

# Is a Polygamous Relationship Acceptable?

## Introduction

In those areas of the world where polygamy is an accepted custom, confusion can arise when a polygamous family wishes to come to Mashiach Yahusha and to follow Torah. For a polygamist man to become a Christian the Church insists he divorce all but his first wife. Such a policy does, in effect, make polygamy an unforgiveable sin and an insurmountable obstruction for any loving family albeit polygamous. But is the Church correct, is monogamy commanded by Scripture or is this merely the imposition of western culture into religion?

## YHWH's Model for Marriage

YHWH created only one wife for Adam He did not provide multiple wives for him thereby setting the Scriptural pattern for marriage which Mashiach confirmed,

*"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning YHWH 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what YHWH has joined together, let no one separate." (Matt. 19:4-6)*

YHWH took two people and united them together as one: it was to be an 'exclusive relationship.' The principle for a marriage to be exclusive is demonstrated by YHWH's relationship with Israel. Israel was to be YHWH's set apart people they belonged to Him and only to Him,

*"Hear, O Israel: YHWH is Elohim, YHWH is one. And you shall love YHWH your Elohim with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deu.6:4).*

We are told it was a marriage relationship (Jer.3:14). When Israel went after other gods YHWH saw it as adultery. YHWH's relationship with Israel was built on the same fundamentals as that of Adam and Eve. Commitment within marriage, like commitment to YHWH, is exclusive: one husband one wife – one Israel one Elohim.

If a husband and wife are to be one and a man marries a second wife they also would become one thus, to maintain 'oneness' would necessitate the two wives becoming one and women being joined together is against Torah.

Polygamy violates the exclusiveness of marriage therefore it has to be outside of YHWH's ideal. Whilst it is true that even the Patriarchs practiced polygamy and were not explicitly condemned for doing so, we can see YHWH's displeasure starting with Avraham. Avraham's first wife Sarah was barren and so Sarah gave her maid Hagar to Avraham and through Hagar he fathered Ishmael, (Hagar was Abraham's concubine which was the same as a wife). But Ishmael was never accepted by YHWH, in fact YHWH did not even recognise Ishmael as Avraham's son (Gen.22:2). Again it could be argued that the very foundation of the people Israel; the twelve tribes who, being born from four women, were the result of a polygamous relationship. However, because sin had entered creation YHWH: had to work within the confines of a carnal human nature and culture. Even though the patriarchs and some kings of Israel, David for example, had a covenant relationship with YHWH they as all of humanity had a carnal nature. Only by being born again in Mashiach can humanity lose its carnal but the ancients did not have the benefit of Mashiach's sacrifice. Consequently, until Mashiach YHWH had to make the best of a bad situation and a good example is found in Deuteronomy,

*“When brothers dwell together, and one of them dies childless, his widow is not to marry someone unrelated to him. Her husband’s brother is to go into her and perform the duty of a brother -in-law by marrying her (Deu.25:5).*

Here a man is commanded by YHWH to marry his brother’s wife if his brother died without a son and heir. On the surface it appears that YHWH is encouraging polygamous relationships. However, this again shows YHWH dealing with the effect of Adam’s fall; death which is the result of sin and it is sin that has ruined YHWH’s ideal for family life. People weren’t fulfilling their family responsibilities and caring for those who were in need. So YHWH introduced a measure to ensure that the family name was continued, that widows were provided for and none of his people would fall into poverty or shame as a result of death or human selfishness.

But there is a deeper principle behind (Deu.25:5). YHWH’s plan was for Israel to be a set-apart nation, a light to the Gentiles. The efficacy of YHWH’s plan required a flourishing community, for this it was essential for all twelve tribes to remain wholesome in number and (Deu.25:5) satisfied this requisite by maintaining family numbers. However, Mashiach, through His sacrifice, has removed the necessity of (Deu.25:5) because birth rite is no longer the criteria for being set-apart: it is acceptance of Him and His sacrifice. What is paramount today is becoming a member of the ‘body of Mashiach’ and not being born Jewish (Gal.3:28). It is this change in circumstances that caused the apostle in (1Cor.7:39), to say that if a woman’s husband dies she is free to marry whoever she chooses as long as he is a believer. Post Mashiach the responsibility for taking care of widows falls to the family (1 Tim. 5:8), and in particular, to the women of the family (1 Tim. 5:16).

YHWH’s desire for a man to have only one wife can be evidenced throughout the Scriptures;

Exodus	20:17, 21:3-5
Psalms	109:9, 128:3
Proverbs	5:18, 18:22
Ecclesiastes	9:09
Malachi	21:04
1Corinthians	7:03, 7:27, 7:33, 7:34
Ephesians	5:31, 5:33
1 Timothy	3:2, 3:12
Titus	1:06

So, whilst we can find polygamous relationships within the Scriptures we must not ignore that YHWH set the principle for marriage when He created only one wife for Adam. What happened subsequent to the creation record was a direct result of sin entering creation. Through sin, the chosen people became stubborn and hard-hearted and YHWH had to make provision to overcome the situation but Polygamy was never YHWH’s original intention.

### **So Can a Polygamist Become Part of the Body of Mashiach?**

We have just said that polygamy was never the will of YHWH and when we step outside of His will we sin. Whilst in a sinful state it is impossible to have a relationship with YHWH. Thus when we commit sin we have to confess our transgression before YHWH and repent unto Him. Such repentance generally demands burying the old lifestyle and living in harmony with YHWH. For a polygamist to satisfy these criteria he would have to divorce all but his first wife: a condition imposed by Christianity. But such an approach is more likely to turn people away from Yahusha, particularly those children born into a polygamous family. What is more it is contrary to Mashiach’s direction,

*“But I say to you that whoever puts away his wife, except for the matter of fornication makes her commit adultery: and whoever marries a woman who has been put away commits adultery. (Matt.5:32).*

*\*Note Mashiach says wife not wives or one of his wives.*

Mashiach instructs that a husband can only separate from his wife if she is guilty of fornication. If we are to listen to Mashiach, divorce is not the correct way to deal with a polygamous family. Furthermore it is hard to believe that for a polygamous family to be acceptable, Mashiach requires the destruction of the family itself. If this were the case a whole section of society would simply never consider turning to Mashiach and hence miss out on salvation. Yet YHWH says, *"All souls are mine"* (Ezek.18:4). YHWH will never turn away a repentant soul, He wants all to enter into a relationship with Him: neither is Mashiach a destroyer of family unity. What is more there is nothing in the Scriptures that prohibits a polygamous family from accepting Mashiach and the salvation He offers. Indeed acceptance of an existing polygamous family into the congregation is inferred by the apostle,

*A congregation leader, then, should be blameless, the husband of one wife, sober, sensible, orderly, kind to strangers, able to teach, not given to wine, no brawler, but gentle, not quarrelsome, no lover of money, one who rules his own house well, having his children in subjection with all reverence, for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how shall he look after the assembly of Elohim? (1Tim.3:2-5).*

For Paul to mention that a leader must have only one wife indicates that polygamous families were present in the congregations otherwise there is no need of such a reference. It is a pity that Paul has not dealt more thoroughly with this issue other than to prohibit a polygamist from becoming a leader of a congregation. However, what criteria must a polygamous family satisfy for acceptance into the congregation and how should a congregation deal with a polygamous family wanting to come to Mashiach?

### **Criteria for a Polygamous Family's Acceptance into the Faith.**

Family unity is an important element of our faith: YHWH describes His covenant relationship with Israel in terms of a marriage. (Jer.3:14). Thus, it is incumbent upon us to respect the sanctity of a family, even a polygamous family. So what is required of a polygamous family wanting to join a messianic congregation? Well firstly, a polygamist husband should remain married to all spouses and must not favour one spouse over another. He must repent of the sin of polygamy and lead his family as best he can in a Torah compliant lifestyle. For this, the pattern of polygamy must stop and not be passed on to the children. Obviously the unacceptability of polygamy and why YHWH considers it a sin will need to be explained carefully to the children. Only by educating the children in the way of YHWH can the whole family demonstrate true repentance.

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