke to the Corinthians, where he says, “Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body *with her*? For He says, “THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH” (1 Corinthians 6:16). A man who joins with a prostitute in sexual relations has committed a serious sin, as the only person who a man is permitted to join with is his wife. This again is two people joining as one in a monogamous marriage relationship—not a man, a woman, and another woman!

In his instruction to Believers in Asia Minor, Paul describes how a proper marriage relationship depicts the service of Yeshua the Messiah for the *ekklēsia* (Ephesians 5:24-27). He says,

“So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Messiah also *does* the [assembly], because we are members of His body. FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Messiah and the [assembly]. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must *see to it* that she respects her husband” (Ephesians 5:28-31).

A monogamous relationship between one man and one woman is most definitely in view here. Paul, the good Hillelite Rabbi, is clear to say “let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see

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that she respects her husband” (RSV), referring to *tēn heautou gunaika* (τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα) in the singular. Yeshua the Messiah did not die for the sake of multiple *assemblies*—i.e., Israel and “the Church”—but one singular group of people. Yeshua’s service on behalf of the *ekklesia* is the model a husband is to follow in serving and loving his wife as a precious treasure. The appeal is once again made to Genesis 2:24. As Paul would summarize it, “each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband” (1 Corinthians 7:2), not by any means reflecting some kind of polygamous marriage relationship. In fact, such a statement is reflective of the mutual respect that a spouse is to have toward one another.

Yet in spite of the evidence from the Apostolic Scriptures that polygamy was not practiced, there are some Messianics today who would twist Paul words about marriage in 1 Timothy. He writes his disciple in Ephesus that the bishops and deacons to be appointed, “must be above reproach, the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2) and that “A deacon must be the husband of but one wife” (1 Timothy 3:12, NIV). Some have argued that congregational leaders who are monogamous is not what is in view here, but instead that such individuals must be “the husband of *at least* one wife.” Does the context of Paul’s letter allow for such an interpretation? How are we to interpret *mias gunaikos andres* (μίας γυναικὸς ἄνδρες)? Were those polygamous figures from the Tanach “good managers of *their* children and their own households” (1 Timothy 3:12b) like these leaders were to be?

1 Timothy 3:2 specifies how these leaders were to be *mias gunaikos andra* (μίας γυναικὸς ἄνδρα), which may be described as “a ‘one-woman man.’” A. Duane Litfin indicates, “Virtually all commentators agree that this phrase prohibits both polygamy and promiscuity, which are unthinkable for spiritual leaders in the church.”<sup>87</sup> David H. Stern’s statement in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* is direct when he says, “*At least one*. No one seriously proposes this,”<sup>88</sup> as Stern affirms the Genesis 2:24 teaching on monogamy. He goes on to reflect how Paul’s instruction to Timothy regards “the importance of [a husband’s] fidelity in marriage. Few things can bring a ministry to ruin more quickly and totally than the sexual misbehavior of its leaders.”<sup>89</sup> Indeed this is very important, because a husband’s loyalty to his wife is a clue as to

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<sup>87</sup> A. Duane Litfin, “1 Timothy,” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 736.

<sup>88</sup> David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 641.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 642.

whether he is loyal to his Lord. And Yeshua's words on this are clear: "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13). In a similar way, "No husband can serve two wives."

Paul is *by no means* telling Timothy that the male leaders he was to appoint must be "the husband of *at least* one wife." This would mean that all male bachelors are disqualified from positions of leadership and teaching, a view which runs into a severe problem when considering that most of the Apostles in the New Testament are depicted as not being married! Yeshua Himself was unmarried. So, the issue can involve some kind of polygamy, and any pagans who were converted to faith and polygamous being barred from leadership.

Still, Messianic polygamists will not stop their barrage of radically reinterpreting Paul. Paul tells Timothy later in the same epistle, "But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, *men* who forbid marriage..." (1 Timothy 4:1-3a). They actually interpret his reference of forbidding one to marry as a prohibition on a man to practice polygamy, perhaps making note of Rabbinic decrees in the Middle Ages that finally and officially forbade polygamy for Jewish men.<sup>90</sup> This is again one of those places where no serious commentator is going to recognize polygamy as being the issue Paul is addressing. The issue here is an asceticism combined with celibacy—a total prohibition on marriage altogether. Dispensationalist author John F. Walvoord summarizes,

"Of special interest is the prophecy that in the end of the age there will be prohibition of marriage and requirement to abstain from certain foods. It is evident in the Roman Church today that priests are forbidden to marry on the ground that the single estate is more holy than the married estate, something which is not taught in the Word of God..."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Cf. "monogamy and polygamy," in Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 437.

<sup>91</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Church In Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), pp 54-55.

Commenting on Paul's further remark that this celibacy will be combined with "abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth" (1 Timothy 4:3b), Walvoord surprisingly indicates, "Another obvious factor is the religious custom to abstain from meats on Friday and to retain from certain foods during Lent. This again is a man-made invention and certainly not taught in the Word of God."

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Yeshua the Messiah and the Apostle Paul uphold the principle of a marriage relationship between one man and one woman—**and they by no means condone any kind of plural marriage** between one man and multiple women.<sup>92</sup>

### Our God is Not a Polygamist

The trouble with Messianic advocates of polygamy is that they commit a great deal of eisegesis in interpreting the Scriptures, reading messages into the text which are not present. Every instance of two or three in the Bible is assumed to be a reference to a polygamous marriage relationship. This is most especially troubling when it concerns the relationship that HaShem has to Israel. Is our God polygamous? Is He married to many people? Is He married at all? These are questions to be considered when we consider various passages that depict the Lord as some kind of husband.

A few beyond-extremists in the Two-House sub-movement<sup>93</sup> have stated that Ezekiel 23, depicting the situation of the sisters Oholah and Oholibah, requires there to be polygamy. In fact, they go as far to assert that those who oppose polygamy actually oppose the final restoration of Israel's Kingdom! But is this really a valid interpretation of Ezekiel ch. 23? Perhaps we need to examine the passage more closely.

The Lord tells the Prophet Ezekiel, “there were two women, the daughters of one mother; and they played the harlot in Egypt. They played the harlot in their youth; there their breasts were pressed and there their virgin bosom was handled” (Ezekiel 23:2-3). No one should disagree that this *eim-achat* (אִם-אָחַת) or “one mother” is Israel. These two daughters are Oholah and Oholibah, with one representing the Northern Kingdom and the other the Southern Kingdom: “Samaria is Oholah and Jerusalem is Oholibah” (Ezekiel 23:4b). They are described as having some serious prostitute tendencies while in Egypt.

The adulterous sins of Oholah with Assyria are detailed (Ezekiel 23:5-8), and the Lord says “I gave her into the hand of her lovers, into the hand of the Assyrians, after whom she lusted. They uncovered her nakedness; they took her sons and her daughters, but they slew her with the sword. Thus she became a byword among women, and they executed judgments on her” (Ezekiel 23:9-10). The adulterous sins of Oholibah are then described, and it is actually asserted “her harlotries

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<sup>92</sup> For a further evaluation of these passages from 1 Timothy, consult the relevant sections of the author's commentary *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>93</sup> For a general review of this, consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Two-House Teaching.”

were more than the harlotries of her sister” (Ezekiel 23:11). The sins of this sister are committed with Assyria and Chaldea/Babylon, and God describes how He will submit her to significant judgment at the hands of her lovers (Ezekiel 23:12-23). The Lord says, “They will come against you with weapons, chariots and wagons, and with a company of peoples. They will set themselves against you on every side with buckler and shield and helmet; and I will commit the judgment to them, and they will judge you according to their customs” (Ezekiel 23:24ff).

Terrible things will be done to Oholibah, representing Judah (Ezekiel 23:27-35). The Prophet Ezekiel is called to detail the severity of God’s judgment against both of these sisters, as He says this has come upon them “Because you have forgotten Me and cast Me behind your back, bear now the *punishment* of your lewdness and your harlotries” (Ezekiel 23:35b), then listing some specific sins that were committed against Him (Ezekiel 23:36-39). As the Lord decrees, “Bring up a company against them and give them over to terror and plunder” (Ezekiel 23:45), for all of the terrible things they have done against Him.

The context of Ezekiel 23 is clearly the judgment that Israel and Judah deserve for being disloyal to the Lord. But is God polygamous? Some would say so because of the opening remark, “Their names were Oholah the elder and Oholibah her sister. And they became Mine, and they bore sons and daughters” (Ezekiel 23:4a). From this point of view, the Lord has taken two sisters to be His wives—representing the Northern and Southern Kingdoms—and the sons and daughters are clearly the Israelites. But this begs a critical question: Is the Lord husband of Israel/Ephraim and Judah, **or is He the husband of the mother**, Israel? Ralph H. Alexander reminds us that these sisters “were both ‘born’ of the same ‘mother,’ an emphasis on their common origin from the united nation of Israel that existed from the time of Egypt to Solomon.”<sup>94</sup>

The whole context of Ezekiel 23 is an indictment against the sins of Israel and Judah. When the Lord says that Oholah and Oholibah “became Mine” it is in the context of Him marrying *their mother*, whom He delivered from Egypt, the united nation of Israel. As previously discussed, the Torah specifically forbids a man from marrying two sisters at the same time (Leviticus 18:18)! God does not do this. The children described are not intended to be those brought forth from God, for both Oholah and Oholibah demonstrated a penchant for playing the harlot in Egypt (Ezekiel 23:3). If anything, God took these two sisters

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<sup>94</sup> Ralph H. Alexander, “Ezekiel,” in *EXP*, 6:851.

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into His house as His own *daughters*, knowing their shortcomings, yet being generous and merciful to them as a Father. But what happens? The children that came forth from Oholah and Oholibah were **bastard children** produced as a result of their rebelliousness against His instructions. As the Lord is very clear to say,

“Then I said concerning her who was worn out by adulteries, ‘Will they now commit adultery with her when she is *thus*?’ But they went in to her as they would go in to a harlot. Thus they went in to Oholah and to Oholibah, the lewd women” (Ezekiel 23:43-44).

Oholah and Oholibah are known for not being loyal to the Lord, but instead for committing spiritual adultery against Him. R.H. Alexander describes, “It was tragic that Jerusalem and/or Samaria would be known by this epithet, but they had been characterized by a history of political prostitution with many nations.”<sup>95</sup> And those nations with whom they had committed adultery would be the very ones that God would use to judge Israel and Judah—as He actually calls them “righteous men” (Ezekiel 23:45ff)! There is no polygamy in Ezekiel 23; there is the promise of judgment from our Heavenly Father against two sisters, His two daughters, that have rebelled against Him in extreme disobedience and have produced children of prostitution.

The analogy of marriage is a very powerful one describing the relationship of the Lord to His corporate people—and this is why polygamists think they can find justification because God is “married” to His people, obviously multiple persons. But how far can we take the allusions to marriage that describe the Lord’s relationship with His people? In 2 Corinthians 11:2, for example, Paul tells his audience “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Messiah I might present you *as* a pure virgin.” Believers are certainly to be like a pure female virgin awaiting their husband, not adulterating themselves with the ways of the world. Yet, how *literally* is Paul’s description intended to be? His preceding remark is, “I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness” (2 Corinthians 11:1a). What does this “folly” (KJV) mean in regard to the descriptions of our “marriage” to the Lord?

Yeshua uses the imagery of a marriage relationship to describe His Second Coming, but we need to be very careful with how much we press this. Believers are to be virginal in the world; no one disagrees with this. But it can be disputed whether or not we are ever “married” to the Lord. Various “virgins” —meaning attendant bridesmaids—are to

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 857.



be there when Yeshua returns to escort Him to the wedding feast. At the present time we are to be waiting faithfully as those attendant bridesmaids with our oil as the bridegroom comes (Matthew 25:1-13). The view that the ten virgins are attendant bridesmaids, and not multiple brides that will join with the bridegroom in some kind of polygamous marriage, is well established among commentaries on Matthew from a variety of perspectives,<sup>96</sup> and fits well with ancient Jewish marriage customs.<sup>97</sup> The Bride of Messiah is actually *not* His people, but is in fact the city of Jerusalem, the capital of the world in the eschaton that the sons of Israel are to join themselves to (Isaiah 62:1-5). In Revelation 21:9, the Apostle John is told, "I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb," and what we see is not some group of people—but instead the city of New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2, 10-27).

Any description that details the people of God in regard to marriage is used entirely as analogy. There is no coming marriage for Believers to the Lord; the marriage coming is ultimately between the Lord and His new Creation, including New Jerusalem, with His faithful people as attendant bridesmaids. Unfortunately, not realizing this truth has caused some significant problems in both Christian and Messianic theology, giving rise to various pre-tribulation rapture sub-teachings, and now with polygamists thinking that they have support for their view. Our God is no polygamist, and His singular bride is ultimately Jerusalem.<sup>98</sup>

## What Polygamy could do to the Messianic Movement

Like many of you, I pray every day for the viability and future of the Messianic movement. I have often described it as *the emerging Messianic movement* because we simply do not know what it is going to look like in the decades to come. The decisions we make today will affect tomorrow, and they will also affect our credibility in the larger Jewish-Christian world. In spite of the Biblical evidence that stands against polygamy, and the warnings the Scriptural narrative gives us to not practice it, there is now a sector of the (fringe) Messianic movement that has emerged which encourages it. It must be emphasized that most in the Messianic movement, regardless of their position on the role of

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. R.E. Nixon, "Matthew," in *NBCR*, 846; Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," in *BKCNT*, 80; D.A. Carson, "Matthew," in *EXP*, 8:512.

<sup>97</sup> D.J. Williams, "Bride, Bridegroom," in Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 87.

<sup>98</sup> For a further discussion, consult Chapter 6 of the author's book *When Will the Messiah Return?: "Who or What is the True Bride of Messiah?"*

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women, are rightfully opposed to it. Yet, those few who do advocate polygamy are very vocal about it. Each of us needs to be concerned, and see that the polygamists are stopped, rebuked, and removed as soon as possible.

The Torah, even in the worst circumstances with Israel under siege because of sin, still depicts marriage in terms of one man and one woman: “toward the wife he cherishes...toward the husband she cherishes” (Deuteronomy 28:54, 56). As Kaiser aptly states, “Too many Old Testament texts continue to represent the norm as a monogamous relationship...The law [here] does not specify which one of his wives or threaten all of the lives of his harem should he disobey God; it presumes that there is only *one* wife and *one* husband.”<sup>99</sup> In Psalm 128:3 we see the promise, “Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house,” with *ish'tekha* (יְשׁוּעָה) or “your wife” appearing in the singular. Qohelet depicts a proper marriage, saying “if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three *strands* is not quickly torn apart” (Ecclesiastes 4:12), as a husband and wife are to be bound together by God’s presence among them serving as a third cord. Even when Ancient Israel was subject to God’s judgment, it was “both husband and wife [that] shall be taken” (Jeremiah 6:11), as opposed to a husband and his harem of wives.

The advent of a polygamous sector in today’s Messianic movement is very discouraging to many people. Many monogamous Messianic couples who are happily married are shaking their heads at the utter nonsense beginning to brew in our ranks. These couples may be parents of young men and young women, whom they already have believed will have difficulty finding an acceptable Messianic(-friendly) spouse. They have been particularly worried about the vocal fringe teachers who have served to do nothing more than keep people out of the Messianic movement who are sincerely interested, particularly potential spouses to their sons and daughters. Many Jewish Believers could decide to split from the Messianic movement and go to Church to find a husband or wife, or worse yet, renege on Yeshua and go back to the Synagogue as a result of a growing acceptance of polygamy. Many non-Jewish Messianic Believers could likewise just choose to go back to Church, thinking that polygamy will associate the Messianic movement with that dreaded word known as “cult,” and in desperation to not live endlessly single lives.

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<sup>99</sup> Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 189.

There are many young men in the Messianic movement today who have done their best to remain sexually pure until marriage. They have waited beyond their mid- to late-twenties, the typical time that their evangelical Christian or Jewish counterparts are getting married, to wait to be married—sometimes with no end in sight. They have been faithful in their commitments to the Lord and their virginity *beyond the typical norm* because of the seriousness of their Messianic faith. **The advent of polygamy infuriates such young men**, because it gives people yet another reason to stay away from the Messianic movement, and the things that it can legitimately offer to people to enrich their faith and live more like Yeshua. Mrs. Right will stay away from a movement that is presumably run by Rabbi Wrong. Suffice it to say, the young Messianic man who has been praying urgently for an eligible wife, and has yet to find one—may now be thinking that the advent of polygamy in some (extreme fringe) sectors of the Messianic movement seals his fate as a perpetual bachelor. He thinks he may never know the true joys of sexuality as God originally intended. His view is that if the Messianic movement truly is of the Lord, then the polygamists must be flushed out *now*.

But we should not be that worried for the single Messianic young man, who might feel like the polygamists among us should be shown little mercy and no tolerance. *The real concern should be for the single Messianic young woman*. While it is much easier for a young woman to control herself sexually than a young man, she has to pray extra hard for that proper husband to come along who will honor and respect her. Due to the chauvinistic nature in men that the practice of polygamy encourages, single young women in the Messianic movement now have to be worried about being targeted as a potential second, third, fourth, etc. wife, perhaps by some dirty old man who has lost sexual interest in his current wife. Rather than divorce her, it is said that all he needs to do is marry another. **Such a position demeans the position of young women in our faith community**, and reduces women to the role of being nothing more than an object of sexual desire or a child-making factory. Men who are looking for another wife from such young women need to be very fearful of their fathers and brothers, who should stand up in their defense. Likewise, such women should be willing to defend themselves *at the very least* as objects of sexual harassment should a bad situation ever arise. (And we should pray to God that it never does!)

The new Messianic polygamists love to counter-argue. These men say that they want more children, and since their current wives are beyond child-bearing age, they need new and younger wives to

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“populate Israel.” *Really*. Is this the only way that one can have children? Are there not enough children in the world to adopt? Would it not be better for such families to demonstrate that the greater restoration and establishment of Israel’s Kingdom that they believe in so much is not elitist or racist, because it involves “companions” (Ezekiel 37:16, 19) adopted and welcomed in as natives (Isaiah 56:3)? If human life is so precious to such people, should we not be actively saving orphan children—particularly female children—from decrepit third world countries where they are not valued and could die of starvation or neglect? Are we not all made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-27)? Is it not true that the *ekklēsia* should be actively saving the lives of orphans, giving them homes in which to live where they can be nurtured and loved?

Another issue that is seldom considered by Messianic advocates of polygamy concerns how they intend to bankroll their polygamous family. It is not by coincidence that kings, political leaders, and rich men in the Scriptures are those who have multiple wives. Many Messianic families already struggle financially—and those are families made up of one husband, one wife, and multiple children (beyond the average three to four). What will happen when polygamous families emerge with one husband, multiple wives, and multiple children? Although the Tanach demonstrates that such families were not places of great peace and tranquility, a bank account balance can also teach a person important lessons as well. **How on Earth are polygamous men going to pay for all of their wives and their extra children?**

Since the polygamy fiasco has hit the Messianic community in 2008—and not just in the United States<sup>100</sup>—it has not been that encouraging to witness the utter silence that many Messianic ministries and teachers of influence<sup>101</sup> have shown toward this subject, when asked. These people are not silent because they endorse polygamy. Perhaps they refuse to acknowledge it because they would like to wish it would go away, and that by ignoring it the fire will just burn itself out. I really do wish things were that simple, but I do not believe that this will happen. The Messianic world is facing this crisis because its larger Biblical Studies is behind the curve in so many areas. Teachers

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<sup>100</sup> While vacationing in the United Kingdom in Summer 2008, I had an opportunity to visit two Messianic friends for an afternoon. After exchanging greetings with I was immediately asked what I thought about the polygamy issue that was dividing the British Messianic community. Although the polygamy fiasco originated in America, I can personally testify it has been exported to other parts of the world.

<sup>101</sup> Galatians 2:6.

and leaders do not wish to address the subject of polygamy, because it is connected to an entire gamut of issues regarding sexual ethics and gender roles, that as of today (2008), it is completely unprepared to handle.

In over thirteen years of Messianic experience (1995-2008) I have seldom ever heard about sexual ethics taught in a Messianic context. When I went through Methodist confirmation classes as a teenager in 1993, I was taught some basic sexual ethics—yet I do not know if Messianic *barbat mitzvah* classes do something similar.<sup>102</sup> It is insufficient now to just say that one should wait until marriage to have sexual intercourse, and that homosexuality is prohibited. *This is where sexual ethics begins.* It also includes issues regarding: what is acceptable within the marriage bed, when a husband and wife can and cannot have intercourse, whether contraception is or is not acceptable, exceptions for abortion such as to save the life of a mother, the danger of sexually transmitted diseases, the role of drugs such as Viagra, and many, many other things. There is certainly a wide array of literature on the subject from both the Jewish and Christian theological traditions that should be consulted. While human sexuality is admittedly not a comfortable subject for many of us to consider, Messianics sweeping it under the rug is no longer acceptable. No teacher or pastor should feel it necessary to use anatomical terms from the *Shabbat* pulpit, but he or she could certainly teach on respect for the body and the consequences of improper sex.

And what is perhaps the most important—and previously unseen—issue that has now been opened up with the advent of polygamous men in the Messianic community? Most of today's Messianic movement, at best, is complementarian, meaning that although men and women are the essential spiritual equals of one another, it is still the men who can only teach and lead God's people. In spite of the significant Biblical examples from both the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures of women in positions of leadership and teaching,<sup>103</sup> most in the Messianic movement believe that positions of

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<sup>102</sup> Consult the author's article "Galatians 3:24-25: Are Messianic Youth Properly Trained in the Torah and All the Scriptures?"

<sup>103</sup> Significant examples of women in leadership in the Bible include: Miriam (Micah 6:4; cf. Numbers 12:1-16), Deborah (Judges 4-5; cf. Deuteronomy 17:8), Huldah (2 Kings 22:11-14), Esther (Book of Esther), Mary the mother of Yeshua (Acts 1:7-8, 14-15; 2:1-14; cf. Joel 2:28), Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2), Mary, Lydia, Nympha (Acts 12:12; 16:15; Colossians 4:15), Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 1:1; cf. 4:2-3), Priscilla (Acts 18:25), female prophets at Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:5; 14:19), Junia (Romans 16:7).

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leadership and teaching are reserved only for men. This has been something that evangelical Christianity has been debating for the past two to three decades, with many evangelicals embracing female pastors and leaders, and many other evangelicals repudiating them. The egalitarian debate over the equality of males and females in the Body of Messiah—as a direct result of the emergence of a polygamous sector in our faith community—will also emerge within the Messianic movement.<sup>104</sup>

I have known for quite some time that the egalitarian debate over women in ministry was something looming on the horizon for us,<sup>105</sup> but I also thought that we could leave it “for another day.” With the emergence of a sector of polygamous Messianic men, that other day has now quickly arrived. Whereas some form of complementarianism has been the norm in the Messianic movement, with women respected but frequently not allowed to lead, this is due to change in the days ahead. A particularly difficult season is upon us with two new sectors coming forth:

1. Those who believe in a “Biblical patriarchy,” where men come first and women come second. Men are allowed to have polygamous marriage relationships because women were primarily made for sex and reproduction.
2. Those who believe in the equality of men and women, recognizing that there are significant examples of women in leadership throughout the Bible. Qualified women can be leaders and teachers just like qualified men.

My conscience requires me to be honest with you and not hide the fact that I believe that the work of Yeshua at Golgotha (Calvary) has restored the equality of the sexes that existed prior to the Fall (Galatians 3:28). Sadly, perhaps, Messianic women have played more of a role encouraging and helping me as a Messianic teacher than Messianic men. As a Messianic male, I would be willing to submit to a Messianic female leader or teacher—provided she had the right spiritual temperament, training, and credentials—the same as any Messianic

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For a further analysis of this, and related controversies, consult Belleville, “Women in Ministry: An Egalitarian Perspective,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, pp 21-103.

<sup>104</sup> Some theological conversation on the issue has at least been presented in the camp of Messianic Judaism. Consult the section “Senior Congregational Leadership—For Men Only?” in Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ed., *Voices of Messianic Judaism* (Baltimore: Lederer Books, 2001), pp 151-168.

<sup>105</sup> I discussed this issue in a preliminary manner in my commentary *Philippians for the Practical Messianic* in 2006, particularly in the discussion on Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3) and Lydia (Acts 16:14ff).

male leader or teacher should have. The practice of polygamy is nothing less than an anathema in the ears of an egalitarian such as myself, as it only serves the male's sexual interest, and does nothing to elevate the value of females.<sup>106</sup>

The Messianic movement of the future that I am working for is not one where men get to run the show unchecked just because they are men, but where *qualified men and women* work together for the purposes of God. Husbands and wives will be equal partners in marriage who share responsibility with one another (cf. Ephesians 5:21), and that equality and respect will be manifested in how Jewish and non-Jewish Believers will respect and honor one another as fellow members of the Body of Messiah. *Familial equality will lead to corporate equality and greater unity.* These are the things that the enemy desperately does not want to see happen, because when we have such greater unity then and only then can Messianics be a force of the Lord's holiness and righteousness!

## Is polygamy for today?

Is polygamy for today? Some in our faith community claim that since the Patriarchs did it, Messianic men today can now do it. As their line goes, "YHWH's ways are higher than man's ways." Yet the polygamists are forgetting some very important things. HaShem is much bigger than we are, and the Eternal One is able to use flawed people to accomplish His ends in spite of themselves. The Lord never made Eve to only be one of Adam's wives, but as Adam himself exclaimed, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23)—Adam's equal partner created to complete him in his life tasks, and vice versa. This is what a marriage between one man and one woman is all about. It is about working together and serving one another, being the best of friends and companions, honoring and respecting the other as a person of great value made in God's image. A good marriage is based on the principle of mutual submission of one to another (Ephesians 5:21), and making your spouse's needs more important than your own (cf. Philippians 2:3-4). Such camaraderie is to then be reflected in the larger community of faith.

The Hebrew Tanach is very unique among the religious documents of the world in that it does not hesitate to criticize its own chosen

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<sup>106</sup> As of 2013, my Messianic egalitarian convictions have been principally summarized in various parts of the commentaries *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic*, and *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic*.

Also useful to consider are the FAQ entries on the Messianic Apologetics website, "Women in Ministry," "Male Headship," and "1 Corinthians 14:34-35."

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people. The Old Testament is direct and thorough in recording the problems caused by polygamous marriages, and notably the New Testament is silent about them continuing. According to Paul, much of what we see in the Tanach is a “warning” (1 Corinthians 10:11, RSV) of things that are not to be repeated. *Apparently, most got the message that polygamy was not God’s intention.* Polygamy never benefited those who practiced it, and shame on any Messianic men today who would desire households that have rival sub-families. Polygamous men have to pick their favorite wives. Children from sub-families within polygamous households inevitably squabble and fight with those from other sub-families. God in His great mercy and grace used flawed men who practiced polygamy, just as He can redeem any of us from the sins we may be engrossed by!

There are worse sins than polygamy. Much of Ancient Israel also practiced idolatry and child sacrifice. Murder and genocide are worse than polygamy. There are exceptions seen in history where polygamy has had to be practiced to repopulate a people decimated by war, famine, or disease. Missionaries who go to third world countries, sharing the gospel with polygamous heathen, recognize that a polygamous husband cannot just throw off his second, third, fourth, etc. wives lest they become destitute and without a place to provide them with safety and sustenance. But such missionaries *never encourage continuous polygamy*, prohibiting it for the next generation of Believers, and rightly training them that a proper marriage is between one man and one woman.

My friends, **polygamy was never intended for yesterday**, much less for today! The Bible’s teachings about the problems caused by polygamy are manifold.

Perhaps the Lord has had to allow a sector of Messianic polygamists to arise to do something important: **He wants to see the equality of the sexes restored.** If Messianic polygamists did not arise, Messianic egalitarians might continue to keep quiet on their views of men *and* women being allowed to lead, and women being elevated in value. Recognizing this, and acting properly upon it, will bring the real change and transformation that our faith community so desperately needs. When this happens, it will significantly alter the face of the Messianic movement, and bring us into the position where we can really be a useful tool for God that can minister to all people.