

...One Man and One (?) Woman

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In 1540, Philip the Magnanimous (1504-1567), Landgrave of Hesse, married Margarete von der Saale with the blessing of Martin Luther (1483-1546). On the face of it, this event meant nothing particularly extraordinary. But exceptional it was. Philip was still married. His marriage to his first wife, the Duchess Christina of Saxony, had taken place in 1523. So here we find Luther, the great Protestant reformer, tolerating a bigamous marriage, which had to be kept secret because of popular disapproval (Faulkner 1913).

Bigamy is the minimum form of polygamy, which of course is having two (bigamy) or more (polygamy) spouses at the same time. It is one of the so-called evils that the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), written by former congressman Bob Barr (McGhee 2008:1A, 6A) and sponsored by conservative Christians, is intended to protect us from (Public Law Number 104-199, U. S. Statutes at Large 110 Stat. 2419, September 21, 1996). It is as though custom were not enough, so that, as some champions of monogamy proclaim, *God's plan: one man and one woman* will not be thwarted.

Apparently Luther didn't think it was God's plan. And others, such as the pre-Reformation Anabaptists and 19th Century Mormons, would have agreed. Joseph Smith (1805-1844), the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1830, with his writing and publishing *The Book of Mormon*, may have had as many as 50 wives (he publicly acknowledged only the first, however). His murder in 1844 was in large part prompted by moral outrage over his plural marriages. In 1890, mainstream Mormons gave up polygamy, permitting Utah, where they had settled, to join the Union in 1896, although they continue to believe it will be practiced in the hereafter.

But some breakaway Mormon groups in the 21st century still agree monogamy is not God's plan. Warren Jeffs for one, prophet of a religious

group in Utah, Arizona, and Texas called the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, is said to have about 40 wives. Having been on the ten-most wanted list for four months of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.), he was recently arrested, prosecuted, and convicted on the charge of arranging marriages with under-age girls. However, the underlying motivation for his arrest seems to be a general attack on the practice of polygamy in the southwestern United States, which has not been dealt with directly in the courts.

Why the condemnation of polygamy? The *Bible* nowhere insists on monogamy and indeed biblical justification for polygamy--actually, only marriage of a man to more than one woman, polygyny-- is not difficult to find. The first plural marriage is reported there as occurring just six generations after Adam, with Lamech and his wives Adah and Zillah (*Genesis* 4:19). Esau had three wives (*Genesis* 36) and the story of his brother Jacob and his two wives Leah and Rachel (*Genesis* 29) involves the most famous biblical love story. More troubling perhaps for the Christian and general Western case law against polygamy is the example of King Solomon, said to be the wisest man on earth, who had 700 wives and 300 concubines! (*I Kings* 11)

The *Bible* not only names names, but gives rules about who can enter into plural marriages. In *Leviticus* 18:17-18, for example, a man is forbidden to be married to a woman and her sister at the same time. The case of Leah and Rachel, who were sisters, represents a custom before the giving of the Law to Moses. Nor may a man be married to a woman and her daughter. But a man -- married or not -- is commanded to marry the childless widow of a dead brother (*Deuteronomy* 25:5), a custom known as the levirate. The *Bible* even considers the problems of inheritance "if a man have two wives, one beloved and the other hated" (*Deuteronomy* 21:1).

Some modern commentators assume that the commandment against adultery is the basis for monogamy. This clearly is not the case. David is sinful not because he has several wives, but because he commits adultery with Bathsheba, and even plans to get her husband Uriah killed in battle.

In the *New Testament*, Jesus never discusses the subject of multiple wives, although he seems to condemn multiple husbands for women (polyandry) when he confronts the woman of Samaria, said to have five husbands (*John* 4:17-18). In one epistle, Paul advises that a bishop should have one wife only. He says the same thing about deacons and elders (*I Timothy* 3:12, *Titus* 1:6). This suggests that monogamy was not obligatory for other men.*

So, given all the biblical justification for polygamy, why do Christians and Westerners in general observe monogamy? The answer: they are simply continuing an ancient *pagan* lifestyle. Of all the major groups in the Roman Empire at the beginning of the Christian era, only the Jews practiced polygamy. Monogamy had in fact had a fairly long history in the Mediterranean world. The fifth century B.C. traveler and writer known as the father of history Herodotus (circa 484 B.C.-430/420 B.C.) described the ancient Egyptians as monogamous like the Greeks in his *History* of the Greco-Persian Wars.

There is some dispute among Egyptologists as to whether the depictions of several wives in art is an indication of sequential marriages or polygamous ones: According to James Brundage (1990:12):

Egyptian marriage was apparently monogamous, at least under the Old and Middle Kingdoms. The Egyptian language at that period has no terms for “concubine” or “harem,” which suggests these concepts were not a familiar part of life.

It is of course possible that such a word existed but simply has not yet been found or identified.

Under the Roman emperor Diocletian (A.D. 245-316), bigamy was made a punishable crime. About a hundred years later, the church father / bishop of Hippo Augustine (A.D. 354-430), reared in the monogamous Roman world, found it necessary to justify why the good men in the Bible often had more than one wife. And he insisted that it was not out of lust but the need for population growth.

When pagans converted to Christianity, they simply continued with their traditional marriage customs. There was, after all, no commandment: *Thou shalt have multiple wives*. Monogamy was part of that social structure. Eventually, it was assumed to be divinely sanctioned, a development reported by anthropologists in other contexts.

Why then do modern Jews practice monogamy? In point of fact, not all do. Sephardic Jews living in predominantly Muslim countries have sometimes observed polygamy in recent times, particularly because of the levirate command. But in Europe among the Ashkenazi, largely owing to Christian intolerance on this point, the Grand Rabbi of the Western World, Gershom ben Juda, issued a decree in A.D. 1030 prohibiting polygamy among all Jews under his jurisdiction, the prohibition to last 1000 years. Israel follows the Ashkenazi rule here. Interestingly, some Sephardic Jews in Israel have recently petitioned the government to permit polygamy as part of their cultural heritage.

Acknowledging the pagan underpinnings of Western monogamy, one has to concede the following. No matter how obnoxious one might find it — perhaps particularly because of the current but not ancient perception of the marriages as forced and the disparity in the ages of the participants, an issue raised by Paul Foy (2008) but not considered here — it is Warren Jeffs and his ilk who are following the biblical model, for which they are hounded as criminals. And when this is done, the slogan *God’s plan: one man, one woman*, may be found less compelling.

Notes

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