

Paul's Perspective on Polygyny

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Christendom has long held a monogamy-only position that is often defended using several verses from the writings of the Apostle Paul. But did Paul actually believe and promote monogamy over polygyny? Is it possible Catholic and Christian theologians viewed him through a particular bias and mistranslated and/or misunderstood him? This article seeks to demonstrate that Paul consistently allowed for, if not outright promoted, polygyny as a lawful form of family structure.

Without question, polygyny, the family structure that allows a man to have more than one wife, was practiced during the time of the Torah and most of the Tanakh. Righteous men whom we *know* had more than one wife or concubine contemporaneously include Abraham, Jacob, Caleb, Gideon, Elkanah, David, and Joash. Many other men *may have* had more than one wife, however we are simply not told. Circumstantial evidence seems to indicate that a number of other men had more than one wife or concubine simultaneously; however, silence neither proves nor denies monogamy or polygyny. What is clear is that Scripture never condemns a man for having more than one woman under his authority and care.

Besides a complete lack of condemnatory command, God actually describes Himself as having more than one wife in multiple places (Ezekiel 23; Jeremiah 3, and 31). By understanding that He would never describe Himself in sinful terms or regulate a sin so as to make it righteous, one can safely conclude that polygyny is *not* sin as long as it is practiced within the framework of God's instructions.

Conversely, God never commands monogamy as His standard or ideal, nor does He ever intimate such. Christianity assumes such an ideal; however, a consistent hermeneutic approach to the position's foundational passage (Gen. 2:24-25) demonstrates there is no command, otherwise nakedness, shamelessness and vegetarianism would also have to be promoted as the Creation Ideal.

Most of the Christian defense for monogamy-only runs to Paul in an effort to counter the clear Biblical evidence in the Torah that is contrary to their position. Therefore, an honest Bible student must critically evaluate numerous Pauline passages professed to promote monogamy.

Second Temple Jewish Polygyny

Before considering Paul's statements on the topic, it is important to understand the cultural and theological circumstances and presuppositions surrounding his commentaries on marriage and governing the fledgling assemblies.

Paul was a Pharisee of Pharisees and well trained in Second Temple Rabbinic Law. From the time of the Patriarchs through the time of Paul and until Rabbi Gershom ben Judah's Decree circa 1020 CE, polygyny was allowed and practiced in varying degrees among most all Jews throughout Europe and the Middle East. Historians and theologians writing in the century or two after Paul confirm the broad existence of polygyny among the Jews.

Adiel Schremer in his detailed and well researched paper *How Much Jewish Polygyny in Roman Palestine?*, published by the American Academy for Jewish Research elucidates,

Josephus, .. explicitly states that it is customary among Jewish men to marry more than one wife (Ant. XVII: 14; cf. War, 1:477). It is also supported by Justin's claim, that the Jews marry many women. Since these testimonies are of a general and observational character, they are of higher value for us than a few specific evidences for the actual practice of polygyny. Furthermore, several sources from that period indeed testify to the existence of polygyny:

1. Joseph, son of Tobias, married his niece while being married to another woman (Josephus, Ant. XII:186- 189).
2. Herod had many wives (Josephus, War 1:477; Ant. XVII: 18).¹
3. Antipater, Herod's son, married the daughter of his brother, Aristobolus, and another woman, the daughter of Antigonos.
4. In the families of Qifai and Alovai were rivals.
5. Abba, Raban Gamliel's brother, had two wives (Mishnah Yev. 15a).²

John Witte, Jr., in *The Western Case for Monogamy Over Polygamy* writes, "While the Qumran community may have prohibited polygamy, most other Jewish communities permitted the practice, before and after the destruction of the Temple and the diaspora of the Jews in 70 CE."³ He goes on to say, "Even so, the ban [Rabbi Gershom's ban circa 1020/30 CE] was a major shift

¹ Schremer cites Ant. XVII:18, however this quote appears to be in 19.

² Schremer, Adiel, *How Much Jewish Polygyny In Roman Palestine?* [PDF] https://www.academia.edu/4944609/How_Much_Jewish_Polygyny_in_Roman_Palestine_2001_, p. 203 [23]

³ Witte, John, Jr. *The Western Case for Monogamy Over Polygamy*, 2015. Cambridge University Press. p.50

because it explicitly prohibited practices that the Torah and Talmud had long permitted - polygamy and unilateral male divorce.”⁴

The fact that polygyny was accepted and even practiced among early Christians is confirmed by John Cairncross in *After Polygamy Was Made A Sin, The Social History of Christian Polygamy*. After a discussion of 16th century theologian Bernadino Ochino’s strong stand in favor of polygyny, Cairncross writes,

Even in Europe, it has been practised in early Christian times. Emperors such as Valentinian not only had several wives, but explicitly allowed polygamy. Lothair of France, Pepin, Charlemagne and the Emperor Barbarossa all had several wives. The insistence of monogamy was arbitrarily introduced by the Church as late as A.D. 600, just as the celibacy of the clergy is a novelty for which there is no Biblical warrant. And, if the Church has erred for so long, “this is man’s error, not God’s.”⁵

The Greco-Roman Marriage Ideal

If the Torah and Jewish marriage practice was common among early Christians, Greco-Roman culture and law were increasingly monogamy-only. John Witte, Jr., previously cited, paints the legal and cultural landscape that was Paul’s challenge as he revealed Torah and righteous living to the fledgeling assemblies,

Already half a millenium before the time of Jesus, ancient Greece and ancient Rome had chosen monogamy as the only valid form of marriage that could produce legitimate and heritable widows and children. Sixth- and fifth-century BCE laws of various Greek city-states made clear that valid marriages had to be monogamous, and this norm also became commonplace in the first Roman law collections that have survived from the mid-fifth century BCE. Monogamy was a “quintessentially Greek” institution of the ancient world, Stanford ancient historian Walter Scheidel has shown, and the Thracian Greeks and the Romans after them regarded polygamy as “a barbarian custom or a mark of tyranny.”⁶

Witte astutely continues, “Plato’s student Aristotle (384-321 BCE) viewed monogamous marriage as the foundation of the polis”⁷ meaning “city” or “state.” However, the point is

⁴ Ibid. p.60

⁵ Cairncross, John. *After Polygamy was Made a Sin*, 1974. Reprinted by Orphan Copyright Works Project, p.77.

⁶ Witte, J, p.104

⁷ Ibid. p.105

entirely lost on him. The Greeks pursued monogamy for the good of the State, not the good of the patriarchal family in a Biblical nation!

Until the Third century CE, Roman law did not criminalize polygamy. If a man claimed to have two or more wives, the law simply recognized as valid only the first properly married wife. It was considered “legally impossible” to have more than one wife or marriage at the same time.⁸

Though criminalization did not happen until the 258 CE, the legal and cultural march against polygyny began as early as Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome (ca. 716-673 BCE). Gellius, a Roman historian, records that a very old law, appearing to be Numa’s, prohibited a man from living with or marrying his concubine in addition to his wife.⁹ Witte titles this a ‘gradual criminalization of polygamy’ in a culture that was sexually very promiscuous. He writes,

Even though monogamy was the marital ideal of this classical western world, both Greek and Roman laws did allow a married man to have sex with slaves and prostitutes with impunity. These laws also allowed a married man to retain a longstanding concubine so long as she did not live in the marital home and did not inherit anything from the man.¹⁰

Paul’s Gentile congregations are coming out of a sexually promiscuous Greco-Roman monogamy-only culture and learning about covenant keeping Patriarchs who were married in both monogamous and polygynous families. The stage is now set to explore multiple Pauline passages, often used to support monogamy, and see what he may really have been saying.

Paul’s Patriarchal Thesis

The Apostle’s framework for marriage, family, and community is decidedly patriarchal as exemplified in the Torah. He unapologetically spells this out in 1 Corinthians 11:3-12, drawing his foundation from Creation.

³ But I want you to understand that Messiah is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Messiah. ... ⁷ For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.

⁸ For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; ⁹ for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake.

⁸ Ibid. p.108

⁹ Ibid. p.109

¹⁰ Ibid. p.107

Paul is very clear that the woman is to be subject to, or in submission to, her husband. He teaches this in multiple passages (e.g. Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:18-20; 1 Cor. 14:34; Titus 2:5), a sentiment echoed by the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3:1-7. Clearly, the Torah is the guiding framework for male-female relationships and Paul makes it abundantly clear that authority and headship belong to the man.¹¹ Recognizing that Paul is teaching a Torah based understanding of headship and patriarchy does not solve the polygyny question, but Biblical polygyny cannot happen in an egalitarian or non-patriarchal family structure. It is now time to consider specific verses wherein Paul discusses marriage related issues and leaves the door open for, or at times points to, polygyny as the solution for various situations in the Church.

A False Monogamy-Only Bias

Christendom often reaches to 1 Corinthians 7:2 for their first line of defense,

² But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own (ἐαυτοῦ) wife, and each woman is to have her own (ἑαυτῆς) husband. ³ The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. ⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*.

Most English translations render these two *different* Greek words as ‘own,’ however, this is a misleading translation rooted in a monogamy-only bias. Tom Shipley in *Man and Woman in Biblical Law* explains the variance this way,

“Let every man have his *own* (Grk., “heautou”) wife and ... every woman her *own* (Grk., “idios”) husband.” So here we have two different words: “heautou” and “idios.” Why use two *different* Greek words here for “own” in the two clauses of the same sentence and what is the significance? Quite simply the Greek word “heautou” signifies *exclusive* possession, as for example I speak of my *own* body, or my *own* soul. A Biblical example of the use of “heautou” is where Paul admonishes a man to eat his “own” (“heautou”) bread, the point being that we should not be *sharing* the bread spoken of.

The Greek word “idios” signifies actual or potential *corporate* possession, a Biblical example of which is the passage which says Jesus returned to his “own” (“idios”)

¹¹ Ephesians 5:21 is often used errantly to teach ‘mutual submission;’ however, doing so immediately destroys Paul’s illustration of marriage as a picture of Messiah and the Church. 5:21 is a summary verse for the previous section detailing how men in the assembly are to work together in harmony and is in no way a governing verse for Ephesians 5:22-33.

country. There were others who lived in *his own* country because it was *their own* country, also! Far from implying the *unlawfulness* of polygyny, the usage and signification of the two different terms here for “own” seems to have been employed precisely because of an awareness of the *lawfulness* of polygyny. Far from speaking “in monogamous terms,” it seems quite clear that Paul spoke in *polygynous* terms - for the man, but not the woman.¹²

Interestingly, immediately following verse 2, Paul alludes to Exodus 21:10, a passage about how a man is to righteously meet the needs of multiple wives. Paul highlights the Torah command that her conjugal rights are to be met!

Christendom’s most common next line of defense is Paul’s qualifications for elders. Two key passages are cited,

1 Timothy 3:2 An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,³ not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money.⁴ *He must be* one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity

Titus 1:5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,⁶ *namely*, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion.⁷ For the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain,⁸ but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled,

A first, and fascinating, consideration that must be made is the parallel between Moses appointing judges in Exodus 18. The Israelite judges were drawn from the patriarchal structure of existing families, but Paul, in the absence of established fellowships with patriarchal families, must go a more pragmatic route to appoint overseers. Noteworthy, these must be married men who rule their house well.

A second immediate consideration is that even *if* the translators have rendered the passage correctly from the Greek, it does not exclude laymen from having more than one wife. It is directed only at overseers/elders. However, the probability is that the passage is not even translated correctly.

¹² Shipley, Tom., *Man and Woman in Biblical Law: Resurrecting the Biblical Family, Part 1*, 2010. Institute for Christian Patriarchy, Baltimore, Maryland. p.148.

In both passages, the translation reads ‘husband of one wife.’ The first glaring concern one might have upon encountering this wording is that if translated correctly, Paul is excluding many of the Patriarchs from simple eldership in a small local assembly. Imagine this: Abraham, Jacob, Gideon and David, all men “approved by God” (Hebrews 11) would not qualify as elders in a small fellowship. Surely, that cannot be what Paul meant. We must again return to the underlying Greek text for a clue.

Both uses of ‘one’ is the Greek word $\mu\iota\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$. Because translating it as ‘one’ immediately disqualifies authors of Scripture and men after God’s own heart, consideration must be given to several other translational options. Besides ‘one,’ the Greek $\mu\iota\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ can also be translated as ‘a’ or ‘first,’ either of which does not add to Torah nor disqualifies Patriarchs and righteous men of old.

Consider our two possibilities,

- ‘husband of **a** wife’ means he is married. This exactly fits with the rest of both passages as they mention children and ruling his house well.
- ‘Husband of **first** wife’ meaning the man is a covenant keeper. He is not divorced.

Both possibilities are easily defended from the Torah and interestingly, both again leave the door open to an elder having more than one wife, not unlike Abraham, Jacob, Caleb, Elkanah, David, Joash, etc. Paul would *not* have added to the Torah by creating a standard for elders that is nowhere ever taught in the Tanakh.

A third passage with clear patriarchal implications is 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

¹⁰ But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband ¹¹ (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

Notice, unlike Paul’s opined passages beginning ‘But I say,’ he clearly says that this is a command from the Lord, therefore it must exactly align with Torah. One should not be surprised when they note that Paul directly instructs the woman that “she must remain unmarried” but he gives no such reciprocal command to the man. According to Torah, he *may* take another wife and exactly as Paul instructs him, he is not to divorce his first wife. This passage again upholds patriarchal family structure while leaving the door widely ajar for polygyny. As a side note, a few verses later (v. 15), he does allow that a woman whose unbelieving husband has left her should not be in bondage, or presumably can remarry.

God’s Provision for the Widow

With regard to his teaching on marriage, I Timothy 5:3-18 is possibly Paul's most powerful argument for polygyny. He clearly has patriarchal covering and levirate marriage in view as a solution for widows for much of the passage. Because of the detailed nature of the passage, it will be taken a few verses at a time.

³ Honor widows who are widows indeed; ⁴ but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God.

Paul's first instruction is that some of the widow's children or grandchildren should show piety by helping to care for their mother, thus honoring her and their deceased father. While this meets the needs of food and shelter, it does not meet the desire for 'sensual pleasure' which Paul will address in a few verses.

⁵ Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day. ⁶ But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. ⁷ Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach. ⁸ But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Paul draws a distinction for those widows who are 'widows indeed.' These apparently have no children or other familial support structure to turn to for protection or support. His instruction to Timothy is to guide the widows away from 'wanton pleasure' and toward family support so they might be 'above reproach.' Paul reiterates that she should be taken care of by her own house. Verse 8 is usually cited out of context with regard to orphans or family members, but it is clearly concerning widows in the faith and the need for a man to 'provide for his own, especially for those of his household.'

Recall, as well, there were likely an abundance of widows as men would have borne the brunt of persecution in this time period. Later, as persecution further increased against the fledgling fellowships in Messiah, women would have carried part of the burden, but at the point of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, men were in shorter supply than normal causing the widows to far outnumber the men.

⁹ A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, *having been* the wife of one man, ¹⁰ having a reputation for good works; *and* if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, *and* if she has devoted herself to every good work.

The qualifications for 'a widow to be put on the list' are quite stringent. Only the most senior godly women who had impeccable track records in the faith and to their husbands would qualify.

Note that Paul's use of the Greek ἓξ is correctly translated as the numeral 'one,' as in, she was only married one time, confirming what was previously pointed out in I Corinthians 7:10-11.

Paul's instructions to Timothy continue,

¹¹ But refuse *to put* younger widows *on the list*, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married, ¹² *thus* incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. ¹³ At the same time they also learn *to be* idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper *to mention*. ¹⁴ Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, *and* give the enemy no occasion for reproach; ¹⁵ for some have already turned aside to follow Satan.

Audaciously, Paul wants the younger widows to be married and there is a shortage of men! Clyde Pilkington, Jr.'s *The Great Omission* details the fact that even *without* persecution, women outnumber men in almost every time and place in history due to a number of factors.¹³ More specifically, Paul instructed widows in 1 Corinthians 7:39 to be 'married in the Lord' creating an impossible situation for young widows if they are limited to monogamous godly men who are in apparent short supply! Paul's solution is obvious, but he continues,

¹⁶ If any woman who is a believer has *dependent* widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.

Here Paul makes a very important reference that introduces the next couple verses. Ruth and Naomi should immediately come to mind when reading this verse, as well as, by extension, levirate marriage, a subject confirmed in the next two verses!

¹⁷ The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "**YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING,**" and "The laborer is worthy of his wages."

Deuteronomy 25:4-10 states,

⁴ **"You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing.**

⁵ "When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be *married* outside *the family* to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. ⁶ It shall be that the firstborn whom she bears shall assume the name of his dead brother, so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel. ⁷ But if the man does not desire to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the

¹³ Pilkington, Clyde L., Jr., *The Great Omission: Christendom's Abandonment of the Biblical Family*. 2010. Patriarch Publishing House. p.13ff.

elders and say, ‘My husband’s brother refuses to establish a name for his brother in Israel; he is not willing to perform the duty of a husband’s brother to me.’⁸ Then the elders of his city shall summon him and speak to him. And *if* he persists and says, ‘I do not desire to take her,’⁹ then his brother’s wife shall come to him in the sight of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face; and she shall declare, ‘Thus it is done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house.’¹⁰ In Israel his name shall be called, ‘The house of him whose sandal is removed.’

Paul's connection to levirate marriage is unmistakable. Further making this connection is his use of the phrase, “the laborer is worthy of his wages,” an apparent reference to Leviticus 19:13. The surrounding context, however, is another strong support for Paul’s subtle message. It begins with another clear connection to Ruth’s gleaning in Boaz’s fields but also demonstrates that the one who has the means to meet a neighbor’s need, but withholds it, is robbing his neighbor. In the context of Paul’s argument, the elder, and presumably other married brothers in the community, have the means and therefore the duty to cover the needy widow. *Not doing so* is ‘oppressing your neighbor’ and therefore sin.

⁹ ‘Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God.

¹¹ ‘You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. ¹² You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD.

¹³ ‘You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob *him*. The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning.

The fact that an elder had to be married and ruling his house well begs the question, who better to be prepared to take in and care for a young widow and orphans with her than an elder who had a solid track record ruling his own house well and rearing of his own children? Paul’s connection and instruction is only missed if one assumes a monogamy-only paradigm thus misinterpreting the *μῆας* passages. Within the polygynous context of both the Torah and the Jewish culture in his day, Paul was unmistakably instructing elders to assume responsibility covering the widows within the assembly if the widow wanted to marry and no other godly man was available (1 Tim. 5:11).

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul, a Pharisee of Pharisees and student of Gamliel, knew the Torah as well as any Biblical author other than Moses. An Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul had every opportunity to

make a clear statement in favor of monogamy-only as he established Biblically correct relationships within the young communities of non-Jewish believers in Jesus. On the one hand, Roman law and culture demanded allegiance to State, fueled by a growing culture of monogamy-only while on the other adherence to the Torah demanded a foundation for a Biblical people built of patriarchal families which allowed for a man to have more than one wife.

Considering these several passages from Paul's pen, one can only conclude that minimally he intentionally left the door ajar concerning Biblical polygyny. He not only never condemns the practice, something he could have easily done, but he uses language that anyone outside of a monogamy-only mindset would immediately recognize as allowing for polygyny within Torah guidelines and patriarchal headship. His coup de grace is instructing his young protege, Timothy, in the care and protection of widows, particularly the younger ones who desired a husband. Paul unmistakably invokes levirate marriage and goes so far as to indicate the elders were to assume the responsibility of covering where others had not. Without question, this flips long held Christian monogamy-only teaching on its head, but no other reasonable conclusion is possible. Paul's paradigm was decidedly *not* monogamy-only.

In light of these considerations, and the complete absence of any Scriptural command condemning Biblical polygyny, it is time to reevaluate the entire traditional case against polygyny within Christendom.

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