

Marriage in the Judeo-Christian scripture — those kinky Hebrews

By Alan Austin

21 June 2012

The Old Testament suggests the God of Israel does not follow what the Church currently regards as Biblical family values, says [Alan Austin](#).

When you have a ménage a trois, they must not include a woman and her [daughter](#). “That is wickedness.” Says the Lord. And when a man sells his daughter to another man, he must [refund](#) the money if the buyer finds the sex unsatisfactory.

Just two instructions in the ancient Hebrew Scriptures which suggest the God of Israel does not follow “Biblical family values”.

The Anglican Archbishop of Sydney urged his followers last week to “commend the Biblical way of life in our churches and to the community.” This was in anticipation of this week’s report on same-sex marriage to the Australian Parliament.

Dr Jensen’s definition of marriage specified “two persons of the opposite sex”. Roman Catholic and Orthodox leaders echoed this call.

The problem these venerable gentlemen have, however, is that their understanding of the “Biblical way of life” is just nowhere found in the Bible.

Abraham is one of the greatest heroes of the Judeo-Christian tradition. When he and wife

Sarai found themselves childless, they brought their slave girl [Hagar](#) into the bedroom. The resulting son became a great patriarch.

Abraham later took a [second wife](#), Keturah, and had several more kids. He also had children with an uncertain number of mistresses — or concubines.

Jacob’s sex life was more bizarre still. He purchased his first wife Leah from her father — then married her [sister](#) Rachel. Rachel’s servant girl [Bilhah](#) soon joined them “as a wife” for at least two children. A bit later, Leah’s servant girl [Zilpah](#) made it a happy fivesome.

Yes, a bit kinky perhaps. But there is no hint in the texts this was irregular. In fact, the opposite. Great [rejoicing](#) at these blessings from God.

These lucky guys were not alone. Lamech took two wives. Esau had three. Gideon had many wives. King Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Rehoboam took 18 wives, and 60 concubines. Abijah had 14 wives. Caleb had children with at least two partners. David had eight wives, an unknown number of concubines and a relationship with Jonathan. There are others we know of and many we don’t.

This is not to suggest ancient Israel was Amsterdam in the swinging sixties. The

opposite, in fact. Polygamy was ordained by God to fulfil the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Especially after famine or war had depleted male populations. Clear guidelines were firmly in place.

First wives must be [looked after](#) when a man takes new ones. Wives must not come from another [race](#). Inheritance must be divided up [fairly](#) among children of all wives. Subsequent wives must not include your wife's [sister](#) while your wife is living (this came after Jacob's threesome). And a widow whose husband dies before they have had children *must* marry her [brother-in-law](#) after the funeral.

A man may assign one of his slave girls to a male slave for them to have children. When the male slave is redeemed — he is free to go. But his wife and children remain the [property](#) of the owner.

A virgin who is raped must [marry](#) the rapist with no possibility of divorce. But the rapist must pay the father 50 shekels for his property loss. A bride who is discovered after the wedding not to be a [virgin](#) must be killed.

Biblical marriage, anyone?

The argument that God disapproved of multiple partners but tolerated and regulated it — as with [divorce](#) — is unfounded. There is no hint anywhere that polygamous, same-sex or extramarital unions are intrinsically wrong. Some may be — but not all. Yes, Solomon was rebuked for taking too many foreign wives. But [nationality](#) was the problem there, not multiplicity. Although 700 does look a bit greedy...

God's prophet told King David he could have had even [more wives](#) had he wanted. This is just not possible if polygamy was in any way sinful.

The New Testament, in contrast, teaches clearly against marriage, proclaiming celibacy as the preferred option for followers of Christ.

“It is good for a man not to touch a woman,” Paul [instructs](#). And later, “He who marries does right, but he who does not marry does [better](#).”

Marriage is grudgingly permitted for the weak and then regulated. Slaves, wives and children are all [subordinate](#) to the [husband](#). There is one commandment in the New Testament requiring one wife. That applies to [bishops](#) or elders only.

So where did the curious idea arise that Biblical marriage is one-man-one-woman? It appears to have originated from a poetic piece set in the Garden of Eden, a passage often read at weddings.

Genesis [chapter 2](#) says: (24) “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. (25) And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.”

Clearly, say conservatives, this has the words “a man” and “his wife”. End of argument. Increasingly, however, scholars say this does not deal definitively with questions of number, gender, race, or anything else regarding marital partners. Rather, it is snapshot of the first union between Adam and Eve, which affirms that partnerships should be permanent and that newlyweds should not live with his parents. That's about all.

Singular terms in Scripture, scholars advise, often imply plural. And vice versa. For example, the tenth commandment [instructs](#) us not to “covet thy neighbour's house, thy neighbour's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass ...”

These are all singular terms, but clearly imply plural. Similarly, [instructions](#) to fathers to “not provoke your children” apply to fathers with only one child.

So restricting Genesis 2:24 to just one spouse fails. Besides, they ask, how can we apply verse 24 rigidly today, but not verse 25?

Scholars [note](#) also that Genesis 2:24 uses the Hebrew word 'dabaq' for being joined, or cleaving. What does this mean? We find the word also used for Solomon and his [many wives](#) and for the [relationship](#) between two women, [Ruth](#) and Naomi. So on the face of it, whatever 'dabaq' means, it can apply to polygamous and same-sex unions.

Scholars ruefully admit Scripture offers no clear definition of marriage. Murdoch University's Professor of New Testament William Loader suggests marriage in Biblical times was primarily to secure father to son inheritance.

"Men owned households," he wrote in his [submission](#) to the Australian Senate in April. "That included sexual access to wives and slaves, but never incestuous relations. Men decided with other men whom their daughters would marry and so 'gave them away', a tradition which still survives at least in ceremony in many wedding liturgies."

Loader concludes that "there appears to be no sound reason to exclude same-sex couples" from marriage.

So, Christians are quite free to argue for a definition of [marriage](#) as "the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman".

But they are not free to claim this is Biblical.



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