

SOME THOUGHTS ON POLYGAMY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT
By "A friend of mine"

Concerning the incendiary issue of polygamy in the Old Testament, four inter-related affirmations, and then a number of secondary observations.

First, the AFFIRMATIONS:

1. POLYGAMY DOES NOT FALL UNDER THE INTERDICT OF THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT.

The point: polygamy is not *intrinsically* wicked; there is no sense in which, *in its very essence*, the act of a man having more than one wife violates the moral character of a holy God, so long as that man faithfully executes all the responsibilities of a husband to both/all of his wives (as below). Thus the Mosaic Law can contemplate bigamy without explicitly condemning the relationship (Deut 21:15-17). In short, polygamy is not *intrinsically* adulterous.

2. THE REASON POLYGAMY IS NOT ADULTERY IS THAT POLYGAMY ASSUMES THAT THE DEMANDS OF THE MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP, AS DEFINED AND DISPLAYED IN SCRIPTURE, WILL OBTAIN ENTIRELY IN ALL ASPECTS OF THE RELATIONSHIP.

This is counter-intuitive to one who has trained himself to think biblical thoughts. Indeed, there is that in each one of us which recoils at the idea of regarding with approbation *any* man who is sexually involved with two women at once. But the question must be this: if a man is married to two women at once in the biblical sense, do his physical relations with those women constitute adultery.

The intuitive response is to insist that those relations are adulterous because in marriage a man is to cleave to his wife, and it is unthinkable that a man could thus cleave to more than one woman at once. I can certainly see where the Scriptures at least *implicitly* teach that a man can cleave to only one wife at a time (given the singular in Gen 2:24, as well as the concluding observation that by reason of the leaving/cleaving "they shall become one flesh").

If that biblical standard of marriage leaves no room for a second wife (that is, for a man, having already left his father and mother and joined himself to a wife, to cleave to a second wife without violating the leave/cleave relationship he has already formed under God with his first wife), then proposition #1 above is erroneous. However, I am persuaded that there are reasons to acknowledge the validity of that proposition, even given the intuitive disregard for the idea of a man cleaving to more than one wife. First of all, Scripture does not *explicitly* state that a man can cleave to but one wife at a time (though the *moral superiority* of monogamy is validly inferred from both the precept and the pattern of Genesis 2). Second, polygamy does occur without explicit disapprobation in the narrative of Scripture, in many cases in the lives of the heroes of the Old Testament, men renowned for their spiritual depth and character. Third (and most importantly) there is one scenario in which a polygamous relationship is demanded in the Mosaic law (levirate marriage, Deut 25:5). [Note: that law states that when a man dies before giving children to his wife, one of his brothers must "perform the duty of a husband's brother" to her - i.e. must "go in to her" and provide her with a child. There is no indication that only unmarried brothers would be thus obligated. The term "levirate" is from the Latin for "brother-in-law.")

3. UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES, POLYGAMY IS THE LEAST WICKED AND DESTRUCTIVE OF A NUMBER OF UNHAPPY “EVILS” AVAILABLE, AND – THOUGH NEVER MORALLY DESIRABLE – IT IS IN THESE CASES MORALLY ACCEPTABLE.

This needs to be contemplated within the scope of a clan culture; there was no “safety net” for the destitute other than the clan. (This is the probably the meaning of the phrase “If brothers dwell together...” in Dt 25:5.) Further, situations often arose in which there were more women than men (e.g. a huge defeat in battle¹). In that culture, women with no family – no husband and no children to care for her – were genuinely and hopelessly destitute. (They would often resort to harlotry – a moral evil, I would argue, more awful and destructive than polygamy.) All that to say that in that culture, built entirely around the clan, polygamy (and in some cases polyandry) at times became the lesser of the evils from which a people had to choose. Clearly, the most accessible illustration of this in the Bible is levirate marriage, which was provided to rescue the childless widow from destitution. *Indeed, this may well be the only biblically defensible reason for polygamy.*

In that regard, a disclaimer. The other justification for taking a second wife often appealed to in the narrative of Scripture is the inability of the first wife to give her husband a son (Abraham [where the strategy is divinely rejected], Jacob, probably Elkanah); I have serious doubts as to whether this was ever morally valid. Although I understand the importance of children in a clan society, the biblical narrative seems to denounce this at least implicitly. (More below.)

4. IN ITS ESSENCE, POLYGAMY IS MORALLY INFERIOR (I.E., IT DILUTES THE FORCE OF THE LEAVE/CLEAVE PRINCIPLE) AND SOCIALLY DESTRUCTIVE. IT IS THEREFORE TO BE REGARDED AS MORALLY LEGITIMATE ONLY WHEN PRACTICED UNDER DIVINELY DEFINED CIRCUMSTANCES.

My position can be coherent only if polygamy is regarded as morally legitimate *only when appealed to as an expedient*, an “emergency” strategy to be employed only in extraordinary circumstances. The only place where it is expressly commanded is the case of the childless widow, and in that case the attendant legislation (25:6-10) assumes the possible, if not probable, reluctance of the surviving brother to “fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law”. It seems valid to infer from the Deuteronomy passage that a polygamous relationship would be morally necessary in the case of such an exigency, and yet such a relationship is so foreign to sanctified impulses and to a healthy domestic situation that God took care to provide both legislative demands and societal influences in order to assure that it would be honored. This was the more dramatically true given the explicit prohibition against a man taking his brother’s wife in Lev 20:21.

A further point in this regard. Although polygamy appears in the Old Testament record without any *explicit* prohibition or denunciation, it is certainly significant that it becomes the object of *implicit* disapprobation by means of the narratives in which it appears. That is, in every instance I can think of in the biblical narrative, the consequence of this strategy is tragedy and disruption, both spiritual and domestic. Indeed, in nearly every case tragedy and disruption become the center-point of the narrative, and all of that *because of the polygamy*. (For instance, Sarah and Hagar, Leah and Rachel, Hannah and Peninnah, the foreign wives of Solomon.)

¹ For instance, there was temporary emergency authorization of bigamy in Athens following massive male casualties in the Peloponnesian War in the late 5th century BC (D. Ogden, *Greek Bastardy in the Classical and Hellenistic Periods*, Oxford: 1996, 72-5).

Furthermore, when the resort to a second wife in order to raise up seed occurs in the Old Testament, the narrative often includes the explicit notice that the strategy involves disbelief. And that in contrast to the narratives in which petition was made to God by those unable to bear children (that is, they did not resort to the expediency of polygamy) and God honored that petition with a child who would be much used by Him (e.g. Hannah, who although her husband had resorted to polytheism nonetheless begged God for a son and was heard; Zecharias and Elisabeth, who continued to beg God long after there was human reason to suppose the prayer would be heard). In sum, though there is in the Scripture no explicit prohibition of polygamy, there is in the divinely superintended record the clear message that polygamy is dangerous and destructive, that it should be resorted to only in the most extreme exigencies, and that the pattern God established is that a man leave his father and mother and cleave to one woman as wife.

Now the SECONDARY OBSERVATIONS

- a. In the present discussion, the concept of polygamy is very narrowly defined. It does *not* include the man who surreptitiously keeps two households in two cities, or the Mormon-esque scenario of one man who marries many wives and simply balances them in one household. Indeed, the impulse in the Old Testament narrative is to eschew the relationship (Deut 25:6-10; Gen 38:6ff.). Polygamy born of a man's lustful and morally perverted appetite to bed more than one woman is on the face of it reprehensible.
- b. Deut 17:17 is often appealed to as a universal prohibition upon polygamy, but I would argue that the harems of the ancient Near Eastern world are a distinguishable issue. They were largely a political enterprise; they were designed to aggrandize the monarch; and they are in fact condemned explicitly in Deut 17:17. There is nothing to be said in defense of the practice, but I am not convinced the interdict of Deut 17 can be taken as a blanket condemnation of polygamy across the culture. The context has to do explicitly with the tendency of the human king to aggrandize himself; indeed, the three-fold interdict (“you shall not multiply wives, horses, silver & gold”) includes the three primary means by which a ruler in the ancient world would render himself glorious. The multiplication of wives has to do with enlarging the king's harem. If he were truly powerful, neighboring lords and kinglets would sue for peace and submit to some sort of treaty by which they would be promised that their land would not be invaded, that their caravans would be allowed to pass through the king's territory, and so on. In many cases that treaty would be sealed with a princess for the king's harem. Thus, the larger the king's harem the more powerful and grand was that king. Because the true King of Israel was Yahweh, and because the human kings were to regard themselves as no more than His appointed representatives, King Yahweh disallowed all of the accouterments of royal majesty normally prized and flouted by monarchs.
- c. I am *not* saying that the seventh commandment ought to be read as “culturally conditioned.” But I am convinced that the commandment is carefully framed. It absolutely – for all time and in every place and under every circumstance – prohibits sexual activity outside of the covenant of marriage. But it does leave room for the

legislation of Deuteronomy 25:5-10 (i.e. levirate marriage) to be given without compromising or jeopardizing God’s earlier word.

- d. I am not persuaded that the levirate relationship involved ongoing sexual relations between the brother-in-law and his second wife. The demand is that he provide offspring for her, and evidently that he care for her as part of his household (“take her to him as wife, *and* perform the duty of a husband’s brother unto her”). It may be that the legislation of Deut 21:15-17 (which demands equity in bequeathing property to the sons of two wives) has reference to a levirate arrangement – that is, that the real issue in levirate marriage is that a child be provided and that that offspring be given his father’s name and be treated fairly in the distribution of his grandfather’s estate. Again, the expediency of raising up seed does not necessarily include ongoing sexual relations with the second wife.
- e. Again, I am fairly persuaded that the only legitimate form of polygamy in the divine economy was levirate marriage, and that this expediency was demanded by societal/cultural realities. Indeed, I would argue that in this one instance polygamy ought to be seen as a virtue, an act of compassion and care. In this regard it is instructive that Moses exults over the equity and kindness of the Law in Deut 4:5-8, averring that other nations would ponder that Law with amazement and confess, “What great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law!” One of the most remarkable kindnesses of the Mosaic Law is the provision for widows with no children to care for them. There was no one more thoroughly deserted and despised in ancient cultures than a widow with no children. Indeed, the brothers of the widow’s dead husband could almost rejoice in her loss because it meant that the inheritance of each of them would be greater. One of the most remarkably humane and tender aspects of the Mosaic Law is this: it demanded that the very ones who might be the most reluctant to help - the brothers who stood to lose by helping - are the ones required to raise up seed to the woman. That child will then become heir to the estate of his paternal grandfather along with all of the uncles on his father’s side. This is the law of levirate marriage. It was practiced in Israel (and in other cultures) before it was instituted in the Law (Gen 38:8), but it was codified in that Law system (Deut 25:5-10). Indeed, in thus codifying that practice Moses provided a way by which the brother-in-law might to his shame refuse to obey (25:6-10). The implication is that by reason of the public shame the clan/community would provide for the widowed woman. But at any rate the wonder of the Law given by King Yahweh is that it so carefully and tenderly cares for the needs of the destitute woman, while at the same time honoring the moral and domestic tensions involved in the exigency at hand.
- f. It is clear that by the time of the New Testament polygamy was to be regarded as unnecessary and wrong. Whatever Paul means by the phrase “husband of one wife” (lit: “one-woman man”) in his list of qualifications for church office (1 Tim 3:2, 12), it certainly prohibits polygamy whether that is Paul’s deliberate intent or no. In fact, that practice had shown itself so certainly destructive that it had been outlawed in the broader Roman culture. One historical study insists that by the time of the Roman Empire monogamy “was firmly established as the only legitimate marriage system: polygamy was considered a barbarian custom or a mark of tyranny and

monogamy was regarded as quintessentially 'Greek.'"² Further, the New Testament makes it clear that in the Christian world the local churches were zealous to care for widows; indeed, they were so zealous that he found it necessary to insist that they honor the biblical demand that if the widow had children, those children were to provide that care (1 Tim 5:3-16). The one exigency which once might have rendered polygamy morally incumbent was no longer a reasonable consideration, churches were anxious to meet the needs of those who were once helped by levirate marriage, the broader culture had come to realize that polygamy was corrosive to society, and thus the standard of "one-woman man" is to be universally enforced. In fact, polygamy is almost certainly not what Paul has in mind in his use of that phrase; his reference is to a man of impeccable moral integrity and purity. But it would be impossible to argue that a man married to two women at once fulfilled that requirement. With all that, the point here is simply that the restriction of 1 Tim 3:2, 12 certainly establishes the moral superiority of monogamy, but it should not be taken as a timeless interdict upon the practice of polygamy given the way that practice is handled in the Old Testament, especially in reference to the law of levirate marriage.

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² Walter Scheidel, "Monogamy and polygyny in Greece, Rome and world history," in Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics, found on 8/25/08 at <http://www.princeton.edu/~pswpc/papers/subject/subject/romanhist.html>.