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CONDEMNATION AND GRACE: POLYGAMY AND CONCUBINAGE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

by Richard M. Davidson

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The divine design for marriage established at creation is a *monogamous* relationship between “a man...and...his wife” (Gen. 2:24).¹ Paul’s citation of this verse makes even more explicit the monogamous design: “And the *two* [not three or more] shall become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31, emphasis added). Monogamy is ultimately rooted in monotheism and in the concept of *imago Dei* (image of God): just as the Lord God, who is “one” (Deut. 6:4), is not involved in promiscuous relationships within a polytheistic pantheon, so husbands and wives, created in God’s image, are to be monogamous in their marital relationship with each other. However, a distortion of the creation design for monogamy manifests itself during Old Testament times in the practice of polygamy and concubinage.²

POLYGAMY AND CONCUBINAGE IN GENESIS

The book of Genesis contains several examples of polygamy and/or concubinage — Lamech (Gen. 4:18–24), Nahor (Gen. 22:20–24), Abraham (Gen. 16 and 21), Jacob (Gen. 29–30), Esau (Gen. 26:34–35; 28:8–9; 36:2–3), and Eliphaz (Gen. 36:12). Though no explicit verbal condemnation of this practice is given in these biblical narratives, the narrator (whom I take as Moses) presents each account in such a way as to underscore a theology of disapproval. The record of these polygamous relationships is bristling with discord, rivalry, heartache, and even rebellion, revealing the negative motivations and/or disastrous consequences that invariably accompanied such departures from

God's Edenic standard.³ The inspired narratives with their implicit theology of disapproval speak even louder, and more eloquently, than explicit condemnation.

With regard to Abraham's relationship with Hagar, although Hagar was humanly regarded as Abram's wife (Gen. 16:3), the narrator carefully records the contrast between human understanding and the divine perspective. Throughout the story, God regularly calls Sarah Abram's wife (e.g., Gen. 17:15, 19; 18:9–10) but refers to Hagar only as "Sarai's maid" (Gen. 16:8–9; cf. 21:12) and not as Abram's wife. Furthermore, by juxtaposing the account of Abraham's return to a monogamous status (Gen. 21) with the account of Abraham's test of faith on Mt. Moriah (Gen. 22), the narrator seems to suggest that it was after returning to faithfulness in his marital status that Abraham was prepared to pass the supreme test of loyalty to God.

With regard to the polygamy/concubinage of Jacob, in addition to the narrative bristling with details of the disastrous consequences of polygamy in Jacob's dysfunctional family, there are also hints in the text that after Jacob's wrestling with the Angel at the Jabbok River (Gen. 32:24–28), he returned to a monogamous state. Before the encounter at the Jabbok, the narrative repeatedly mentions Jacob's sexual relationship with all four wives/concubines, but after this event, the only conjugal relations mentioned are with his wife Rachel (Gen. 35:16–19). Whereas before Jacob's name (character) change at the Jabbok, he had called both Rachel and Leah "my wives" (Gen. 30:26; cf. 31:50), after the Jabbok experience, he called only Rachel "my wife" (Gen. 44:27). Most telling of all, in the genealogy of Genesis 46, the narrator mentions Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah as women who "bore to Jacob" children, but only Rachel is classified as "Jacob's wife" (Gen. 46:15, 18, 19, 25). Thus the narrator seems to imply that after Jacob's conversion experience at the Jabbok, he continued to care for Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah, but no longer considered them his wives and concubines, and returned to a monogamous relationship with the wife of his original intention, Rachel.

MOSAIC LEGISLATION

According to some interpreters, several laws in the Pentateuch assume, allow for, and even approve of the practice of polygamy. But a careful analysis of these passages reveals that none of them supports polygamy or concubinage as the will of God.⁴

For example, Deuteronomy 17:16–17 does not give the king permission to have several wives, as some have claimed; rather the divine will in these verses is that the king have *no* multiplication of horses (i.e., no chariotry), *no* multiplication of wives (i.e., no harem), and no amassing of *excessive* wealth.⁵

The legislation most frequently cited as support for polygamy and concubinage in the Pentateuch is found in Leviticus 18:18. This passage is commonly translated as tacitly allowing for plural marriages. For example, the NASB reads, “You shall not marry a woman in addition to her sister [Heb. *’ishah ’el-’akhotah*, lit. ‘a woman to her sister’] as a rival while she is alive, to uncover her nakedness.” In this and most other modern versions, the phrase *’ishah ’el-’akhotah* (“a woman to her sister”) is taken as referring to a literal (consanguine) sister. The implication of this reading is that although a certain incestuous polygamous relationship is forbidden (ie., marriage to two consanguine sisters while both are living, technically called sororal polygyny), polygamy in general is acceptable within the law.

However, the Hebrew phrase *’ishah ’el-’akhotah* (“a woman to her sister”) in its eight occurrences elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible *always* is used idiomatically in the distributive sense of “one in addition to another,” and *nowhere* refers to literal sisters.⁶ Likewise, the masculine equivalent of this phrase, *’ish ’el-’akiw* (“a man to his brother”), appears twelve times in the Hebrew Bible, and is always used in a similar idiomatic manner with a distributive meaning of “one to another” or “to one another,” and *nowhere* is it to be translated literally as “a man to his brother.”⁷ Consistent with usage elsewhere in Scripture, Leviticus 18:18 should be taken idiomatically and distributively as referring to “one [woman/wife] in addition to another [woman/wife],” and not to literal sisters.

Numerous other considerations related to this passage—involving semantic, syntactical, literary-structural, contextual, and theological evidence—lead me to join those scholars who conclude that this verse refers to any two women, not just to two consanguine sisters. In other words, this legislation prohibits *all* polygamy.⁸ God’s will here is revealed as opposing all polygamy/concubinage, even though there are no punishments mentioned for this practice during Old Testament times.⁹ The prohibitions in Leviticus 18—including polygamy/concubinage in v. 18—are presented as universal moral law, applicable to all humanity (transcultural) for all time (transtemporal), upholding the order of creation.¹⁰

POLYGAMY AND CONCUBINAGE DURING THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES

The book of Judges contains several accounts of polygamy and/or concubinage. Judges 8:30 records the case of Gideon, who “had many wives.” The context of this passage makes clear that Gideon’s polygamy came in the setting of his apostasy later in life, in which he not only became polygamous but also idolatrous (vv. 24–28). Thus there is no divine approval for his polygamous relationships. Several other of the judges may have

been polygamous, due to their numerous offspring: Jair (Judges 10:3–4), Ibzan (Judges 12:8–9), and Abdon (Judges 12:13).

The concluding narrative block of Judges (chaps. 19–21), which includes the story of a Levite and his concubine (Judges 19), all too vividly portrays the explosive nature and destructive capacity of decadent sexuality. This material probably was placed at the end of the book to highlight the depths of degradation to which the people of Israel sank when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

POLYGAMY AND CONCUBINAGE DURING ISRAEL’S MONARCHY

The books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles also reveal a society that has strayed far from God’s moral standard. Those who fell prey to the prevailing customs of bigamy, polygamy, or concubinage included even the pious ones, such as Elkanah (1 Sam. 1–2), and the political leaders of the united monarchy: Saul (1 Sam. 14:50; 2 Sam. 3:7), David (10 wives/concubines besides Bathsheba and Michal; 2 Sam. 5:13; 1 Chron. 3:1–9; 14:3), and Solomon (700 wives and 300 concubines; 1 Kings 3:1; 7:8; 11:1–7).

At least six of the twenty Judean kings of the divided monarchy are mentioned as having more than one wife: Rehoboam (2 Chron. 11:18–21), Abijah (14 wives; 2 Chron. 13:21), Jehoram (2 Chron. 21:14–17), Joash (2 Chron. 24:2–3),¹¹ Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24:15), and Zedekiah (Jer. 38:23). In the northern kingdom, only the polygamy of Ahab is recorded (1 Kings 20:3–7), although other kings may well have followed this practice. The genealogical records of Chronicles also mention several polygamists: Jerahmeel (1 Chron. 2:25–28), Caleb (1 Chron. 2:46–48), Ashhur (1 Chron. 4:5), Izrahiah and his four sons (1 Chron. 7:3–4), and Manasseh (1 Chron. 7:14).

The biblical narrators faithfully record the anguish and disharmony involved in having a “rival wife” (1 Sam. 1:6; see the account of Hannah’s experience, esp. vv. 10–11, 15) in disregard of the Leviticus 18:18 legislation, and the disastrous personal and national results of kings “multiplying wives” to themselves in blatant disobedience to the divine prohibition in Deuteronomy 17:17.

With regard to the life of David in particular, contrary to those who have suggested that God approved of David’s polygamy and even called him “a man after His own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14) while he was in the polygamous state, Ron du Preez makes a strong biblical case for the conclusions that (1) this statement of divine approval did not apply to David while he was a polygamist; (2) the narrator reveals the negative divine assessment of David’s polygamous relationships; (3) Nathan’s message to David in 2 Samuel 12:7–8 does not indicate that God sanctioned and supported

David's practice of polygamy; and (4) toward the end of his life, David returned to a monogamous state (with Bathsheba; 2 Sam. 20:3; 1 Kings 1:1–4).¹²

During and after the Babylonian captivity, there is no Old Testament mention of plural marriage among God's people.

THE SUM OF THE MATTER

In the Old Testament, there are some thirty-three reasonably clear historical cases of polygamy/concubinage out of approximately three thousand men mentioned in the Scriptural record. Most of these examples involved wealthy patriarchs or Israel's judges/monarchs. Within the narratives involving polygamy or concubinage, the divinely inspired writers invariably embed their tacit condemnation of these practices. Mosaic legislation never commands or condones plural marriages but rather prohibits polygamy/concubinage (Lev. 18:18) as part of universal moral law based on the creation order. Thus the Old Testament documents a departure from the Edenic model of sexuality in actual practice but affirms that this departure is not approved by God.

The Old Testament also reveals God's condescension in relating to His people, despite their polygamy/concubinage, recognizing the hardness of their hearts (as with divorce, Matt. 19:8), while at the same time expressing His disapproval for the practice, and ever prompting and empowering them to return to the Edenic/Mosaic standard of morality. The tenderness with which God cared for the victims in a polygamous situation is wonderfully displayed in His treatment of Hagar and Hannah. Striking evidence of God's forgiving and redeeming grace is that the twelve sons of Jacob, products of a marital relationship involving polygamy and concubinage, become the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel, God's covenant people, and their names will be written on the gates of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:12)!

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NOTES

- 1 All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.
- 2 In the Old Testament, the term for "concubine" (pilegish) most frequently refers to a secondary or inferior wife, taken without a legal ceremony or any formalization by means of the dowry, who did

not have the same legal status as the primary wife or wives, although the term occasionally denotes a monogamous man's full and legitimate wife whom he marries after the death of his first wife (e.g., 1 Chron. 1:32; cf. Gen. 25:1–4).

- 3 For full discussion, with bibliography, of each case of polygamy/concubinage in Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament, see my *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 177–91; and Ronald A. G. du Preez, *Polygamy in the Bible* (Berrien Springs, MI: ATS Publications, 1993).
- 4 See Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 191–202, for discussion of all these passages, including the following, which cannot be treated here for lack of space: Exod. 21:7–11; 22:16–17 [Hebrew vv. 15–16]; Deut. 21:15–17; 22:28–29; 25:5–10.
- 5 Given the immediate context and intertextual connections (e.g., 1 Kings 10–11; Isa. 31:1), by juxtaposing these three laws—the first two with the unqualified prohibition to “increase” and the third with a qualification against *excessive* “increase”—it is reasonable to conclude that there is to be no increase of horses or wives, in contrast to no *excessive* increase of wealth. See Gordon P. Hugenerger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi*, VTSup 52 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 119.
- 6 Exod. 26:3 (bis), 5, 6, 17; Ezek. 1:9, 23; 3:13.
- 7 Gen. 37:19; 42:21, 28; Exod. 16:15; 25:20; 37:9; Num. 14:4; 2 Kings 7:6; Jer. 13:14; 25:26; Ezek. 24:23; 33:30.
- 8 For the full range of evidence for this interpretation, see especially Angelo Tosato, “The Law of Leviticus 18:18: A Reexamination,” CBQ 46 (1984), 199–214; and Hugenerger, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 115–18.
- 9 Cf. Exod. 20:17; Lev. 19:17–18. Hugenerger (*Marriage as a Covenant*, 118) suggests that Leviticus 18:18 is an example of a *lex imperfecta*: “a law which prohibits something without thereby rendering it invalid (reflecting a society which would have lacked the requisite means of enforcement in any case).
- 10 See Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 149–59, 211, for numerous lines of biblical evidence supporting this conclusion.
- 11 In 2 Chronicles 24:2–3, the coordinating conjunction *waw* means “but” or “except” rather than “and,” implying divine disapproval for the arranged polygamy: “Joash did what was right in the eyes of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest. [But/Except] Jehoiada got for him two wives” (ESV). See Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 207–8.
- 12 Du Preez, *Polygamy in the Bible*, 183–204. Bridgeman-Giraudon.