

POLYGAMY

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Unlike in the modern Western world, the practice of having multiple wives was an accepted, although uncommon, mode of marriage in the ancient world. This was true both in societies within the broader ancient Near East and within Israel itself. The most common practitioners of polygamy were kings, which we see in the case of David, Solomon, and others (1 Kings 10:1–3). Non-royal individuals, such as Elkanah, the husband of Hannah, took second wives because the first was unable to have children (see 1 Samuel 1:2). Likewise, in Genesis 16 Abraham’s wife Sarah gave her slave Hagar to Abraham as a second wife because Sarah was unable to have children of her own, though this did cause difficulties between Sarah and Hagar. Polygamy formed a vital part of the narrative of Jacob and his family. Isaiah 4:1 speaks of a foreign invasion that killed many males in Judah, which led to multiple women wanting to be married to one man in order to be economically supported.

The commandments in the law of Moses assume that having multiple wives was an option, and they regulate such unions accordingly. Exodus 21:7–11 protected the rights of a female slave married to her owner should he take another wife, specifically protecting her right to food, clothes, and sexual relations with her husband. In a collection of laws about prohibited sexual relationships, Leviticus 18:17 prohibits marrying a woman and her daughter, which is followed immediately by a prohibition against marrying two sisters in Leviticus 18:18. In these laws, it is not the having multiple wives, as such, that is the difficulty but the wives’ preexisting relationship. It is worth noting that in another part of the Bible, Jacob married the sisters Rachel and Leah, and the fraught nature of this relationship is suggestive of the reason for the law in Leviticus. Deuteronomy records a number of laws relating to having multiple wives. Deuteronomy 17:17 is an attempt to control the number of wives a king could take. This commandment from Deuteronomy

does not appear to have been followed by kings such as Solomon. Deuteronomy 21:15–17 ensures that the inheritance of a child of a less-favored wife was not diminished.

In addition to the practice's legal aspects, the ancient Israelite prophets used polygamy as part of the metaphor of God's covenant relationship with Israel. Many prophets drew on marriage imagery for this symbol, but Jeremiah and Ezekiel extended it so that both the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah were depicted as Jehovah's wives.

Joseph Smith received a revelation, now recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 132, restoring the practice of plural marriage among the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ practiced polygamy until it was ended by revelation. Although the revelation in Doctrine and Covenants 132 was received in response to some of Joseph's questions about the Old Testament (see Doctrine and Covenants 132:1), the practice of polygamy among Latter-day Saints was understood and practiced differently from what we find in the Old Testament because of changed social circumstances.

Related verses

Genesis 3:19–23

Genesis 16:1–6

Genesis 25:1–7

Genesis 26:34

Genesis 29:21–31

Genesis 30:1–5, 9–11

Genesis 36:2–3

Exodus 21:7–11

Leviticus 18:17–18

Deuteronomy 17:17

Deuteronomy 21:15–17

Numbers 12:1

Judges 8:30

1 Samuel 1:1–3

2 Samuel 2:2

2 Samuel 3:2–5

1 Kings 11:3

1 Kings 20:7

2 Kings 24:15

1 Chronicles 7:3–4

2 Chronicles 13:21

Isaiah 4:1

Jeremiah 3:6–14

Ezekiel 16:44–57

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