

## Is Polygamy A Sin?

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This is an important question that we should resolve using the Bible. A sin that is unrepented of and unforgiven will lead one to hell. This treatise examines the question from two perspectives; under three Parts or sections. You are beseeched to read all parts in totality in order to have a comprehensive view of the matter. Parts 1 & 2 seek to justify polygamy while Part 3 refutes their claims. In this article, NT will connote New Testament while OT will denote Old Testament.

### Part 1

Please note first and foremost that sin is TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW and where there is NO LAW, there is no transgression -1 Jn 3:4, Rm 5:13

Polygamy is multiple marriage and also now commonly refers to polygyny; a man having many wives concurrently (bigamy, trigamy etc. i.e. more than a single wife at a time).

It is well established that originally God made a woman for the man Adam, Eve was given unto him for a wife thus showing the initial plan and ideal is monogamy -Gen 2:19-25. However, after the fall God allowed some less than ideal situations. For instance, nakedness was the ideal prior to the fall but clothing was introduced afterwards. Similarly it is noted that Polygamy and Celibacy were permitted after the fall of Adam for mankind. God has never declared polygamy a sin under any dispensation unlike say, Adultery which is affirmed to be a sin: a sin under Patriarchal, Mosaic and Christian ages. Adultery occurs when a married woman has sexual relations with a man other than her living husband; it is so because she breaks wedlock or the marriage covenant. In biblical times, the man is obligated to care for the woman he marries and he does not make the kind of marital vow common today to "forsake all others." Nothing prohibits him from taking another free woman for a wife. However taking someone else's wife constituted adultery as was seen with Abimelech/Abraham, David/Uriah, Herod/Philip, fornicator of 1 Cor 5, etc. Thou shalt not commit adultery is a recurrent command under all dispensations. There is nothing like thou shalt not practice polygamy.

In Patriarchal age, let us note that:

1. Lamech violated God's law of sanctity of life / being another's keeper when he took a man's life, not by having two wives -Gen 4:19-24
2. Abraham was a friend of God and a polygamist as well as Jacob. Abraham had Hagar as second wife (Gen 16:3), Keturah as wife (Gen 25:1) and later had concubines (Gen 25:6), Jacob had two wives initially who later gave him their maids to make four -Gen 30:4,9.

Under the law of Moses,

1. The law permitted a man **\*whether previously married or not\***, to be married to
  - a) his rape victim if the girl's father agrees in Deut 22:28-28.
  - b) another woman but still treat well an initial wife in the situation described in Exo 21:7-10.
  - c) a captive woman or slave of his choice -Deut 21:10-14
2. If polygamy is sin God would not have given the injunction in Lev 18:17-18 that a man should not have sexual relations with two blood sisters or a woman and her daughter. It was because polygamy was permissible that he made those specific restrictions!
3. God expressly commands in Deut 21 that:  
15 **\*If a man have two wives\***, one beloved, and another hated, and they have born him children, both the beloved and the hated; and if the firstborn son be hers that was hated:

16 Then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath, that he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, which is indeed the firstborn:

17 But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his.

4. Since polygamy was allowed and regulated, it was obvious that the person who is most likely to abuse the privilege is a King. That was why God forbids a king from **\*multiplying\*** (not adding) wives unto himself in Deut 17:15-18. That was exactly what King Solomon did that caused him to be led away from the LORD by his strange wives -1Kg 11:1-4

5. Many godly men had two or more wives such as Gideon (Jud 8:30), Elkanah (1 Sam 1:1-3), David **\*(2 Sam 12:7-8, 1 Kg 15:5, 1 Sam 27:3, 2 Sam 5:13)\***, Joash had two wives chosen for him by the high Priest (2 Chro 24:3), Even same might be said of Moses (Exo 2:15-21, Num 12:1), Caleb (1 Chro 2:46-48, though we can not be certain whether these other women were taken while the first was still alive.

### **\*Why did God allow polygamy then?\***

Many reasons are suggested thus by scholars:

1. In Biblical times not all men were able to marry more than one wife, and many did not have any wife at all. This is because male slaves and servants could only have a wife if their master allowed them to. Also poor men often did not marry because fathers would not give their daughters to a man that could not pay a bride price and could not care for their daughters. This left many women that needed husbands and this is why wealthier men had many wives.
2. In order to have large armies for defense, to have large farms and become wealthier, large households were needed, land must be preserved in the family lineage by inheritance and male children were desired in an era of high infant mortality thus there was a need to get many wives as inferred from 1 Chro 7:4
3. God's original desire is for man to have only one wife. However in certain societies, women are more than men (due to war, etc) and are not easily able to fend for themselves being male dominated by law and custom. It is thus expedient to have Polygamy as a permissible way of life rather than rampant Prostitution in such places."
4. So that the man will NOT be defrauded or denied for a prolonged period when a wife is menstruating, pregnant, nursing a baby or menoupausal. In ancient times, she was regarded as **\*unclean or not fit\*** for intercourse at such moments -Lev 12:2; 15:19-25. Man however has a continuous and relatively higher sex drive; is not as restricted or encumbered as a woman. Thus rather than stray into the hands of prostitutes or secretly unto his neighbour's wife, due to incontinence, it became expedient to legally take another wife.

We know adulterers can not inherit the kingdom of God -1 Cor 6:9-10. We know many Polygamists who shall be in that Kingdom -Heb 11 including Abraham, Moses, etc. It is no where specified or implied in the Bible that Polygamy (one man, many women) is a sin to be repented of! Just as Celibacy (one man, zero women) is not a sin though not ideal, both are permissible. It is polyandry (one woman, many men), homosexuality/sodomy, bestiality, orgies/polyamory (many men, many women) relationships, etc. that the scriptures condemn as sin. That Adam was initially single and celibate was **\*not good does not imply it was bad/sinful.\*** There is a neutral state in the moral scale. **\*Polygamy could be amoral\***.

### **Part 2**

The Israelites were probably accustomed to polygamy being a part of their law and life at the time Christ came. Christ taught about the sin of adultery in Mt 5, 19 and Jn 8 but he did not directly speak against polygamy. In Matthew 19:3-9 specifically, the Lord Jesus is not speaking about polygamy. Rather, He is only answering a question about divorce. There would in all likelihood be men and women who were practicing polygamy at the feast of Pentecost in Acts 2 when many were converted at the birth of the church. **\*Do you honestly believe and assert that\*** such Polygamists were told to divorce before they could be baptized by the apostles? Or that they

were told to put away their wives after baptism into the early church? There is no scriptural passage that indicates either. For sure polygamy is not expressly condemned or prohibited in the new covenant. Certain passages might allude to polygamy in the times of the early church and these include:

a) 1 Cor 5:1ff

From written info we can conclude that the man slept his stepmother not his mother. We however do not know for certain whether the woman was married while his mum was alive or after; whether his dad was a polygamist or serial monogamist. The fornicator was a Christian but his partner was not since the apostle wrote nothing about disciplining the woman. This is inconclusive to justify polygamy but points to the likelihood..

b) 1 Cor 7:1ff

Paul notes in vs 6 that what he is saying so far from vs 1 is by permission not by express commandment of the Lord. Note that from the Greek, vs 2 literally says "to avoid immorality, **\*let every man have sexual relations with the wife belonging to him\*** and **\*every wife have sexual relations with her own husband\***." This verse and the passage 1-5, is really about who one may lawfully have sex with -a spouse not others. The intent behind the verse is not to forbid polygamy, as that isn't ever declared a sin or immorality in scripture. Vs 2 does not forbid a polygamist from having sex with each of his wives. (If someone like Elkanah had just been converted the verse is not asking him to put away his second wife or to diminish his marital duties to her.) As for not defrauding anyone (vs 3-5), **\*agreement is the key\*** -they could have mating schedules as Leah and Rachael did in Gen 30:14-16, the man is enjoined to ensure such in Exo 21:10.

Consider also verses

27 Art **\*thou\*** bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art **\*thou\*** loosed from a wife? seek not a wife.

28 **\*But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned\***; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned.

Thus if a married man marries a new virgin (without putting away his first wife -vs 10-11), he has not sinned. When a woman separates from her husband, the wife is commanded of God to either: remain unmarried or be reconciled back to her husband. The husband is commanded of God to not put away any wife and to let any departed wife return back to him. The key point is that the husband is NOT given the same commandments of instruction. Only the wife is commanded to remain unmarried, but the husband is not given that commandment. The (Greek) text of verse 27 is clearly only addressing married men -whether or not the wife has departed. Vs 28 would ordinarily most apply to one whose spouse is dead. The import is the man can always marry a new wife just as under the old covenant but must not maltreat the wife of his youth or initial living women.

c) 1 Tim 3:1ff

It is also offered that 1 Tim 3:2 could be rendered as – *“a bishop then must be blameless, the husband of first wife...”*

meaning one who is still married to his first wife and **\*possibly but not necessarily the polygamists\*** in the congregation. Same Greek word in Acts 20:7 rendered "first" was now rendered "one" in 1 Tim 3:2, possibly based on many translators personal preference for monogamy. Yet what the verse says even with their rendition is that church leaders must have one wife, it does not necessarily mandate every man to but even inherently suggests that there are practicing polygamists in the early church! A Christian does not necessarily have to aspire to be an Elder though that is the ideal. God knows all brothers in the church would not desire or qualify for the office hence the criteria he laid down.

d) Mt 25:1-13

Marriage requires a man to leave his parents and cleave to his wife. He could initiate several marriages with different women unlike a woman who was prohibited from marrying another man while her original lawful husband lives (Rm 7:2-3). In the Bible, the husband could be polygamous but each wife must be monogamous with him! Even God had depicted himself as the husband of "Israel and of Judah" or **\*of two women\*** in Jer

3:6-8, Eze 23:2-4. Also Christ depicted himself as the bridegroom in the parable of the ten virgins. The virgins therein married represent Christians who are the church, the bride of Christ. The virgins do not represent the bridesmaids. All congregations are part of the church and we all must be faithful to one Lord to be part of his one family. His one body and bride, is not one individual but many members. **\*Each of us being joined to the Lord is one spirit with him\*** (1 Cor 6:17) just as a polygamist could be one flesh with each of his wives. This is evident by the fact that 1 Cor 6:16 reveals that a man can be "one flesh" even with an harlot, much less each of his wives to whom he is obligated? If polygamy is a sin, where is the indication in scripture? Did God ever punish anyone for it or require atonement for it or demand repentance for it? Has it always been a sin or did it stop being a sin or suddenly became sin at a particular time?

To assert that it was a sin tolerated under the old covenant is to impugn God's holy and moral nature. The LORD God does not change (Mal 3:6, Heb 13:8), nor would He, therefore, "tolerate" sin, as some mistakenly assert. Every transgression received a just and swift recompense under the law of Moses. 1 Cor 10:6-8 and Heb 13:4 are still relevant. "Thou shall not commit adultery", "i the Lord hate divorce," etc. are found in scripture but no such statements are given against polygamy. We should promote the ideal of monogamy yet we must also be careful not to prohibit what God allows or to "blame the guiltless" or **\*declare as sin what he has not.\***

Let me add that the reason bigamy / polygamy is considered a felony in many countries now is because of modern Christendom as espoused by Catholicism / denominations which influenced their marital statutes. As long as polygamist families do not obtain government-recognition (e.g., seeking an official marriage-license), there is no breaking of any law. For eligible persons before God, traditional marriages are valid also before the state even without going to a registry or getting certified/ solemnized in so called 'church-wedding'. Marriage is defined by God Who alone has the authority NOT by any government.

God condemned divorce in the OT and showed his hatred for it through Malachi. He even alluded to impropriety of divorce by saying it would arise on basis of an uncleanness or an hatred in Deut 24. **\*However, no such explicit disdain or condemnation of polygamy is found throughout the scriptures.\*** The works of the flesh are listed in Gal 5, adultery NOT polygamy is among them. You need to prove it is a sin before you can include it amongst the "and such like."

### Part 3

The aim of this portion is to critique the previous sections and to offer a refutation to their arguments and conclusion. It is contended that polygamy is not a sin since there is no express law that says "***thou shall not marry more than one wife,***" there is no passage where such behaviour is condemned and no one was ever told to atone for or repent of it. The refrain is "*for where no law is, there is no transgression,.. For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law... Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.*" -Romans 4:15; 5:13, 1 John 3:4

I however submit that **\*"polygamy is a transgression of the law"\*** I will spend some time to prove this submission and show why we cannot use the fact that it was condoned in the OT as a justification to practice it in this gospel era.

In defense some allude to instrumental music saying God never commanded it or declared it sin too. However, God did command instruments of music in worship in OT (2 Chro 29:25) whereas he requires the heart for making melody in the NT -Eph 5:19. A better analogy is the issue of women silence in the church. In 1 Cor 14:34-35, Paul wrote a command from the Lord (vs 37): "*Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.*"

Where was that expressly written in the law of Moses? The 'law' refers to the totality of OT record -including the Patriarchs, Moses, Psalms and prophets. We can see God instructing that a woman must be under obedience to the husband from Gen 3:16, and infer only men should speak in the assembly of his people from Exo 18:21-23, Deut 17:8-12. Yet there were women leaders/prophetesses like Deborah in the OT but none in the NT. Similarly, we can infer the law for monogamy from Gen 2:24 "*Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.*"

This is reiterated in Malachi 2:14-16 "*Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.*"

Jeremiah 3:20 says: "*Surely as a wife treacherously departeth from her husband, so have ye dealt treacherously with me, O house of Israel, saith the LORD.*"

Not only is the Genesis account a pattern: a rib was made into a single helpmate **\*not ribs for multiple companions\***. God knew Eve alone was sufficient to meet the need of Adam and for mankind to begin the task of dominating and replenishing the earth. When a man marries he leaves his parents to cleave to his wife. If he should marry a second woman, he would be leaving his first living wife (at least partially if not totally) to cleave unto another. Christ was referring to this marriage law (that just two becomes one till death puts asunder) which was from the beginning in Matthew 19

*4 And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female,*

*5 And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?*

*6 Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*

He expects anyone to be able to see that implication from the Genesis record, just as he expected the Sadducees to see the necessity of a resurrection from Exo 3:6 in Mt 22:31-33

The argument was made that a polygamist becomes one with each of his wives and that it is not the 3 or more that becomes one. 1 Cor 6:16-17 was cited to show he could be one flesh with any harlot or with each wife just as the Lord is one spirit with every believer. The response to that is as follows: God demands that all that are in a marriage be one -Eph 5:23-33. A man's wife is as his body (Eph 5:28) to be nourished. For Christ, not only is He joined to each Christian, the Christians that make his body are also joined as one -Eph 4:4 & 1 Cor 1:10; 12:12. So in a polygamy are the women joined as one flesh and in one mind? (They would only be if they indulge in lesbianism and live in harmony with one another while also joined as one to the husband!) The body or wife of Christ is not complete with just one individual -Eph 4:16 & 1 Cor 12:14. A man however is complete with just one wife -Eph 5:31.

This also relates to the allusion made to Mt 25:1-13 that Christ depicts himself as a bridegroom married to several virgins -hence a man could marry many wives.

The truth is Christ will be married to one bride; the church which is collectively described as a virgin (2 Cor 11:2) which is made up of righteous saints that are figuratively also individually described as virgins (Rev 9:7-8; 14:4). The import of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins is preparedness not the number of brides a man should marry at a wedding. God depicting himself as husband of the divided kingdom is immaterial as the nation was reunified before Christ came. Today, there is one Israel -the spiritual children of Abraham by faith.

On 1 Cor 7:1-5, while it is true that the theme of this passage is lawful sex which occurs only in a marriage, the use of words such as "his own wife... her own husband \*"**are declarave, possessive and exclusive.**" The idea of sharing a spouse as in any form of polygamy is prohibited. It is the wife that has power over her husband's body, not the **\*wives\***. There is no way a man can use his organ to penetrate two or more women at the same time, it has to be sequential so one will surely be defrauded should two wives desire their husband at the same time in such relationship. The possible scenario in polyandry is expressly described as adultery in Rm 7:2-3. In 1 Cor 5, the man was rebuked for having (sex with) his father's wife, not his father's widow. This is a denunciation of not only adultery but also of incest and of polyandry under the NT.

It was claimed that men do not make exclusive marital vows as is done in monogamy today in ancient times. That may not be accurate in general. Initially, God-fearing men were usually monogamous in scripture; those who were not were usually compelled by their wives or father in laws (e.g. Abraham, Jacob). It was the 'hard guys' like Lamech, Esau who 'had no qualms' before the practice became a common culture. Even then we see Laban making a covenant with Jacob thus:

Genesis 31:50 *"If thou shalt afflict my daughters, or if thou shalt take other wives beside my daughters, no man is with us; \*see, God is witness betwixt me and thee."\**

This kind of agreement for exclusivity might not be uncommon in the old covenant whenever a man gave out his daughter in marriage, the prospective suitor is eager to accept conditions (Gen 34)

It was offered that Paul permitted polygamy by not requiring the husband to remain unmarried if the wife leaves in 1 Cor 7:10-11, and this was alluded to as evident in vs 27-28. Note carefully 1 Corinthians 7

25 *Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful.*

26 *I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, I say, that it is good for a man so to be.*

27 *Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife.*

28 *But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you.*

Paul was advising people, particular the Corinthians to remain in whatever state they were due to the prevailing and imminent distress of their time. It stands against reason that he would ask the married to add another spouse when he was actually saying it is preferable for those that were unmarried not to, and that having a spouse is inherently a distraction to spirituality, though not a sin in itself. It is the man who is loosed from a wife (via death or a 'scriptural divorce') that vs 28a is addressing. This is evident from the opening words "but and if" of vs 28. It has to be so grammatically for it must reference the last person being addressed in the previous verse (as in vs 11). Being bound or loosed are different scenarios. The wife is bound to the husband alone till death before she may marry another (vs 39).

From 1 Tim 3:2, it is offered that the phrase may correctly be rendered as "*a bishop then must be blameless, the husband of first wife...*"

That is true. However, such rendition does not connote a polygamist may be an Elder; rather it is even more restrictive than stating "*the husband of one wife.*" This is because using 'first' requires that he should not only be monogamous but must also never have been married unto another woman ever. Irrespective of whichever rendition one favours, the import is just 'one/first' wife is specified, anything else is necessarily excluded -for a potential elder who must serve as an example to the flock. The requirement does not necessarily imply there were polygamists in the early church, it simply specified those whom God wanted in the Eldership must be married to one woman and have a model family/home (vs 2-5), thus excluding bachelors, widowers, etc.

Given that it is two that are to be one flesh in marriage, when a married man sleep with another woman other than his original spouse or wife of his youth, he commits adultery with the second woman and commits adultery against the first woman. In pure polygamy there is a form of consent of all parties involved for the act to take

place and **\*God choose not to impute the transgression as sin in the OT\***. (That can not be denied given where he told David: "*And I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things.*" -2 Samuel 12:8). Nevertheless, that God did not punish the transgression occasioned by polygamy with the judgment it deserved did not mean there were no consequences. The way of a transgressor is hard; it is not accidental that polygamous homes of the OT were full of jealousy, strife and tumult, even when blood sisters were involved as the wives. Adultery was not always punished with the full weight of the law as seen with Judah, David/Bathsheba, Hosea's harlot wife and the woman brought unto Jesus in John 8. That however is not a license for sin today, for we are under the true light and not shadows. Even through Solomon, the Lord testified his preference for monogamy in Proverbs 5

*15 Drink waters out of thine own cistern, and running waters out of thine own well.*

*16 Let thy fountains be dispersed abroad, and rivers of waters in the streets.*

*17 Let them be only thine own, and not strangers' with thee.*

*18 Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth.*

*19 Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love.*

*20 And why wilt thou, my son, be ravished with a strange woman, and embrace the bosom of a stranger?*

*21 For the ways of man are before the eyes of the LORD, and he pondereth all his goings.*

Celibacy could be is a divine gift to some (Mt 19:12, 1 Cor 7:7) but polygamy is not amoral in light of Christ's teachings. The husband should now do unto the wife as he wants her to do unto him, "*giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.*" -1 Pet 3:7b In impure polygamy wherein the first wife has been put away treacherously, the Lord speaks against such in Mt 19:9. (The exemption he grants for remarriage while a former mate is alive is "*save for the cause of fornication.*" This means a marriage cannot be dissolved save when it is a fornication or immorality ab initio; an illicit union. What Jesus taught thereby is universal and valid from the beginning of creation till the end of the world, there abound Biblical examples of this interpretation in Patriarchal, Mosaic and Gospel ages.) Pointing to men of faith in Heb 11 does not justify polygamy. The commendation therein was to commend their overall faith and a particular aspect of their lives not a sign of approval of everything they did. They lived under a different dispensation wherein God's will was still in revelation and not perfectly revealed or enforced unlike ours. Hebrews 13:4 is paramount today –"*Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.*"

While several plausible reasons were given for the origin of polygamy, they remain speculations inasmuch such are not **\*necessary inferences\*** from Bible verses. Children are an heritage of the Lord, these he gives and is not guaranteed by polygamy, 1 Chro 7:4 states that a household contributed many soldiers because they had many wives and sons. It did not say they had many wives so as to raise a batallion. That the woman is unclean in Leviticus during menstrual issues or for seven days after childbirth are temporary matters and more for religious reasons not that the husband should go marry another. After all, a man was unclean too after having sexual intercourse with his woman. Patience and self-control is necessary even today as either spouse may have a health challenge at any time, which is not a justification for extra-marital sex. Now wars depend on strategy and technology not mere number of troops, wealth creation depends on knowledge / information and industrialization not manual labour –so the bases enumerated for polygamy in the past are no longer tenable. God allowed men to walk in their own ways in ages past, overlooking and forbearing several things including polygamy, divorce, ignorant worship, etc -Mt 19:8. Acts 14:16; 17:23-31. In the NT scriptures, there is no record of anyone practicing polygamy but all examples and instructions are on monogamous marriages. We need to respect the silence of the scriptures and not go beyond that which is written. The original marriage plan and ideal has been restored by Jesus Christ; it is **\*"one man, one wife."**