

Polygamy from the Perspectives of the Old Testament, the Quran, and Current Muslim Thought

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Some contemporary Muslim reformers are advocating that—despite the weight of Islamic tradition—the Quranic ideal is monogamy. Claire Meckler claims that, in a similar manner, the Old Testament presents monogamy as the ideal but also reflects accommodations to tradition and culture. Meckler calls for Christians to maintain an attitude of forbearance and flexibility as they encounter this issue in the context of ministry to Muslims.



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Why did so many men of the Old Testament practice polygamy? Furthermore, why did God never seem to rebuke His servants for having multiple wives? Many Christians believe the issue of polygamy to be a thing of the past and therefore irrelevant in today's world. But cross-cultural workers among Muslims know better; they, among others, still encounter this issue and are therefore looking for Biblical perspectives. Is polygamy in and of itself morally right or wrong? Does God directly forbid it, or does He permit it as a social institution when culturally appropriate? What are the applications of our answers when the Christian faith is introduced into Islamic cultures?

The topic of polygamy is complex and multi-faceted. What follows is an attempt to briefly explore some of the pertinent issues from the viewpoints of the Old Testament, the Quran, and current Muslim writers.

Polygamy, as the term is popularly used, denotes plural wives; technically this is called polygyny. Likewise, polyandry is the technical term for plural husbands (Smalley 1978:258). Even though polygamy technically refers to plural

marriage, whether of husbands or of wives, the word will be employed in this study in its more common usage: a man who has more than one wife.

POLYGAMY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The first reference to polygamy in the Bible is found in Genesis 4:19, in the seventh generation of man's recorded presence on the earth. Lamech, the first bigamist, was from the lineage of Cain. He was apparently "a man of bloodthirsty vindictiveness and a boaster of his prowess" (Archer 1982:121). But polygamy is also well documented in the lives of the patriarchs as well as in the lives of the kings of Israel, its judges, and private citizens.

Concubinage was also very common in the Old Testament era. A concubine was "a woman lawfully united in marriage to a man in a relation inferior to that of the regular wife. No moral stigma was attached to being a concubine. It was a natural part of a polygamous social system" (Tenney 1967:180). Concubines were frequently taken from among Hebrew or foreign slave girls or Gentile captives taken in war, or even from among free Hebrew women, but they were not illicit mistresses. They had no rights other than lawful cohabitation and no authority in the family or household affairs. The children were considered legitimate, although the offspring of the first wife were preferred in the distribution of the inheritance (Gen. 25:6, cf. Tenney 1967:180).

The practice of polygamy and concubinage is well documented from before the flood, throughout the time of the patriarchs, and after the giving of the law to Moses. Examples include: Nahor (Gen. 22:24); Abraham (Gen. 25:6); Esau (Gen. 26:34; 28:9); Jacob (Gen. 29:25-29; 35:22-26); Eliphaz (Gen. 26:12); Gideon (Judg. 8:31); Elkanah (1 Sam. 1:2); Saul (2 Sam. 3:7; 12:8); David (2 Sam. 3:2-13); Solomon (1 Kings 11:3); Caleb (1 Chron. 2:46); Manasseh (1 Chron. 7:14); Rehoboam (2 Chron. 11:21); Abijah (2 Chron. 13:21); and Belshazzar (Dan. 5:2).

Numerous other instances are cited concerning less prominent Old Testament figures, both wicked men and those seeking to follow God. Why was the practice so prevalent? Was polygamy justifiable during the early history of mankind

as an expedient to populate the earth? Was the acquisition of multiple wives a heathen custom or one sanctioned by God? The Scriptures provide us with some initial answers.

First, Genesis 2:23-24 gives the account of God's institution of the first marriage. He made only one wife for Adam and then commanded that the two should become one flesh. Most Biblical scholars contend that the total unity of two persons in marriage, as understood by the expression "one flesh," demands monogamy and indissolubility. Monogamy, therefore, stands as God's ordained ideal for marriage. But is polygamy ever explicitly forbidden in the Old Testament? It would appear that it was not explicitly forbidden, at least not prior to the giving of the Levitical law. Men of the patriarchal period may then perhaps be excused for their behavior. It seems that God never directly corrected them or condemned their harems as pagan or sinful. However, the patriarchs reaped the consequences of their plural marriages. In every narrative description of multiple wives or concubines the consequences were jealousy, bitterness, hatred, competitiveness, trickery, sibling rivalry, complications with inheritance rights, and hostility within the family. When two or more women shared a husband, continuous strife was almost always the apparent result of the man's preference of one wife over another. The Hebrew word for the second wife literally means "rival wife," as in 1 Samuel 1:6, where the other wife is called Hannah's adversary, the one who relentlessly provoked her and caused her fretting (Packer, et al., 1980:417).

But on the basis of Genesis 2:24 alone it is difficult to conclude that God's monogamous ideal was also to be the normative law governing marriage. Four hundred years later Moses declares further revelation of God's will. Included are a few passages that could be construed as granting at least temporary permission to adopt alternatives to God's general preference for monogamy:

The Old Testament does not explicitly forbid polygamy, but narrative passages clearly portray its adverse consequences.

(a) Ex. 21:10: "... If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing, and marital rights";

(b) Lev. 18:18: "Do not take your wife's sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living";

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(c) Deut. 21:15: "If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other, and both bear him sons but the first born is the son of the wife he does not love...."

These passages could imply that polygamy was considered lawful. However, Walter Kaiser, author of *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (1983), offers a completely different interpretation. In fact, he is adamant that certain words from these Hebrew texts have been mistranslated. For example, he claims that Exodus 21:10, if taken in its right context (verses 7-11), means "if he marries another woman instead of her...." He interprets Leviticus 18:18 as a prohibition of polygamy as well as incest. He very convincingly argues that Deuteronomy 21:15-17 is legislation directed to a man who has had two wives in succession (the second after the first one died), and not two wives simultaneously (Kaiser 1983:182-190).

Schools of thought differ widely on how to translate specific words relating to polygamy. A fairly common viewpoint is that God was offering women protection from the degraded passions and abuses of men; the Mosaic laws gave protection to multiple wives and concubines not in order to condone the custom, but rather to guard innocent women and children from being victimized (Packer, et al., 1980:421, 435-436). It does seem fairly clear that the specifications in Exodus 21:7-17, Leviticus 18:18, and Deuteronomy 21:14-17 are indeed guarantees of just treatment and guidelines for equal inheritance rights. If a man took a second wife, he was still bound by law to feed and clothe the first wife and to continue conjugal relations with her. The concubines and foreign women taken as war brides were also ensured some rights. Their presence in Jewish society and other cultures was assumed.

What were some reasons for the prevalence of polygamy in that day and age? If a man had only one wife, he faced the risk of having no offspring due to sterility or disease. A barren wife, or one who delivered children who did not live until adulthood, would mean the end of the family lineage. Multiple wives provided assurance of numerous children who would also be a source of financial security to the parents in

terms of the labor they could later render and the care they could eventually provide. There was also the possibility of losing a wife in death and then having no mother to raise the children. Another matter of convenience for the man was that of not having to abstain from sexual contact if his wife were in her monthly period or restricted after childbirth. If a man could not afford the marriage money for another wife, he would sometimes buy a slave for that purpose or use one he already had in his household (cf. Gen. 16:2, 30:3-8). Polygamy also seems to have been a means of gaining social status, and, indeed, it did become a form of institutionalized wealth (Smalley 1978:259-269). Later, plural marriages became useful in forming political alliances; kings would wed daughters of other kings in order to seal a covenant.

Perhaps this is why the Lord does give an explicit command in Deuteronomy 17:17, directed not to the common man but to kings: "He must not take many wives...." It is interesting to note that at this time in history Israel did not yet have a king. The condition in verse 14 states the time that this command is to be put into effect: "... when you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you." So God may have tolerated the existence of polygamy as a "necessary evil" for a limited time, but at this point He clearly stated that it was not to be practiced by the leaders of His people and implied that the leaders were to set an example for their subjects.

Yet, beginning with Saul, the kings of Israel indulged in the luxury of many wives and concubines. Why didn't God or the priests rebuke these men for their blatant disobedience in this area? Most probably because they were absolute monarchs whom no earthly tribunal could call to account for their conduct (Kaiser 1983:182-189). Solomon, famous for his 700 wives and 300 concubines, was reproved for his sin of having *foreign* wives (Neh. 13:26), but not necessarily for his having *many* wives. The Scriptures do convey, however, that the state of his domestic affairs was one of the causes for much misfortune in his life and the lives of his successors.

The wives of any deceased king were normally entrusted to the care and protection of the king's successor (e.g., Saul's wives were given to David). This enabled the women to retain their royal status and provided them with a pension plan

(Archer 1982:123). Such a provision was one of the few redeeming aspects of the rationale behind harems.

The continuation of multiple marriages after the giving of the Levitical law clearly indicates the failure of the Israelites to follow God's original model and plan. The tenth commandment (Ex. 20:17) assumes monogamy as the norm: "Thou shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (not wives). The book of Proverbs endorses the recommended standard of having one wife: "He who finds a wife finds what is good, and receives favor from the Lord" (18:22), and "... a prudent wife is from the Lord" (19:14). Numerous other verses throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Deut. 28:54,56; Psalm 128:3; Prov. 5:18,19; Jer. 5:8; 6:11; Mal. 2:14) presume that monogamy was the customary practice. Monogamy is repeatedly represented by the prophets as symbolic of the union of God with Israel, His chosen one (Isa. 54:5,6; Hosea 2:19). Polygamy, on the other hand, is represented as the counterpart of idolatry (Tenney 1967:513).

Despite this evidence, Karl Barth still states, "We can hardly point with certainty to a single text in which polygamy is expressly forbidden and monogamy is universally decreed. If then, we approach the Bible legalistically, we cannot honestly conclude that in this matter we are dealing with an unconditional law of God" (as quoted in Kaiser 1983:188-189). Likewise, Oswald Fountain declares that the church's case against polygamy "on the basis of Scripture is a flimsy one" (as quoted in Kaiser 1983:188-189). I disagree with Fountain, believing that the whole counsel of God suggests otherwise. Part of that Scriptural witness comes from an Old Testament survey of the type given above, and yet other insights are given in the New Testament.

AN OVERVIEW OF NEW TESTAMENT INSIGHTS

It seems that over the course of time God's people grew in their comprehension of His will concerning marriage. According to Gleason Archer (1982:123), from the time of the return from the Babylonian exile there are no recorded examples or references of polygamy among the Israelites. From the period of the post-exilic books of the Old Testament through the time of Christ four hundred years later, monogamy

was the rule among the Greeks, the Romans, and the Jews, although, of course, there were always some exceptions (e.g., Herod).

The Christian doctrine of monogamy is heavily grounded on Jesus' reiteration of Genesis 2:24; the affirmation that "the two will become one flesh" (Mt. 19:5, cf. Mk. 10:8) excludes a third party. The New Testament teachings on marriage and the family are fundamentally incompatible with polygamous unions; simultaneous marriage contracts are considered adulterous. Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as elevating the status of women, and Paul describes the Church as the bride, the one and only wife, of Christ (Eph. 5:25; Rev. 21:9). (It is reported that polygamy often dies out where the status of the woman is raised and when she becomes recognized as a reciprocal member of an honored relationship, cf. Smalley 1978:258-269).

The Epistles indicate that the early church was still grappling with these issues. Titus 1:6 and 1 Timothy 3:2,12 list monogamy among the qualifications for elders and deacons. This requirement would prevent converted polygamists from serving as church leaders but not from becoming church members. 1 Corinthians 7:2 affirms the standard of monogamy, but Jesus' views would prohibit divorce as the solution for polygamist believers. Tragically, some Christian missions of recent times have held their convictions on monogamy so strongly that they have not allowed polygamous persons to join the church. Putting co-wives out on the street or sending them back to their families no longer virgins (thus decreasing their eligibility for remarriage) and without their children (usually kept as property of the husband) does not seem to be in harmony with Jesus' teachings or spirit of compassion.

Should, then, the Christian church vigorously advocate monogamy but also embrace into its fellowship all persons without consideration for the status of the marriage union? It is at this juncture that it is necessary to compare Biblical teaching with Islamic tradition and contemporary debate in order to discover whatever parallels and contrasts there may be.

QURANIC TRADITION AND CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The Prophet Mohammed was married to his first wife for 25 years. During her lifetime he had no other wife, which was reportedly unusual for a man of his standing. According to annotations in the Quran, he would not have remarried at the age of fifty except for his compassion and mercy in providing for widows who otherwise would have been destitute. Wars had decimated the ranks of Arabian men, and many women and children were left widows and orphans; thus, Mohammed encouraged polygamy as a social responsibility. He himself married several women, but he also gave guidelines to his followers. Prior to Mohammed's time men were allowed an unrestricted number of wives, but with the writing of the Quran a maximum of four was established under the stipulation that the husband treat his wives with perfect equality in material things as well as in affection and immaterial things (Ali 1977:113,1120). Sura 4:3 states, "And if ye fear that ye shall not deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice two, or three, or four, but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with them, then only one; or a captive that your right hand possesses. That will be more suitable to prevent you from doing injustice."

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According to John Esposito, "Quranic injunctions, intended to raise women's status and equality, represented some of the most radical departures from customary law in ancient Arabia" (1982:15). Islam brought profound social change, especially by strengthening the family. Marriage became the key element of stability, growth, and unity in the Muslim community (Esposito 1982:4, 50-51). Mohammed declared, "Marriage is half the religion," and, indeed, marriage occupies a central place in the moral and social legislation of Islam. Sura 33:49 ("Oh ye who believe! When ye marry believing women...") indicates that marriage was presumed to be plural unless the specified conditions could not be met. Polygamy was considered a practical necessity under certain circumstances, such as overpopulation of women or when a wife was unable to bear children (Weinman 1985:29-30).

Motivations for polygamy today, as in previous eras, involve a complex set of cultural factors. Feminine incentives

stem from the concept of the extended family and patterns of socialization in Muslim societies. Women and girls, who are segregated from the men, naturally want companionship. If a man has only one wife and several sons, the woman is alone in her chores and domestic duties. A co-wife is viewed as a help and a companion and possibly also the bearer of daughters for the family. The first wife has a special position of authority over the additional wives, who are expected to go to market for her, fetch water from the well, and prepare meals. With such assistance the first wife is more free to visit her mother or other female relatives. Multiple wives also benefit from the economic well-being and social status that are attached to the husband (Smalley 1978:255-273).

Despite these incentives, it is obvious that the polygamous marriage is not without its problems. Human nature is the same regardless of the cultural setting or religious environment. A woman often feels threatened by the presence of another woman in her home. Partiality on the part of the husband is almost inevitable. Indeed, Sura 4:129 of the Quran cites: "Ye are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if that were your ardent desire." Commentary notes in the Quran elaborate:

In the Muslim household there is no room for a favorite wife. They must all be dealt with justly, including equal and rotating conjugal rights. Where the rotation was for some reason interfered with, it was permissible, by another interference with the usual rotation, to bring satisfaction to one who had been previously set aside. This was not only permitted, but commended, as tending to remove dissatisfaction and cheer and comfort the eyes and hearts of those who were disappointed in their turn (Ali 1977:1122).

Such procedures for keeping peace in the home could become rather wearisome!

Today's Muslim societies are in much turmoil over the issue of polygamy. Some proposed laws would give a woman the right to divorce her husband should he take an additional wife; other laws stipulate that a man must obtain written permission from an arbitration council before contracting an additional marriage. In Egypt one of the arguments posed for the need to legislate restrictions on polygamy notes that the

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vast majority of neglected children are the result of polygamous marriages contracted by men who are incapable of supporting even one family. Mumtaz Ali, a Muslim leader in the cause for women's rights, has denounced most Muslim marriages as loveless servitude endured by women whose inferior position is due to their lack of education and their subjection to marriage laws and customs needing fundamental reform. He views polygamy as a tolerated institution of the past which must "in contemporary society give way to the Quranic ideal—monogamy" (Esposito 1982:74).

Muhammad Abduh, sometimes called the "Father of Muslim Modernism," supports this idea. He holds that polygamy was permitted during the Prophet's time as a concession to the prevailing social conditions. "However," he says, "the true intent of the Quran, its ideal, is monogamy." The texts he cites to establish monogamy as the norm are Sura 4:3 and 4:129, claiming that it is practically impossible to provide equal justice to multiple wives. He has been especially critical of polygamy's deleterious effect on family life. His writings, though harshly criticized by many Islamic fundamentalists, have become a source of inspiration to many Muslim feminists.

Since 1920 numerous attempts have been made to reform family laws in the Muslim world, but often to no avail (Esposito 1982:60, 74, 84). Again, according to Esposito,

The question of polygamy has been a major issue in the twentieth-century Muslim family law reform. Reformers in most Muslim countries have attempted to restrict the exercise of polygamy through legislation based upon their interpretation of Quranic values which conclude that monogamy is the Quranic ideal and thus should be the community's legal norm. The reform called for would constitute a significant departure from traditional Muslim social and legal practice (1982:124-125).

CONCLUSION

John Murray provides an excellent summary of the appropriate Christian response to these issues:

How could God allow His people, in some cases the most eminent of Old Testament saints, to practice what was a

violation of His preceptive will?... Our Lord... tells us explicitly that it was for the hardness of their hearts.... Sufferance there indeed was, but no legitimation or sanction of the practice.... In the earlier periods of revelation transgression of a law would not be as aggravated as that same transgression becomes in the fuller and brighter light of the revelation of its wrong and of the sanction with which it is attended.... It was the sufferance of forbearance, not the sufferance of approval or sanction (as quoted in Kaiser

Likewise, the Christian's reaction to the Muslim practice of polygamy should be one of forbearance. We cannot condone the practice, but at the same time we cannot rip it from the fiber of their society or their personal lives. As Muslims come to faith in Christ, they must come with their families intact, including all of their wives. The polygamous family is not entirely responsible for the situation in which it finds itself. Neither is it entirely free from the social, economic, and cultural obligations which polygamy brings. It would be tragically counterproductive for the church to only preach against polygamy, and not at the same time to offer creative answers for the difficulties caused by transition to the monogamous alternative (Smalley 1978:270).

We must remember that many things were not sanctioned by God during the Old Testament era, but they were nevertheless permitted—even after a higher and better standard had been announced. It required centuries of progressive revelation before God's chosen people realized that polygamy was not in their best interest. Perhaps Christians today need to have more of God's patience in this matter.

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