

Here's the Plain Truth About OLD TESTAMENT POLYGAMY

You may be surprised to learn that Abraham was not a polygamist — that David completely repented of it — that God's legal statutes made polygamy illegal in ancient Israel!

by Herbert W. Armstrong

GOD *did not* sanction polygamy in Old Testament times. Contrary to the suppositions many have accepted, God *forbade it* — and PUNISHED for it!

Abraham Was NOT a Polygamist

Many people recall at once a few Old Testament instances of plural wives, and assume that God sanctioned polygamy. That assumption is absolutely false! God has *never* approved, nor made lawful, more than one living wife for any man. Quite the contrary, He FORBADE IT, even to the kings of Israel, and that by written STATUTE!

Abraham *was not a polygamist*. While Sarah, his wife, lived, he never married any other woman.

Abraham had an illegitimate son by Hagar. But that was an adulterous SIN. Although it renders it nonetheless a SIN, I think we can recognize extenuating circumstances.

Sarah was barren. For a wife in ancient times to go childless was felt to be a disgrace. It was Sarah, Abraham's own wife, who brought to Abraham her servant handmaid, asking him to produce a child for Sarah by this servant woman. We can imagine Hagar to have been attractive, and not necessarily lacking in voluptuous charms simply because she was a servant. The temptation, under these circumstances, at Sarah's instigation, might have been great. Certainly the very invitation coming from Sarah would have made it harder to resist.

Abraham was a strong man. But this temptation appears to have been *stronger*. All humans have sinned. Abraham was human. Abraham lied when he twice claimed Sarah was his sister, fearing for his own life.

Abraham was not without sin. But

neither this adultery, nor the two lies, were sins of the nature that springs from a wrong attitude of mind or heart. Abraham, in his heart, was always OBEDIENT to GOD. There was no spirit of hostility or rebellion. These sins were of the FLESH, under temptation — not malicious or rebellious sins of the heart. But *they were SINS!* God *forgave* Abraham's sins of spiritual weakness, committed under heavy temptation.

Nevertheless, we all must REAP what we sow — even though God forgives our sins upon repentance. God refused to approve this adulterous act of Abraham's. He rejected the illegitimate son, Ishmael, from the birthright. This transgression produced jealousy between the women. It resulted in trouble, controversy, suffering.

How many realize that even the Arab-Jewish strife over Palestine, today, was brought on by this very THREE-CORNERED TRIANGLE, and the ensuing jealousy of the two women, Sarah and Hagar, over the one man, Abraham? The Jews are the children of Sarah, through Isaac, born later by a miracle. The Arabs are the children of Ishmael.

In Genesis 21:8-21 is the record of Hagar's departure from Sarah and Abraham. God ordered Abraham to send away the concubine Hagar and her son, and Abraham *obeyed*. This was at the time Isaac was weaned. Abraham had, after this, no more relations with Hagar, or his other concubine, Susanna, who is mentioned in the ancient Austrian Chronicle — see Genesis 25:6 where you will read that Abraham's *concubines'* sons were sent away.

Sarah's death is recorded in Genesis 23:1-2. It was after that (Gen. 25), that Abraham married Keturah. This,

of course, was a perfectly legal marriage. *There was no polygamy — no divorce.*

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are termed, in both Old and New Testaments, "the Fathers." Jesus Christ came to confirm the PROMISES made to "the Fathers." The unconditional promises God made to Abraham were repeated to both Isaac and Jacob.

Isaac Had Only One Wife

Isaac was no polygamist!

There is no mention whatever of any wife for Isaac other than Rebekah. There is no mention of any concubines, or of any act of adultery.

In Old Testament *types* Abraham is the *human* type of God the Father. He is called, in the human sense, the father of the faithful. In this same system of types, Isaac is the type of Christ, the Son of God. And Isaac's wife, Rebekah, is the type of the CHURCH, which is to marry Christ.

Did you ever realize this type similarity? Just as Rebekah had to become the affianced bride of Isaac, and in a sense come to LOVE HIM, before she ever saw him — while he was still off in another land, so must we in God's true CHURCH come to LOVE CHRIST, who is in a far country — heaven — without ever having seen Him!

Now CHRIST will never have but the ONE WIFE. And, Isaac, being a type of Christ, had only one wife. Apparently Isaac was spotless from sins of lust or sex.

Isaac's wife, Rebekah, like her mother-in-law, Sarah, was barren. But Isaac did not take things into his own hands and have children by her handmaids, or by concubines. Neither did Rebekah do as Sarah had done, and resort to bringing a servant girl to

Isaac to produce a son for Rebekah in this proxy manner. Instead of using human reason, taking things into his own hands, Isaac TRUSTED GOD!

"And Isaac entreated the Eternal for his wife, because she was barren: and the Eternal was entreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived" (Gen. 25:21).

If only we could learn to TRUST GOD to work out our problems!

JACOB: One Wife After Conversion

Jacob is a name that means "Supplanter." It was God's will that Jacob receive the birthright instead of his older brother Esau. But in his earlier life Jacob did not rely on God. He took the matter in his own hands, aided and abetted by his mother.

As he stole the Birthright from Esau by unfair means, and received Isaac's blessing by a lying deception, so his father-in-law, Laban, deceived Jacob. Laban supplanted Jacob's *promised and loved* wife, Rachel, with his elder daughter Leah. Leah was foisted on Jacob by fraud. According to God's marriage laws, Jacob could have rejected her — put her away as soon as he discovered the deception. In that event, he would never have been truly married to Leah — GOD would not have bound them as one flesh. But when Jacob accepted her as his wife, she became his ONLY true wife, in God's sight, as long as they both lived.

But Jacob was not yet converted. He leaned to his own understanding. He did not seek wisdom from God, nor did he seek to OBEY God. He did what seemed right to him, in his own selfish interest. So Jacob lived in polygamy with two wives, and also had children by their two personal maids.

But you read of Jacob's conversion in Genesis 32:24-30. He then put idolatry out of his household (Gen. 35:2-4). God appeared to him, changed his name to ISRAEL ("Overcomer," or "Prevailer with God"), and re-confirmed the PROMISES. Then God took Rachel, his second wife (Gen. 35:19), leaving only his first and true wife, Leah.

So, following his conversion, Jacob had but his one original wife. Jacob

had repented. He lived no more in polygamy after his conversion.

A Worldly Custom

It is of course true that it was a worldly custom, in patriarchal times, and in the days of the Kingdom of Israel, for kings and wealthy men to take plural wives. A harem was one of the symbols of royalty.

But God FORBADE polygamy for the kings of Israel.

Here is God's LAW respecting polygamy by Israel's kings:

"When thou art come unto the land which the Eternal thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me. . . . Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away" (Deut. 17:14, 17). It is spoken of as "THIS LAW" in verses 18 and 19.

Israel's first king, Saul, had plural wives. But in this he disobeyed God and followed the custom of the kings of the worldly nations around Israel. It was SIN. It was not approved by God.

David REPENTED of Polygamy

David had several wives. But after his tremendous sin of taking Bathsheba and having her husband murdered, David repented, in real heart-rending repentance. And he never repeated the sin. Very few seem to realize what actually happened.

See II Samuel 12:9-12. "Now therefore," said God (verse 10), "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." Notice, David despised God — not merely the commandment of God, as in verse 9, but also the very *Person* of God! He did it by taking this woman as his wife. Therefore the sword was never to depart from his HOUSE.

The HOUSE OF DAVID, at that time consisted solely of these plural WIVES, and his children. This was a tremendous, super SIN. God was meting out tremendous superpunishment. Now notice the next verse:

"Thus saith the Eternal, Behold, I

will raise up evil against thee out of *thine own house. . .*" His own house included his wives and children. *What* evil? God has just said the *sword* will now come upon his house — his family. God continues: ". . . and I will take thy wives before thine eyes and give them unto thy neighbor, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun."

Notice — this was to be done in the sight of *THIS* sun — before that very day's sunset. God continues: "For thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." The *Septuagint Version* translates it "*this* sun" here, as in the preceding verse. So a neighbor or neighbors defiled David's wives publicly, in the open sun that very day — ravished them. God said "I will take thy wives before thine eyes and give them unto thy neighbor." This was done publicly that very day.

But at that point, David repented. All that is mentioned, in this particular text, is: "And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Eternal" (verse 14). But you will read of David's private prayer of repentance to God in the 51st Psalm — the prayer of a really broken and contrite heart. It was *real* repentance. David *turned from* polygamy.

The next words in this text in II Samuel 12 are: "And Nathan said unto David, The Eternal also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die." However, the son to be born of this adultery was to die.

Even Concubines Put Away

Do you see what God did? He meted out to David a tremendous punishment — God took all his wives, leaving Bathsheba only. With David's first and only legitimate wife, Michal, probably dead (see II Sam. 6:23), God also had cleared the way for Bathsheba to become the legal wife of David. Apparently this was done, that she might be the mother of Solomon, through whom God was to keep His unconditional, dynastic promise to David — a forefather of Jesus Christ — and a prophet used in writing the Bible.

After this David was away from Jerusalem. But, returning, there were

ten concubines (his former harem). Here is what David did with them: "And David came to his house at Jerusalem; and the king took the ten women his concubines, *whom he had left to keep the house*, and put them in ward, and fed them, *but went not in unto them*. So they were shut up unto the day of their death, living in widowhood" (II Sam. 20:3).

Just as David kept the ten concubines "in widowhood"—that is, he had no relations with them, for they had been defiled—so he put away his other wives (II Sam. 19:5-6) *because they too had been defiled* by a neighbor (II Sam. 12:11).

David had truly repented. He practiced polygamy NO MORE! When David was becoming old, he went "fully after the Eternal" (I Kings 11:6). He was "a man after God's own heart," because his heart was right. He did repent. He had been a warrior. In his younger life he went after many women. He had sown his "wild oats." BUT HE REPENTED!

His heart turned to GOD. His life's race ENDED in victory—he "went fully after the Eternal." It is not the one who starts out with the biggest burst of speed, but the one who finishes first *at* the END of the race who wins it.

His son, Solomon, started out righteously, unselfishly, relying on God. But, "when Solomon was old," he had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines—it must have been a record harem. And his wives turned away his heart from God, and to their idols.

It was SIN! Regarding it, God's Word says: "Solomon did *evil* in the sight of the Eternal" (I Kings 11:6).

There was polygamy in ancient Israel. But it was SIN! God *condemned* it—He never condoned or sanctioned it. They reaped what they sowed.

What GOD Joins in Marriage

Also Israelites practiced what God had forbidden—divorce and remarriage. On this, Jesus said: "Moses [*not God*] because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Who-

soever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Mat. 19:8-9). GOD has *never* legalized divorce and remarriage. It is not allowable today.

Jesus said, in this same connection: "Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female?" Notice, Jesus was dating this from the BEGINNING. And God *never changes!* "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?" Notice, a man shall cleave to his WIFE—*not wives*. And they TWO—not he and several wives—shall be one flesh.

"What therefore GOD hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mat. 19:4-6). It is what GOD joins together. That is the definition of MARRIAGE. God does not join together one man with plural women! Any woman a man may "marry" according to man's codes, in addition to the wife GOD joined him to, is NOT his wife, so long as his real wife lives. Any additional women, whether in polygamy, or by divorce one at a time, is plain ADULTERY! GOD never joins the second, let alone the additional "wives." They are NOT truly wives—they are adulteresses, and the man becomes an adulterer. THIS BREAKS GOD'S LAW. IT IS SIN.

Jesus thus put us straight on monogamous marriage.

God made ONE wife for Adam—not a harem! He started the human family out as He ordained they *should go*—a family of ONE man and ONE wife!

And, remember, God gave this absolute *command* regarding future kings of Israel—telling them they must not do as the pagan nations around them (whose kings had their harems): "*Neither shall he multiply wives to himself!*" Saul, Israel's first king, DISOBEYED that command. He let demons take hold of him.

God deposed him, and put David in his place. David started out in polygamy, but God punished him. HE REPENTED thoroughly, and he finished his reign with his *only* living wife. Solomon finished his life in polygamy

and idolatry—and God, in punishment, *rended* the KINGDOM away from his son, Rehoboam.

GOD DID NOT CONDONE POLYGAMY! He *PUNISHED* those who practiced it! It was *always* SIN! It is SIN today!

Hosea and other prophets constantly dwell upon the thought of monogamous marriage as being a symbol of the union of God and His people, and denounce idolatry as unfaithfulness to this spiritual marriage tie.

Christ to Marry ONE Church

The marriage relationship, in the New Testament, is the type of the relationship between Christ and God's Church.

The worldly churches are MANY. Those who claim the NAME Christian—Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox Catholic, hundreds of Protestant churches—all claim to be, combined, the Church which Christ started. They seem to believe, somehow, that when Christ returns to earth to marry His CHURCH, that Jesus Christ will be a POLYGAMIST—that He will marry HUNDREDS of churches—have HUNDREDS of WIVES! *THEY ARE WRONG!*

Jesus Christ will marry but ONE Church—the True Church of GOD—and all these worldly churches will be on the outside looking in!

Listen! "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and HIS WIFE [*not wives*] hath made herself ready" (Rev. 19:7).

One of the qualifications for a Minister in GOD'S Church is that he have only ONE wife! NO POLYGAMIST may be a Minister of Jesus Christ in His True Church!

Here it is: "A bishop [elder, overseer, preacher, minister], must be blameless, the husband of ONE wife" (I Tim. 3:2). Likewise, a man may not even be a deacon if he has more than one wife (verse 12).

Let us, then, understand it once and for all! Polygamy is a SIN. God condemns it! It is ADULTERY! IT HAS NEVER BEEN APPROVED OR CONDONED BY GOD AT ANY TIME, IN PATRIARCHAL DAYS—IN OLD TESTAMENT TIMES—OR NOW, TODAY!