

2 November 2005

Hey, Marc.

I have read that piece your mother sent you, and it looks to me like what I call “the usual stuff”, by which I mean that it is the conventional approach in Western churches to discussing the subject of polygamy. The tradition of legally enforced monogamy is so entrenched in the West (that is, basically all the cultures influenced by the Roman Empire and Roman Church) that typically not much attention is given to the argument, so typically some fairly lightweight inferences and analogies are thrown out there with a “that settles it” attitude, and that’s pretty much the end of the conversation!

And really, for most of the people you’ll ever meet, why bother with building or refuting a well researched and thoroughly thought out argument? There just aren’t that many polygamous families in our culture, and not that many more that want to be, so it just isn’t a real hot item for most people. What passes for discussion in most church circles is merely two people who already thought polygamy was wrong reassuring each other that it really *is* wrong, so it doesn’t take much convincing. Hence the lackadaisical approach to the subject and the sloppy arguments.

The only things that make this a hot topic for anyone, then, are either (a) for whatever reason starting to think that maybe plural marriage is or should be a reasonable lifestyle for one’s family, or (b) meeting an actual polygamous family, which is so outrageous and such a curiosity in our culture that it causes people to re-examine their beliefs about marriage and the sources or foundations of those beliefs.

I’m going to take this essay apart piece by piece and show you the difference between how I and others like me look at this and how this guy and others like him look at it. This really is one of those “which end of the telescope are you looking through?” deals, where the way you choose to look at things has a way of determining what you will see. However, I think you’ll agree with me at the end that there’s one way of looking through the telescope that works and one way that doesn’t work too well.

I’m a lawyer and teacher by training, so I have a particular approach to ethics, logic, and hermeneutics (the rules that govern our study and interpretation of the Bible). I stick to what the text says, and I am not all that interested in analogies, metaphors, and inferences. Those things can be interesting, but they can also be extended in all kinds of ways that may or may not have anything to do with the original text or the rest of scripture. Better to stick to the straight up stuff. With that in mind, let’s get going!

1. Language: Note the way the language of the piece is loaded.

The title of the piece suggests and it is flatly asserted later on in the piece that the bible “*clearly* teaches monogamy” (meaning, I guess, that the author thinks that the bible clearly teaches that having more than one wife is SIN). It’s not as clear as our author thinks it is; it is only clear to him because he is not taking the other side seriously. I think you’ll see what I mean by the time we’re finished here.

(By the way, the article is attached to the end of this letter in case you want to refer to it.)

The opening question (that section that kicks off the piece) says that “the Bible ... *appears* not to condemn this”. That’s a weird way to put it, isn’t it? It “appears” not to condemn it

because in fact it *does not condemn it*. There is no prohibition of polygamy in the scriptures, and no condemnation by God of any polygamist or of polygamy *per se*. It's good to keep that in mind while we go through all these inferences that get thrown up in support of the monogamy-only argument.

One of the headings in the article says "why did God *seem* to allow it?" Can you guess what I'm going to say? He "seemed" to allow it because *He did in fact allow it*. As I just said, there is no verse in the scriptures wherein God states a negative opinion of polygamy or polygamists. Everything you're ever going to hear against it is based on inferences drawn from examples, not from any negative statements by God himself or any apostle or prophet.

Are you getting a feel for this yet? Sticking to the plain text of the scriptures would give you one impression on this subject, but you are being told that God "appears" not to condemn it, and the He only "seemed" to allow it, and that in fact the scriptures "clearly" teach what they do not actually teach at all!

This is an important point, because many teachers want you to believe that things in the Bible "seem" or "appear" to be one way, but they are really another way altogether. (I guess you have to go to seminary to be taught what the scriptures "really" mean....) My contention (and believe me, I'm not the only one that thinks this) is that the scriptures mean what they say, and once we get past our cultural prejudices, it's not that hard to figure stuff like this out.

Again, just be advised that this guy is doing a pre-emptive strike on any kind of rational discussion of scripture, because anything I point to in scripture is going to be said to just "seem" or "appear" to be the case. Oh, well. Let's soldier on, anyway.

2. "One flesh" – Matthew 19:3-6

Okay, he says this is "the clearest evidence" he's got, so it had better be good, right? He's taking his best shot first, right? You tell me....

The text he cites reads as follows:

The Pharisees also came unto him [Jesus, that is], tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, 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? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

So let's notice first that this has nothing directly to do with polygamy at all. The context is a conversation about *divorce* (and later, remarriage), not polygamy. Jesus's point is that married people become one flesh, so we shouldn't rip that one flesh apart. It's not exactly clear here (or anywhere else in the Bible, for that matter) what "one flesh" means, but Jesus says whatever it is, we shouldn't mess with it. God puts married people together, and we shouldn't split them up.

Okay, so there's the text: Jesus is asked a question about divorce, and he says, "Don't do it, it is separating what God has joined". Simple, right? So what does our author want to make of this? He says that two become one flesh, "not more than two".

First, there is no textual support for that either way; he is simply making an unsubstantiated assertion, and assuming that we will follow him. He is assuming, not discussing or teaching, what the significance of “one flesh” is, and based on that assumption, he infers that “one fleshness” (whatever that is) is only available to two people.

Now, there’s a school of teaching in polygamous circles that says that the “oneness” of marriage applies to three or four or however many people are in the family. I think they call it “echad” polygamy (“unity” polygamy). I don’t subscribe to that myself, and as far as I know most polygamists don’t.

The thing is, though, there’s nothing about “one flesh” that says that it can’t apply to each marriage relationship. Jacob was “one flesh” with Leah, and he was “one flesh” with Rachel, and he was “one flesh” with Bilhah, and he was “one flesh” with Zilpah.

In fact, apparently a man is one flesh with any woman he sleeps with, whether they’re married to each other or not. In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul is discussing sexual immorality, and he says, “Or do you not know that he being joined to a harlot is one body? For He says, The two shall be one flesh.” (1 Cor 6:16) Apparently Paul thinks that any sexual relationship can be described by the term “one flesh”, even if a married guy is sleeping with someone else, so whatever we think “one flesh” means, we have to take that into account.

To sum it up, there’s nothing the Bible teaches about what it means to be “one flesh” that requires that a person can only be “one flesh” with *one* other person. “One flesh” is obviously a consequence of sexual activity, and not as obviously but a serious position taken by many commentators and teachers over the years is that it has to do with children, where the mix of DNA from the father and mother really does, in fact, produce “one flesh” out of the two.

So on analysis, our author’s “clearest evidence” is really just a trick, a kind of sleight of hand like magicians use to focus your attention on one thing while they’re doing something else. He takes a teaching of Jesus on divorce and rips it completely out of context, pulls a catchy phrase out of the middle of it, and then assumes the truth of his whole argument, hoping you won’t notice that there *is* no logical argument presented. And to top it off, he does this in flat contradiction to the common teaching in the church (based on Paul’s teaching to the Corinthians) that one of the reasons you should be picky about who you have sex with is that you will become “one flesh” with that person. Any person you have sex with. *All* the people you have sex with.

3. More thoughts on singulars and plurals

We’ll talk about this more later with respect to some of this writer’s other arguments, but it applies here, as well, so I’ll go ahead and throw this out there. You are going to run into all kinds of things that are taught in scripture about marriage that are mentioned in singular terms. This is widely held in Western culture to be Proof Positive that a man is only supposed to have one marriage. Wrong. On the same logic, the verse “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” would indicate that every couple should only have one child. *Must* not have more.

This is a classic illustration of how people see what they’re looking for. It is relatively ordinary logic that if I am teaching about any general principle, I can use one example to illustrate the principle. That doesn’t mean or even imply or hint at the conclusion that therefore, “there can be only one” (you’ve seen Highlander, right?). Discussion in the scriptures about how “a” marriage is supposed to work no more limits a family to one wife than discussions of how to raise

“a” child limit a family to one child, or discussions of how to discipline “an” elder prove that a church should only have one elder. It’s just an illustration. Lighten up.

4. A note re “God’s ideal”

This is more of that dangerous language that we need to trap and analyze before it gets by us and screws up our thinking without our noticing. This author states that his Matthew citation is “the clearest evidence that monogamy is *God’s ideal*”. What do you think *that* means?

What most monogamy-only teachers *want* us to believe is that polygamy is heinous sin that should be criminalized. But they will often shift the ground of the argument to the idea that monogamy is “God’s ideal”. This is another magic trick: While waxing philosophical about the “ideal” relationship between a man and a woman, they want to distract you from that part where God doesn’t actually condemn polygamy or polygamists in the Bible.

The very notion that there’s any such thing as an “ideal relationship” (or “ideal” *anything*) raises some interesting questions that I don’t have time to go into. I think what’s “ideal” for one couple may not be “ideal” for another couple, and there is a reasonable argument I could make that the *notion* of “ideal” human relationships (or “ideal” humans) is an artifact of the industrial revolution and the paradigm shifts it brought us. But let’s table that for now....

For our purposes, let’s just imagine that there is any such thing as an ideal marriage. Should those that fail to measure up to the “ideal” be punished? Ostracized? Persecuted? Does that make any sense at all?? Do you see that it is a far stretch from “your lifestyle is not meeting my definition of ideal” to “you should go to prison”?

This happens all the time in these conversations, though, precisely *because* the Bible contains no condemnation or prohibition of polygamy. If the monogamy-only types could point to a verse that condemns polygamy like the ones that are all over the place about adultery, or homosexuality, or witchcraft, for example (to pick off a few that are prevalent in our culture), you know they would. It’s because they can’t that they have to resort to blather about what “God’s ideal” might look like.

Again, remember what I said about singulars and plurals. Whatever an “ideal” marriage might look like, there’s no logical reason a family couldn’t have two or three or however many ideal marriages co-existing. And there’s nothing you can pull out of the Bible that explains why “God’s ideal” is to limit families to one marriage, any more than you could develop an argument (from the Bible) that families should be limited to one child. Doesn’t mean people don’t do it (China comes to mind...); just means it’s not in the Bible.

Having said all that, I’d cheerfully fall back to saying, “So what? If all you’re concerned about is ‘God’s ideal’, then knock yourself out. Think whatever you want, just don’t treat the people who disagree with you as criminals or perverts.” For comparison, note that Paul taught (and the Roman church took the ball and ran to the wrong end zone) that *celibacy* is God’s “ideal”, and Jesus’s example certainly backs that up. As long as we’re being all spiritual and idealistic and everything, we should probably all be celibates....

Instead, why don’t we quit stressing out about theories about ideals and get down to practical stuff that matters. The church is rife with divorce and remarriage (something Jesus was definitely opposed to and said so, unlike polygamy, about which he said jack). Most of the corporate church (in my experience, but that’s a lot of experience) quietly tolerates homosexuality

and abortion and rampant teenage fornication in its membership, while publicly wringing its hands about these various social ‘problems’ out in the anonymous culture. Why don’t we get a grip on the stuff God obviously hates (divorce, for example (*see* Malachi 2:26)), and back off the stuff that God didn’t say anything about, to condemn which we have to go around what the Bible “appears” or “seems” to say, so we can find out what it “clearly” teaches (yeah, right...) from people such as our author.

5. A final note on “Christ’s teaching”

Note that in his first point (his “clearest evidence”), the author refers to the Matthew passage as “Christ’s teaching on *marriage*”. More sleight of hand, if you ask me. Yeah, in an indirect sense, he was teaching on marriage, but only insofar as it was necessary to answer the question, which was about *divorce*. The Matthew 19 passage cited is not technically “Christ’s teaching on marriage” at all; it is “Christ’s teaching on divorce”.

That’s an accuracy thing, and accuracy is a good goal in scriptural exegesis, just as it is a good goal in so many other things. If we mislabel this as being a teaching on marriage, then we can stretch it to maybe have something to do with polygamy, which wasn’t even mentioned. If we correctly accept that it is a teaching on divorce, then it’s easier to discern that polygamy is not at issue here at all.

6. You’ve seen the best, now it’s time for the rest: Sarfati’s “teaching” on Eph. 5

I didn’t mean to run with this magician metaphor for the whole article, but now it’s looking like I might, and this Ephesians 5 thing is a whopper. His first assertion is that an “important biblical teaching is the parallel of husband and wife with Christ and the Church”; an assertion with which I have no quarrel. His second assertion, then, completely begs the question: He says that this teaching “makes sense only with monogamy”, which he supports with his unsupported assertion that “Jesus will not have multiple brides”.

Says who?

Again (as usual), this guy is reading his presuppositions into the text. It’s hard to even call his assertions “conclusions”, because there is no argument to conclude. Let’s look a little closer. This is going to require some patience on your part (did I mention that most people don’t want to think this hard?) as I cover some additional territory.

First of all, what is “the church”? The Roman church messed us up for all time with its assertion that there is “one church”, of which Papa in Rome is the head. Yeah, yeah, we’ve all been taught from VBS that there is one universal (catholic?) church, but where do they get that idea? Let’s talk about translation for a minute.

To get to the idea that there’s one universal church (so you can jump through hyperspace to the idea that there’s only one bride engaged to Christ), you have to ignore the meaning of the word “church”. The word translated “church” in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, a Greek word that basically means “assembly”. In fact, this word is translated ‘assembly’ three times in Acts 19, when it says that Paul got in trouble for preaching in Ephesus, and an “assembly” was called to figure out what to do with him (*see* Acts 19:32, 39, 41). Same word, *ekklesia*, but divorced from its religious application, it is translated simply “assembly”.

My point here is that (as is the case with a lot of other religious jargon) it helps our understanding of the Bible teaching to realize that where Paul (or whoever) is talking to or about “the church”, you should be able freely to substitute “the assembly” and it should still make sense (or substitute “shepherd” for “pastor”, or “servant” for “deacon”, or “supervisor” for “bishop”, etc.). A “church” is an assembly of people called for a purpose, and there are many more than one of them around the world. Yet in Ephesians, Paul teaches that “the assembly” is the bride of Christ. The Jews were polygamous, so it would have been no big stretch for them to picture Christ married to more than one assembly. It’s just a stretch for *us* because we’ve been conditioned by 1500 years of Roman teaching.

Here’s a point to consider from the scriptural usage of the word ‘church’, or ‘assembly’ (I should point out that I learned this from Watchman Nee, a 20th century Chinese Christian who wrote many really good books): The usage of singular and plural in the New Testament is very clear, and leads to an interesting conclusion. Whenever Paul writes to a “church” (assembly), singular, he is talking about the church/assembly in some particular city or location, like a house (*see, e.g.*, 1 Corinthians 1:2 or 1 Thessalonians 1:1 or Romans 16:5). On the other hand, when Paul is writing to an area or a region, he writes to “*churches*”, plural (*see, e.g.*, Galatians 1:2 or 1 Thessalonians 2:14). There are other examples you can look at in the scripture, but the bottom line is that a church is a group of Christians meeting together (“where two or three are gathered in my name...”), and when you stretch out over larger territory, you talk about “churches”.

This usage is backed up by Jesus’s own language in The Revelation (chapters 2 and 3), where he dictates his seven letters to the seven churches (assemblies). That passage suggests that Jesus has seven brides, at least.

Jesus’s parable of the ten virgins is also pertinent. Some people really try hard to twist that teaching, but the bare bones, no agenda reading of it is that ten women are set to meet the bridegroom, but five aren’t prepared when he returns, so he only takes five with him. A bridegroom returning to claim his five or ten brides may sound really strange to us, but it wouldn’t have sounded strange 2,000 years ago, and we shouldn’t try to re-write it just because we’re uncomfortable with it.

Bottom line: The idea of the “church” as an “assembly of believers” is scriptural, and OBVIOUSLY there is more than one such church. The idea of a mystical catholic “church” (“assembly”???) is ascriptural at best (if not anti-scriptural), clearly a teaching of the mystical Roman priesthood, and therefore of questionable utility as the foundation for the ‘argument’ (that’s being generous) that “Jesus will not have multiple brides”. Of course he will: He’ll have as many brides as there are assemblies of believers.

Just so you’ll know, I bounced this AIG piece off Jay (the friend of mine in Denver who posts on our site), because I know that (a) he is rock solid when it comes to Bible teaching on marriage (and some day I hope he’ll publish his book), and (b) I know he likes AIG overall for their contribution to the creation/evolution debate. He took a slightly different approach to this particular point, which is basically that this is a metaphor: Get over it, and don’t try to make it teach more than it was meant to teach.

There is stuff we can learn from the metaphor that Christ is our Husband, just as there is stuff we can learn from the idea that Christ is our Shepherd, or our Head, or our Bread of Life, or our Rock. These are all useful ideas as far as they go, but we should try to stick within the application that is given to us, and not try to make the metaphor carry weight it was never intended to carry.

Paul's actual teaching in Ephesians 5 (delivered from all the freight some people want it to carry) is that women ought to submit to their men because men are the head of their women in the same way that Christ is the head of his assemblies, and men ought to love their women in the same way that Christ loves his assemblies. I believe all of that. I just don't think that passage limits a man to one wife any more than it limits Christ to one assembly. And there's no good reason to stretch the metaphor to teach more than it was intended to teach.

And the author's comment about how the teaching in Ephesians 5 "makes sense only with monogamy"? It may only make sense to *him*, since he's determined to believe that monogamy is the only way (or "God's ideal") regardless of what the scriptures "appear" to teach, but in light of the above discussion about the true meaning of the word *ekklesia* (translated "church" in English Bibles, but "assembly" would have been better), I don't think it's that much of a stretch to see how Paul's teaching about how husbands and wives ought to act applies to every relationship a husband has with each of his wives, just as it applies to every relationship Christ has with each of his assemblies.

7. More of the rest: The tenth commandment

The tenth commandment is: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that *is* thy neighbour's." How much do I really have to say about this? The author states that this commandment "presupposes the ideal that there is only one wife". He manages to violate both the "ideal" thing and the "singular/plural" thing in one fell stroke.

This verse doesn't come within ten miles of teaching us the ideal number of wives, and unless we're prepared to teach that this commandment requires that we own only one house, one manservant, one maidservant, one ox, one ass, and one of *anything* (that's what it says, right?), we should not pretend that it "presupposes" that we have only one wife—at least not with a straight face.

This is borderline funny, except that it's not funny, and a lot of people take this kind of stuff very seriously. Reminds me of what James said about "not many should presume to be teachers...".

The tenth commandment says not to covet your neighbor's stuff, and it uses the individual examples of *a* house, *a* wife, *a* manservant, *a* maidservant, *an* ox, and *an* ass before going on to the general principle of *an* anything. Nothing there limits the neighbor in how many of those individual things he can have in his household, and it doesn't need to; that wasn't the point.

I guess "God's ideal" is that each individual human own only one of every item, right? Does that make any sense at all, or is that just another example of people seeing what they expect to see?

8. More of the rest: Paul's teaching re elders

Sarfati cites 1 Timothy 3:2 in support of the proposition that "polygamy was expressly forbidden for church elders", but he doesn't exactly explain what that has to do with anything. Let's help him.

First of all, it's not entirely clear that polygamy was "expressly forbidden". The context is that Paul is giving Timothy (or Titus, in a related passage) advice about what sorts of qualities to look for in appointing elders (or overseers, or whatever), but it's not clear how the need for those qualities would be applied in individual cases, and it's not clear how those qualities relate to morality, anyway (more sleight of hand). For instance, the same verse says an overseer should be "given to hospitality" and "apt to teach". Are men who are not extremely hospitable or not great teachers second class citizens? Sinners? Should they be excommunicated? Imprisoned? Does the passage "expressly forbid" not teaching and not hosting small groups in one's home?

Again (par for the course), our writer desperately wants us not to notice that there is a big gap between "we'd prefer that our elders be good teachers and throw great parties" and "any male with more than one wife should go to jail". Paul is throwing out some things for Timothy and Titus to look for in an overseer, but the criteria he presents don't have anything to do with sin (right? he wouldn't have to say anything about any activity that *no* Christian ought to be doing). These criteria have to do with having the spare time and the resources and skills necessary to be a good leader.

So at most, Paul is suggesting that there is something about having a large household (lots of wives and kids) that would inhibit a man's leadership potential (his time constraints, perhaps?); he's not saying that polygamy is sin, any more than he's saying that having uppity children is sin (another requirement for eldership is that one's wife and children be in complete submission, not undisciplined or unruly) or not being a good teacher is a sin. Beyond that, though, there's a non-trivial argument that the verse is mistranslated, anyway. The whole thing turns on how to translate the Greek word *mia*, and once again, people will find what they're looking for.

Mia is reasonably translated "one" or "first", or even as the indefinite article "a". (For instance, just a few verses after the thing in Titus 1 about "one wife", Paul says something about rejecting someone from the church "after the first (*mia*) and second admonition" (see Titus 3:10).) And the only way you can really decide how to translate it into English is to figure out what you think the author is trying to say from context clues, and then make it say that.

Consider the possibilities: If Paul were saying an elder should be the husband of "a" wife, then he'd be looking for married guys as opposed to single. This actually makes a ton of sense, because Paul has already said that how a guy runs his house is a dead giveaway of what kind of elder he'll make in the "household of God". Obviously, a single guy has no wife, no children, and no household to manage, so how could the apostles tell what sort of elder he'd make?

On the other hand, Paul could be saying an elder should be the husband of the "first" wife, which would be a person who has never been divorced. This person has demonstrated commitment and stability and faithfulness, in addition to whatever operating skills are needed to run a household or small community.

On the other other hand, Paul could be saying husband of "one" wife. This gets a little complicated, for two different reasons. On the one hand, Paul would be overturning the witness of scripture and the history of the Jewish people without even a comment. Seems a little odd. Paul could be a little arrogant at times (if 'arrogant' seems strong, think 'pushy' or 'bull headed'), but even he didn't just start making stuff up that contradicted the scriptures. In fact, he's the guy who said "all scripture (which at the time was only the Old Testament) is profitable for teaching and training in righteousness".

On top of that, think about what that requirement really means. King David, Solomon, Moses, Abraham, Josiah (just to name a few of the prominent polygamists in the Bible)—all disqualified from leadership in the church. Weird outcome if you ask me. I'd trade most of the church leaders I've worked with over the past twenty years for just *one* of those guys any time!

The other thing that complicates this is the way the “no divorce and remarriage” people use this verse to disqualify any divorced person from leadership. He may be the husband of one woman at a time, but he's not really a “one woman man”, as they say, so he's off the short list. My problem with that is that it raises divorce to the status of unpardonable sin (which is basically what that camp wants to do) and totally overlooks the fact that God's law provides for divorce in some cases. In other words, not every divorced person is a wrongdoer in God's eyes.

To get really ridiculous (which is where this goes, logically), the verse would also disqualify *remarried widowers*. After all, the guy's been married to two wives, so he's not a one woman man, right? Seems absurd, but once you start down this trail, the logic of it carries you to that conclusion. Or you just do a bunch of crawfishing and end up forgetting about the logic and just choosing to believe whatever you want to believe.

Anyway, as usual, our choices are between strict constructions that make sense but that we may or may not like the result of, and ambiguous constructions that then are held by various people to mean various things, all contradictory.

I just don't get the “one wife” thing (and I never got it before I started researching the polygamy issue, either, so it's not just about that) for the reasons I gave above. It contradicts plain scripture, makes God a sinner (we haven't gotten into that yet, but we'll get there), disqualifies godly men from leadership, and leads to awkward and unsupportable results with respect to divorce, widowhood, and remarriage. My money is on the “a wife” choice (elders should be married), but either of the two other choices (“a” or “first”) is a good solid choice that is consistent with what the rest of scripture teaches about marriage. Elders should be married, and they should stick with their marriages. My only hesitancy on the “first” thing is I'm suspicious of the idea that a past murderer who has repented could be an elder, but a past divorcé could not.

The finale of this deal comes back to the original argument. If there is a group of people out there that sincerely to the bottom of their hearts after studying and praying about this cannot shake the idea that Paul didn't want polygamists (such as David, Moses, etc.) to help oversee the church, then the solution is simple: Just don't make a polygamist an overseer in your church. Fine. Just don't try to tell him that what he's doing is morally reprehensible, or that the Bible “seems” to teach something other than what it says.

9. More of the rest: To each his own

Sarfati doesn't cite the verse, but he refers to 1 Cor 7:2 in support of the proposition that the “one wife” thing actually applies to everybody, even though Paul specifically only applied it to elders. The verse in the KJV says, “Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.” This may be one of the most misleading translation choices in the entire Bible, because it uses parallel language to describe the two relationships, even though Paul's Greek uses different words with different nuances. In fact, Paul's writing actually *supports* New Testament polygamy(!).

Here's the deal: When Paul says that every man should have “his own wife”, he uses the word *heautou*, which is a possessive word that indicates ownership, complete possession. (“No,

kitty, that's *my* pie"; that sort of thing.) When he says that every woman should have "her own husband", though, he uses the word *idios*, which is a kind of possessive relationship that does not require complete control or ownership.

To demonstrate, look at the following verses:

*Matthew 9:1 And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his **own** city.*

*John 4:44 For Jesus himself testified, that a prophet hath no honour in his **own** country.*

*Acts 2:8 And how hear we every man in our **own** tongue, wherein we were born?*

Would anyone seriously argue that Jesus "owned" his city, or that a prophet "owns" his homeland, or that you can "own" your native tongue? Houston is "my" hometown, but it's home for millions of others as well.

See how weird that is? In the Greek, that passage is actually pretty clear evidence that Paul had polygamous relationships in mind. A more useful translation (more in keeping with our actual usage and less misleading) might be "let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her husband". That still doesn't really do justice to the thing, but at least the asymmetry would be a clue to what Paul actually said.

10. More of the rest: Another sleight of hand

"Paul goes on to explain marital duties in terms that make sense only with one husband to one wife." I'm not going to spend much time on that assertion, because this thing is pretty long-winded already. You should be able to recognize it as the kind of magic trick or illusion that I've been talking about already. Sarfati can logically say it only makes sense *to him*, but he cannot logically say the passage doesn't make sense at all unless you presuppose monogamy. He just cannot get his mind around the idea that a man could have legitimate intimate relations with more than one woman, so anytime Paul or anyone else starts talking about sex (or euphemistically, "marital duties"), Sarfati *assumes* that it "has" to be about monogamous sex.

If that were true (it's not, but if it were), he ought to be able to show us an argument that explains why it is true. Unfortunately, he skips that part, so we don't know exactly what it is about the passage he doesn't understand. For a polygamist, though the passage would make perfectly good sense and would apply to each marriage in the family, just as any idea we might have of what an 'ideal' marriage looks like (if there is such a thing) could apply to each marriage in a polygamous household.

11. More of the rest: The example of godly people

This is getting almost silly, but I guess we have to go over this, too. He pulls out two monogamous couples and mistakenly assumes Moses was monogamous, and says, basically, "see there, that settles it". I honestly don't see how that settles anything. First, Moses was arguably polygamous, since the Bible refers to two different women as his wives. Second, even if he were monogamous, what's that? Three monogamists in scripture to how many polygamists? There are several lists on the internet that show all the polygamists in the bible. Jay is writing a pretty comprehensive book on what the scriptures teach on marriage; you can check his list out at <http://historycarper.com/patriarchy/polygamists.htm>. Dozens of men (Jay counts 50 by name) are described as polygamous in the Bible, and not one of them is condemned for it (though some of them made other mistakes, just like monogamous and celibate men do).

David is the topper, in my book. King of Israel, anointed by God, referred to by God Himself as “a man after mine own heart”, described by the bible writers as having “a heart perfect toward God” and having “obeyed every commandment of the Lord except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite” (the BathSheba murder/adultery thing)—if *anyone* in scripture is a “godly example”, I should think *he* is. Yeah, he messed up *once* (according to the Bible itself), but even then it just showed what a great repentor he was! We wouldn’t have seen that side of him if he’d been perfect! (And that one mistake had nothing to do with polygamy, and David had 18 or more wives.)

It goes a little deeper with David, by the way. Remember I said something about making God out to be a sinner? When God confronted David for stealing Uriah’s wife, one the things God said to him at the time was, basically, “I already gave you a bunch of wives, and I would have gladly given you more if I knew you weren’t satisfied” (1 Samuel 12:8). If polygamy were wrong, why would *God Himself* give David a bunch of wives? If wanting more than one wife is a sin, then why would *God Himself* have scolded David by saying He would have gladly given him more wives if David had just let Him know he needed a few more?

I know that’s risking brain damage in our culture even to think about stuff like this (ouch, my head hurts!), but really that’s just an indication of how screwed up Western culture has gotten with respect to love, sex, and marriage. Once you get over that “ohmigosh, if my teachers were wrong about this, what else were they wrong about?” sort of sinking feeling, you start to notice more about just how twisted and unbiblical we are in the 21st century West. All the fornication and adultery and homosexuality around us every day don’t “just happen”; they happen because we have deliberately rejected God’s ways for something different and inferior.

Sorry, went off on a commercial, there. The point here is that GOD is the one who aided and abetted David’s polygamy, so if polygamy is a heinous sin, then I guess God’s a heinous sinner. Yeah. Right. Sure.

Note for the record that the same guy who thinks that just because two guys were monogamous means that the bible “clearly” teaches monogamy will turn right around and argue that even forty guys who were polygamous only “appear” to demonstrate that polygamy is acceptable. Uh-huh. If anything, just remember that arguing from example is dangerous stuff, and ultimately ‘proves’ only what you want it to prove and expected it to prove.

12. More of the rest: What did I say about arguing from example?

With this passing remark—“And the only survivors of the Flood were four monogamous couples”—we have truly reached a new low in what we are loosely calling an “argument”. At least with some of his earlier points I could tell what his point was and could tell which bits he conveniently left out. Now he’s just making conclusory statements for the heck of it.

What that shows is that he’s not really serious about this ‘debate’, he is only preaching to the choir. Ham disrespected his father Noah and was eternally cursed for it; does that prove that monogamy is wrong? Then what on earth does his being on the ark have to do with his monogamy? Just because someone is polygamous or monogamous or celibate when something good or bad happens doesn’t mean—without some kind of specific textual, logical tie-in—that the good or bad thing is connected in any way to their marital state.

If a monogamous guy beats his wife, does that mean monogamy is evil? Do you get this?

13. More of the rest: Too late; the floodgate is open

Having dropped two whole examples of what he thinks is godly monogamy on us, Sarfati now turns to his ‘parade of horrors’ (that’s lawyer talk, from a famous judicial opinion). Before we even hit the examples, though, let’s look at a couple of more foolish statements.

“Where polygamy originated”? Is he serious? Does he think that just because the first mention of polygamy is in the case of Lamech that no one on the planet had been polygamous before then? Gimme a break.

The fact is that most of the cultures across most of the planet across most of history have been polygamous; so say the sociologists. It’s just that this last days dominant Greco-Roman culture is violently monogamous (at least in theory), so from the inside of that culture we get the feeling that ‘this is the way it should be and has always been’. But polygamy’s a fact, Jack, outside of Western culture, just as serial polygamy (divorce, remarriage, divorce, remarriage, etc.) and rampant adultery and prostitution and fornication are a fact *within* Western culture.

The first time shoes appear in scripture is when Moses is told to take his shoes off in front of the burning bush. Does that mean Moses invented shoes?

[Excursis: I know this is getting tediously long, but I want to show you something here. Remember earlier I used the word “hermeneutics”? Well, this is that. Hermeneutics is the science, or logic, if you will, of *exegesis*; exegesis is the process of accurately extracting meaning from a text. So here, Sarfati’s hermeneutic principle appears to be “first mention in Bible equals first occurrence in human history”. Now, if you didn’t immediately recognize that as a dumb idea, a dumb principle to build a theory of meaning on, then I hope after the shoe example it was pretty clear. And the whole point of thinking about hermeneutics is to develop logically consistent, useful rules—the ‘rules of the game’, so to speak—that will help us figure out what can be *reasonably* inferred from what is explicitly said in the Bible.

One of the ways you can tell someone who is not serious about Bible study, but just using the Bible for proof texts for whatever they choose to believe, is that they will be logically inconsistent with the principles they throw around. If shoes existed before they were mentioned in the Bible, then we can throw the whole Lamech thing in the toilet (where it belongs), and the *reason* is that we have demonstrated that the principle that is supposed to be the big argument stopper, “first mention equals first occurrence”, is bogus. End excursis.]

So we have two things to think about now with respect to Lamech. One, just because Lamech had two wives *and* murdered someone doesn’t prove polygamy is evil anymore than any one of the *thousands* of monogamous men who have committed murder proves that monogamy is evil. Two, just because Lamech was the first dude mentioned in the Bible with two wives does not in any way, not even a little bit, indicate, let alone ‘prove’, that Lamech started the whole practice.

You should also note (though I’m not going to develop the point in detail) that Lamech was the father (with one wife) of the guy who developed musical instruments, and he was the father (with the other wife) of the guy who started metalworking. Are these industries tainted because their pappy was polygamous? If not, why not? Is polygamy okay because music and metalworking are okay? If not, why not? Sarfati’s ‘logic’ doesn’t hold up very well, here.

See why I refer to stuff like this as “the usual”? It’s just not very well thought out, and generally that’s because the guy doing the writing or talking is so convinced he’s right and his audience or readers are so ready to approve anything he says that it just doesn’t take much for everyone to agree on how right they all are. Free thinkers and little boys who claim that the emperor isn’t wearing any clothes have never been popular in crowds....

Before I move on to his next boogeyman, I need to comment on one other thing. See where he said, “[a] very important point to remember is that not everything *recorded* in the Bible is *approved* in the Bible”? Yeah, great, but you know what? Not everything *recorded* in the Bible is *condemned* in the Bible, either, now, is it? In other words, the simple mention of Lamech’s polygamy is neither approval nor condemnation, apart from our preconceived notions; it just is what it is. If we want approval or condemnation, we need to look somewhere else in the text.

But looky, looky! There is just such a difference! In David’s case, God flat out said He was trying to be generous with the wives. David already had 18 or so wives and concubines, *some of them actually given to him directly by God*, and God said He would have cheerfully given him *more*! If that’s not approval, I don’t know what is! On the other hand, if Lamech’s polygamy had anything to do with his murder of another man (or his boasting, which seems to be the real problem), I’d expect to see some connection made in the text, like, “Lamech’s wives drove him to murder” or something.

Final thought on Lamech: The names of his two wives translate roughly to “ornament” and “idol”; sounds like Lamech got himself a couple of bimbos out of a beer commercial to be his eye candy and sex toys. The wives get dragged into the narrative mostly to hear Lamech boast of his killing; they are foils for his pride. Lamech’s problem was not polygamy, and maybe not even murder. It was pride. And last time I checked, monogamous families have just as much of a problem with pride as polygamous families do.

Before we talk about Esau I do need to mention Lamech’s family tree, though, since Sarfati did. The author refers to the “godly line of Seth” and the “line of the murderer Cain” as if it had anything to do with anything. All I’m going to say here is that the notion of bloodguilt and blood purity is the same notion that led to the Aryan supremacy movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the extermination of the European Jews and others in the mid-20th century. Careful with that “tainted blood” thing; it’s a dangerous idea.

In passing I’ll mention, though I’ll bet you’ve already caught it, that the whole “argument from example” thing applies here, as well. Lamech was in nasty ol’ Cain’s blood line. So? King David was in the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah, and ultimately Jesus. What does that ‘prove’? On Sarfati’s own logic (if he were actually being logical), that would prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that polygamy is a godly and anointed practice.

Now as for Esau, we can make this quick. In a construction such as “two pagan wives”, the operative word there is *pagan*, not *two*. The same thing will come up with respect to Solomon, but here it is sufficient to point out that the problem with Esau’s wives was that they were *Hittites*, duh. The problem of a polygamous guy who marries badly isn’t any different from the problem of a monogamous guy who marries badly, and it is not a reflection on whether the guy is polygamous or monogamous. Abraham went to some trouble to find a wife for son Isaac from his own people, but grandson Esau decided to shack up with some furriners. It would have been exactly the same outcome if he had hooked up with *one* pagan wife; the problem is not the number, but the pagan-ness.

14. Even more of the rest: Oh, to be king...

Did I mention that sometimes people are so convinced they're right they just don't try very hard to be logical? Sarfati's reference to Deuteronomy 17:17 is some evidence that he's just repeating what *he* was told by someone else, because if he had actually *read* the passage, I don't think he'd have claimed what he claimed.

What the passage (vv. 6-7, to get the full context) says is, "But he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses: forasmuch as the LORD hath said unto you, Ye shall henceforth return no more that way. Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold." Note that there are three things the king is not supposed to multiply: horses, wives, and monetary wealth ("silver and gold").

For some reason, the monogamy-only guys read into the wife thing a requirement that "there can be only *one*". If we're going to be consistent, that means that the king can also only have one horse, one piece of silver, and one piece of gold, right?

Notice also that he apparently can "multiply" silver and gold, he just can't "*greatly* multiply" his cash. Apparently with respect to money, the king can be a little out in front of the other guys (which makes sense), but with respect to women and horses, the king is supposed to be a 'regular guy'. And under God's law, regular guys can have more than one wife. The king just isn't supposed to take advantage of his status and wealth to horde all the fine women!

For the record, I've got a commentary (John Gill, if you're interested) that says that the Jews commonly held that the king could have up to 18 wives and no more. That's about what King David had; maybe they got it from that. That gives you the idea, though. One to ten or so, no big deal (if a guy can afford it). Ten to twenty or so must be the king or a very rich man. Over twenty, and people start to wonder what your deal is.

Speaking of "affording it", that brings up what is the really practical limitation on polygamy: economics. There's a verse in Exodus that says that if a man brings a second wife on board, he has to maintain the first wife's standard of living (well, with respect to food and clothing, at least), or else she can walk. The idea seems to be that a prosperous man will be able to take care of more than one woman, and if a man can't support them properly, he shouldn't *have* more than one woman. I guess the king provision speaks to the case where you have essentially unlimited wealth, but God says that doesn't mean you get unlimited wives (or horses).

15. Even more of the rest: Nobody knows the trouble I've seen

Sarfati says we should take a hint from the "trouble [the kings got into] when they disobeyed [the supposed prohibition against polygamy]". This is an often used argument among the "we're so sure we're right we don't think about this very much" crowd. Two things ought to immediately hit you about this: (a) there is no biblical prohibition against polygamy to disobey, and (b) there might be other reasons why some of those men had domestic problems. We've already been taking apart the argument that monogamy is an 'obedience' issue; there is no prohibition against polygamy in the bible, and there is no criticism of any polygamous family that is actually based on their polygamy. So let's take a look at the second problem. What are these issues that are causing problems in these bible families?

Sarfati says the sibling rivalry among David's sons was a by-product of polygamy. (Actually, he doesn't come out and *say* that, he just insinuates it.) The sad part about that is that the bible is very clear that David lacked nothing in his obedience to God except in the one matter of his murder of Uriah and adultery with his wife, Bath-Sheba, and the bible is very clear that this is the cause of the "sibling rivalry", as Sarfati calls it.

Because David did that which was right in the eyes of the LORD, and turned not aside from any thing that he commanded him all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite. (1 Kings 15:5)

There is one thing that David seriously messed up, and that had to do with Uriah. Murder and adultery, the two biggies. Nothing else about David's life registers any criticism; rather, he is described as having a perfect heart toward the Lord (1 Kings 15:3). Is that consistent with the idea that every one of his multiple marriages is a heinous sin (individual counts of adultery, according to the monogamy-only crowd)? Obviously not.

And here's the thing: The bible says why David had all that "sibling rivalry", and it had to do with the Uriah matter.

Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife. Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun. For thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun. (2 Samuel 12:9-12)

God's justice is perfect. Because David had Uriah murdered, 'the sword would never depart from his house'. Because David slept with Uriah's wife, some of *David's* wives would be taken from him (by his own son!). What's that thing about "paybacks are hell"?

So biblically, the 'sibling rivalry', as Sarfati calls it (if that's what you would call several of David's sons murdering each other or being murdered by others), was the direct result of the murder of Uriah, and technically doesn't even have anything to do with sexual sin of any kind. The payback for the *adultery* (not polygamy) of David was *adultery* committed against him with several of his wives.

Just curious (got this one from Jay, also): What do you think Sarfati would make of the "sibling rivalry" between Cain and Abel, or Jacob and Esau? That monogamy should be outlawed? That having children is wrong? Polygamists certainly don't have a lock on sibling rivalry, do they?

The claim is also made that "Solomon's hundreds of wives helped lead Solomon to idolatry". Again, we're not supposed to notice that there is a change of emphasis hidden behind another sleight of hand move. First of all, let's look at the whole passage:

*But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites; **Of the nations concerning which the LORD said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your***

***heart after their gods:** Solomon clave unto these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart. For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. And Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and went not fully after the LORD, as did David his father. Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, in the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon. And likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods. And the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the LORD God of Israel, which had appeared unto him twice, And had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods: **but he kept not that which the LORD commanded.** (1 Kings 11:1-10)*

Yes, the passage acknowledges that Solomon had “many” strange wives (the word ‘strange’ would be translated ‘foreign’ today, as in our words ‘stranger’ and ‘foreigner’; it doesn’t mean they were weird). But the point, the problem, is that they were ‘foreign’, not that they were ‘many’. Solomon’s essential problem was *disobedience* of “that which the Lord commanded” (see boldfaced text above). But there *is* no commandment against polygamy, and God had a *specific* prohibition against marrying *foreign* women (just as he had against murder and adultery in the case of David):

*When the LORD thy God shall bring thee into the land whither thou goest to possess it, and hath cast out many nations before thee, the Hittites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than thou; And when the LORD thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them: **Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son. For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly.** (Deuteronomy 7:1-4)*

Both David and Solomon are getting the same bad rap. In David’s case, we are asked to overlook the plain prohibitions against murder and adultery and the plain teaching of the scriptures that these were David’s crimes, in order to read into the text a polygamy problem, even though polygamy is not condemned in scripture and David is not criticized in scripture for it. In Solomon’s case, we are being asked to overlook the plain prohibition against marrying foreign women and the plain teaching that this is what he did wrong, again to read into the situation a problem that isn’t there. No wonder these people talk about what the bible ‘seems’ or ‘appears’ to teach; apparently they are not interested in what it *actually* teaches, since it contradicts the ideas they started with.

As for Hannah, let’s look at the story:

Now there was a certain man of Ramathaimzophim, of mount Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah, the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephrathite: And he had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah: and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. And this man went up out of his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice unto the LORD of hosts in Shiloh. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, the priests of the LORD, were there. And when the time was that Elkanah offered, he gave to Peninnah his wife, and to all her sons and her daughters, portions: But unto Hannah he gave a worthy

portion; for he loved Hannah: but the LORD had shut up her womb. And her adversary also provoked her sore, for to make her fret, because the LORD had shut up her womb. (1 Samuel 1:1-6)

Okay, the first thing you notice is that Hannah's 'adversary' (or 'rival', or 'opponent') is not named in the text. Not a big deal, because it doesn't matter to me if it *is* the other wife, Peninnah. Just thought I'd point out the way this is usually done. Those who are determined to make this a polygamy issue will make it one. However, there's nothing in the text itself that tells us exactly who Hannah's enemy is.

Nevertheless, let's just assume for the sake of argument that it was Peninnah. So? Somewhere tonight a man is beating his wife; does that prove monogamy is wrong? Somewhere tonight a woman is cheating on her husband; does *that* prove monogamy is wrong? Lot's daughters had sex with him; does that prove we shouldn't have children? Does it prove we shouldn't drink alcohol?

See what the problem is here? Just like the Lamech thing we've already discussed and the Jacob thing we'll discuss in a minute, an isolated incidence of jealousy or bitterness in a polygamous woman, or some unrelated crime in a polygamous male, does not contaminate the whole institution. The fact that some people are 'doing it wrong' doesn't mean it can never be done right (right?...).

Instead of reading our prejudices into examples and pretending they are laws, we should simply learn the obvious lesson from the example. Compatibility among the women involved in a polygamous household is always an issue, and should be taken into account. In fact, I know of a couple of cases where a guy has tried to add a woman to his family without really taking into account his first wife's opinion of that woman, and it doesn't go well at all. The obvious lesson we can learn from Hannah and her family, the wisdom we can glean here, is that a family considering polygamy should give careful consideration to how the women get along together and whether they are compatible. Otherwise, there's going to be trouble.

16. Yet more: Polygamy among the 'godly'(?)

Well, I don't know whether to point out the obvious oxymoron or just to appreciate the fact that Sarfati realizes and admits that there are *godly* men who are polygamous. You would think that people who really think polygamy is some kind of heinous sin would not refer to Abraham, Jacob, and David as "godly". However, that is the corner they have painted themselves into. They choose to believe that God has a horrible problem with multiple marriage, but they can't deny that Abraham, Jacob, David, Josiah, etc., etc. are approved men. I guess I'll just be grateful that he admits that. On to the specific examples....

As for Abraham, Sarfati calls the Hagar incident a "low point in [Abraham's and Sarah's] faith". Whether or not this is true, it doesn't have anything to do with polygamy. The *problem* is that Abe and Sarah had a specific word from God, and they chose to take matters into their own hands rather than wait for God to fulfill his promise. The *problem* is the heart condition (unbelief), not the tool that is used to act out the problem of the heart.

This is analogous to the "guns don't kill people, people kill people" argument. Gun control folk look at a murder with a gun and they think the problem is the gun. The problem is really the bad heart of the murderer. Nobody explains why pillows shouldn't be outlawed (people get smothered with pillows), kitchen knives (how often does *that* happen?), screwdrivers (a friend of mine did jury duty on a murder trial where the victim was stabbed to death with a screwdriver),

bathbubs (remember Karla Faye), or any other implement that a murderer might use to effect his plan. Some people are just scared of guns.

You know, I thought I was going off on a rabbit trail, here, but maybe the situation is more analogous than I thought. There are two characteristics of guns that separate them from pillows and bathtubs. First, they are seriously more powerful, for better or worse (more effective at whatever you're trying to do with them, be it hunting, defending yourself, or taking an innocent life). Second, they are not for everybody. Most of the population are content to depend on the police force for 'protection' and are not interested in hunting or plinking or competitive target shooting. So you have a relatively small minority of the public that is comfortable with guns, has some reason other than inchoate murder to own a gun, and is therefore not scared at the idea of someone else's owning a gun. Most of the general public, however, doesn't need a gun, doesn't want a gun, and therefore can't imagine why anyone else would want one or should be allowed to have one (and is rather suspicious of anyone who claims they have a right to own one).

In a strangely similar fashion, polygamy is not for everyone (in fact, it's for hardly anyone, these days), and it has the potential to be very powerful. What I mean by that is that a guy with, say, five wives and twenty-five or thirty children has the potential, at least, to have a much more significant impact on his community—for better or worse— than the 'normal' guy with one wife and two or three kids. If the guy's an upstanding, law abiding citizen, then that would be potential for good, but if he's the pervert cult leader wannabe that some suspect he is, then of course that would be potential for harm, and that worries people.

Just some thoughts. Never really looked at it that way before, but it makes sense as I'm sitting here typing this. I guess I ought to get back to Abraham and Sarah.

Back to the godly polygamists: Abraham was called the "friend of God" (James 2:23; *see also* Isaiah 41:8 and 2 Chronicles 20:7) and is the patriarch of our entire faith. Okay, he waffled a little on his faith that one time, but let's not confuse the issues. The real problem is that he cooked up a plan to get what he thought was coming, instead of waiting and trusting God. The *means* he used to get what he wanted were not the problem; the impatience and doubt were the problems.

(Actually, there's an argument that says the problem is that he listened to his *wife*, who had the Bright Idea in the first place. Maybe the real teaching of the story is that husbands should never listen to their wives.) ;-)

For the record, if God promised a couple today a child, and they grew tired of waiting after a few years and resorted to *in vitro* fertilization, would that 'prove' that *in vitro* fertilization was wrong for everyone? (Now, you or your mom may think that *in vitro* is wrong, anyway, or that 'guns are bad, mmmkay?', in which case these examples won't be working as well as I had hoped. In that case, try to pick something that illustrates the point that by now I'm sure you understand: If someone who wants to disobey God chooses to disobey God by doing *x*, that doesn't mean *x* is wrong for everyone for all time.)

By the way, I guess I'll say one more thing about Abraham and Sarah. I don't see any record in Genesis that God ever frowned upon the whole Hagar thing; in fact, God blessed Hagar and Ishmael quite generously, and never criticized Abe or Sarah for what they did. We read all that into the story because of our presuppositions. The only evidence that we have that anything went wrong at all is that the bible says Hagar "despised" Sarah once she (Hagar) got pregnant. This goes back to the jealousy thing and relations among the women in the family (*see, e.g.,* Proverbs 30:21-23). Let's just stipulate that maintaining a 'happy family' with more than one

woman in the family is going to be harder than keeping one woman happy. However, it's also harder to juggle the wants and needs of several children; that doesn't mean every couple should only have one child. It's also harder to run a large business than a small one; that doesn't mean every business owner should be limited to one employee.

Let's move on to Jacob. Sarfati is flat wrong if he's asserting that Jacob took Bilhah and Zilpah into his family because Rachel and Leah wanted him to; those servant women were given to Jacob by his father-in-law, Laban. If he meant "took" as in, "had sex with", then he's more correct, but his grammar really sucks. Regardless, Sarfati asserts that "Jacob was hardly at a spiritual high point at those times"; that is, when he married Leah and "took" Bilhah and Zilpah. That's what we call a "bare assed assertion" (that's a technical legal term...). It could also be called a "conclusory statement". In other words, that's just his opinion, and he doesn't even bother to back it up with any facts or argument, (a) because he doesn't need to for his intended audience, and (b) because he couldn't if he wanted to.

Jacob did the upright thing by marrying Leah even though Laban sort of foisted her on him, and Bilhah and Zilpah were part of the package. He came out of the deal with four wives instead of one, and took care of them and did what he needed to do to keep his family together. Again, there is no whisper of criticism in the bible of Jacob for his polygamy *per se*; all of that is read into the text by people who see what they want to see.

As for Leah's and Rachel's well known rivalry, maybe that's why God told Moses later that men should not marry sisters (at least not if marrying the second sister was going to annoy the first one) (Leviticus 18:18). Sisters have a special relationship, for better or worse, and when it's good it's very good, and when it's bad it's very bad. I can picture ideal circumstances where maybe two sisters could get along in the same household, but not the underhanded way Laban set this all up. He sort of guaranteed that Rachel and Leah would have problems by the way he connived the thing to begin with.

To summarize, Laban was the bad actor, Jacob did a passable job of doing the upright thing to straighten out the mess, and if Sarfati wants to accuse Jacob of dropping the ball on that one, he ought to at least do us the courtesy of making a logical argument instead of just throwing out unsupported and unjustifiable accusations.

Speaking of which, there's the matter of Sarfati's accusation against David. Just a reminder, this is the David that *God* said didn't do anything wrong his whole life except the murder-adultery thing with Uriah and his wife, so for Sarfati to even make this argument that David was a wrongdoer in the situation with Abigail and Ahinoam suggests that Sarfati thinks he's smarter or more righteous than God. Not a great posture to be in.

Abigail certainly doesn't agree with Sarfati. While trying to save her husband Nabal from his own stupidity, she greets David with "Yahweh will certainly make my lord a sure house; because **my lord fights the battles of Yahweh, and evil has not been found in you all your days**" (1 Samuel 25:28). Apparently the people around David thought he was doing okay. Again, you're dealing here with someone so convinced that he's right he can't be bothered with the text. There is nothing in scripture that suggests that David did anything wrong in marrying Abigail or Ahinoam, or that he was "at a spiritual low point" (whatever that is and whatever that has to do with anything), and there is ample scripture to back up the idea that David was a pretty upright, well thought of guy. With 18 or so wives. Sarfati's unsupported allegations simply don't withstand scriptural scrutiny.

17. Yet more: Seeming is believing

Matthew 19:8 has got to be one of the more abused passages of scripture, if not the most. What Jesus said (translated into English, of course) was, “He said unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.” Keep in mind that ‘suffered’ in this passage is an archaic usage; Moses wasn’t “suffering” emotionally, he “allowed” or “permitted” them to divorce (or “put away”) their wives on the one condition of marital unfaithfulness. The Pharisees came to Jesus with a question about whether it was lawful to put away one’s wife “for every cause”. Jesus gave them the obvious response that God’s intention is for marriage to be permanent, and then gives them the kicker, the “new” part, if you will, that kicking your wife out for anything other than adultery actually causes her to commit adultery, at least figuratively speaking, with her new husband.

What Sarfati and others like him never stop to explain is why they think that principle can be extended to whatever they feel like extending it to. Jesus’s plain teaching is that divorce “for every cause” is wrong, that marriage should be permanent, and that unless your wife has already violated the marriage covenant by having sex with someone else, then ‘putting her away’ for an insufficient reason puts her in the awkward position of actually ‘committing adultery’, which is something God really frowns upon. That’s it. Period.

The monogamy-only guys gleefully jump on that and think that they can apply that principle to other things they don’t like or think should change. What they apparently fail to grasp is that Jesus was not changing anything or making new law, he wasn’t dumping the Old Testament teaching, he was straightening out a misconception (or delusion) of the religious leaders that altered God’s original intention for marriage (including Moses’s divorce provision, for that matter).

In like manner, today’s religious leaders, following the traditions of the Roman church, which followed the traditions of (heathen) Roman law and (heathen) Greek philosophy, have outlawed plural marriage, altering God’s original intention and his law, and arguably bringing themselves under Paul’s curse in 1 Timothy 4:1-3 (“Now the Spirit speaks expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; **forbidding to marry**, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.”). The whole “celibacy is really spiritual, monogamy is tolerable, but polygamy is awful” thing is non-biblical, and has clearly traceable historical roots in Romish and before them Egyptian and Babylonish practice. But that church history discussion is a whole ‘nother paper....

As is usual with these points, if Sarfati is really trying to persuade us of something, he ought to at least *try* to provide some evidence and argument, but as usual, he simply makes unsupported (and unsupportable) allegations, knowing that he is preaching to the choir. Jesus taught us clearly, unequivocally, that marriage is meant to be permanent, and that wives should not be divorced for any reason short of adultery, or else we *make* them to be adulteresses when they remarry. That’s about it, and to take his teaching and twist it to be a proof text for some other topic that Jesus in fact said *nothing* about, is just wrong. Jesus’s silence on the custom of plural marriage is thundering, if polygamy is the heinous crime some people think it is.

As for his argument that the word “if” shows that God did not “encourage” polygamy, I almost don’t know what to say. The phrase “grasping at straws” comes to mind, but not much else. Just to pick ONE example of how ludicrous that is, Jesus said, “**if** you love me, keep my

commandments” (John 14:15). I guess Sarfati should argue that this “conditional” statement is not meant to “encourage” commandment keeping, right? Apparently Sarfati does not understand the simple logic of an “if/then” statement, but by now we could have probably figured that out.

Sarfati also talks about some kind of “additional obligations” that God put on having additional wives, which, as usual, is presented without any kind of explanation or backup. The only thing he could possibly be talking about is the “if” statement he just referenced, Exodus 21:10-11, which says, “If he takes another wife; her (the first wife’s) food, her raiment (clothing), and her duty of marriage (usually thought to be sex and children), he shall not diminish”. I already mentioned this, but this is just economic reality.

A guy should not marry more wives than he can support. Heck, for that matter, he shouldn’t get married *in the first place* if he can’t support his wife! Similarly, a family shouldn’t bring more children into the world than they can figure out how to care for, and an employer shouldn’t take on more employees than he can afford to pay without bankrupting the company. Duh. Big deal.

Sarfati doesn’t actually show us this verse, or any other verses, because he is arguing (incorrectly) that God has somehow burdened “additional” marriages in some punitive way to discourage people from growing their families. This is not true, and further, reflects a massive misunderstanding of the way God actually works.

God has gone to some trouble to spell out for us what we’re supposed to be doing (a few general principles within which we have a lot of freedom), and what we’re not supposed to be doing (a list of very specific things for which we’ll be punished if we cross the line). God, unlike a lot of religious people, doesn’t have a grey area of moral disdain for practices he (sniff, eye roll) doesn’t approve of. He says things like, “if you eat this, you will die”, or “if a woman lies with a beast, put to death both the woman and the beast”. In other words, if God wants you not to do something, he spells it out and tells you what’s going to happen to you if you do it, and if he hasn’t done so, then just because certain social groups don’t approve of your behavior doesn’t mean you’re doing anything wrong.

Does that make sense? I want to make sure you’re with me here. The ethics, or code of conduct, of the bible is not that difficult to figure out, should one want to figure it out. And the over-arching principles of the New Testament (since that’s where modern religious types like to camp out) include liberty in Christ, not judging one another, and doing all things in love for the sake of unity. For Sarfati or others to resort to this kind of scripture twisting just to argue that God “seems” to permit polygamy, while really “discouraging” it in a sort of feeble, half-hearted way, is just silly.

18. Last but not least: Cultural comparisons

Sarfati makes some interesting insinuations (that’s all they are) in his closing comments. First, he says it’s “no wonder” polygamy was “unknown among the Jews after the Babylonian exile”. That’s odd, because that contradicts several historical sources that state that polygamy was practiced by the Jews until the 5th century, when Rome wiped it out. (For the record, there was a ban on polygamy in the 3rd century that applied to everyone but the Jews, which was later lifted, but then in the 5th century (I think it was Justinian) polygamy was outlawed by Rome for everyone. If Sarfati had said polygamy was “less common” or something after Babylon, maybe he’d have had a leg to stand on, but to state that it was “unknown” is just incorrect.

On top of which, what exactly would that prove? The Jews are captured by a heathen people, and while in captivity lose some of their distinctive social practices and adopt those of their captors. That's a good thing?? We want to be more like the Babylonians? Huh?

Same goes for Greece and Rome, and Sarfati really sneaks in a strange comment here. He says that "even" the Greeks and Romans had a monogamy-only rule by New Testament time, as if the Greco-Roman culture had somehow progressed or evolved from polygamy to monogamy. Wrong. The Greco-Roman culture was *always* 'officially' monogamous (although sex with slaves and boys wasn't considered such a big deal). Basically, monogamy as an ideal and a legally enforced social structure has its roots in the Germanic tribes of central Europe, which then influenced Rome, which then influenced the world, including primitive Christianity.

So it's not the case that "even" the Greeks and Romans evolved to monogamy-only status'. It's more like 'the Greeks and Romans were able to impose their monogamy on the whole world by replacing the biblical ethics of Christianity and Judaism with a pagan ethic'.

In fact, the church didn't officially pronounce against polygamy until the 1500s, so it obviously wasn't that obvious that something changed at the time of Christ. Augustine himself wrote some interesting stuff that flat out admits that polygamy is an acceptable biblical practice and that the only reason it wasn't practiced in the church at his time was that it was in violation of "our Roman custom". Martin Luther acknowledged and permitted it (that was one of the things that first struck me as a clue that this isn't as obvious as some people think it is). John Milton spoke in favor of it and against the celibate priesthood that condemned it.

There's always been a minority tradition that has understood the biblical teaching on marriage and has recognized the sociological roots of the monogamy-only tradition in the church: not some kind of newfangled teaching of Jesus and the apostles (since it's not there in the bible), but the syncretism of the early church, mixing Roman ethics and Greek philosophy into the Christian religion.

So to summarize, I'm not sure what Sarfati's point is in alluding to the Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans. Are we to develop our ethical positions from study of the scriptures? Or from mimicking pagan cultures? I would have thought the answer is obvious, but I'm willing to bet that Sarfati is so far into the 'rightness' of his position (in his own mind) that he doesn't even realize what he's doing. It won't surprise you if I put in my vote for developing our ethics from the scriptures, right?

Well, that about does it for me (can you believe it?). That's the line by line on the Answers In Genesis piece. Believe it or not, there's a lot I could have said but didn't, but I did want to try to address each of the points raised in the article.

If you want to learn more about the biblical teaching on this, I wholeheartedly recommend Sam Chapman's website, <http://www.samchapman.f2s.com/polygamy.htm>. He's a guy in England who is monogamous—a Baptist, I think, for what that's worth—and doesn't have an axe to grind (meaning he can't be accused of simply trying to defend his own lifestyle choices). His material is pretty well organized and very comprehensive. There are plenty of other sites out there, but I think his is the best.

Let me know if this helps you any or if you have any further questions.

A

Does the Bible clearly teach monogamy?
by Dr. Jonathan Sarfati

Question:

‘Ken Ham often says that Genesis shows that “God intended one man for one woman.” While I agree with monogamy, the Bible has many examples of men with more than one wife, and appears not to condemn this. Could you please explain how Genesis clearly teaches monogamy as Ken says.’

Answer:

The clearest evidence that monogamy is God’s ideal is from Christ’s teaching on marriage in [Matt. 19:3–6](#). In this passage, He cited the Genesis creation account, in particular [Gen. 1:27](#) and [2:24](#), saying ‘the **two** will become one flesh’, **not** more than two.

Another important biblical teaching is the parallel of husband and wife with Christ and the Church in [Eph. 5:22–33](#), which makes sense only with monogamy — Jesus will not have multiple brides.

The 10th Commandment ‘... You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife [singular] ...’ ([Exodus 20:17](#)) also presupposes the ideal that there is only one wife. Polygamy is expressly forbidden for church elders ([1 Tim. 3:2](#)). And this is not just for elders, because Paul also wrote: ‘each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.’ Paul goes on to explain marital duties in terms that make sense only with one husband to one wife.

The example of godly people is also important. Isaac and Rebekah were monogamous — they are often used as a model in Jewish weddings today. Other examples were Joseph and Asenath, and Moses and Zipporah. And the only survivors of the Flood were four monogamous couples.

Polygamy’s origins and consequences

A very important point to remember is that not everything *recorded* in the Bible is *approved* in the Bible. Consider where polygamy originated — first in the line of the murderer Cain, not the godly line of Seth. The first recorded polygamist was the murderer Lamech ([Gen. 4:23–24](#)). Then Esau, who despised his birthright, also caused much grief to his parents by marrying two pagan wives ([Gen. 26:34](#)).

God also forbade the kings of Israel to be polygamous ([Deut. 17:17](#)). Look at the trouble when they disobeyed, including deadly sibling rivalry between David’s sons from his different wives; and Solomon’s hundreds of wives helped lead Solomon to idolatry ([1 Kings 11:1–3](#)). Also, Hannah, Samuel’s mother, was humiliated by her husband Elkanah’s other wife Peninnah ([1 Sam. 1:1–7](#)).

What about godly men who were polygamous?

Abraham and Sarah would have been monogamous apart from a low point in their faith when Hagar became a second wife — note how much strife this caused later. Jacob only wanted Rachel, but was tricked into marrying her older sister Leah, and later he took their slave girls at the sisters’ urging, due to the rivalry between the sisters. Jacob was hardly at a spiritual high point at those times, and neither was David when he added Abigail and Ahinoam ([1 Sam. 25:42–43](#)).

Why did God seem to allow it, then?

It is more like the case of divorce, which God tolerated for a while under certain conditions because of the hardness of their hearts, but was not the way it was intended from the beginning ([Matt. 19:8](#)). But whenever the Mosaic law had provisions for polygamy, it was always the conditional ‘If he takes another wife to himself ...’ ([Ex.21:10](#)), never an encouragement. God put a number of obligations of the husband towards the additional wives which would discourage polygamy. It is no wonder that polygamy was unknown among the Jews after the Babylonian exile, and monogamy was the rule even among the Greeks and Romans by New Testament times.

Sources

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