Some Biblical Principles Relevant to Evangelism among Polygamous Peoples

By Roy E. Gane

In their articles in this issue of *JAMS* on "Evangelism among Resistant Peoples with Deeply Entrenched Polygamy" and "The Maasai, Polygamy, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Reflections on a Missionary Problem in Tanzania," Russell Staples and Stefan Höschele offer sensitive critiques of ways in which Christian missionaries and their churches have related to polygamous peoples who respond to the gospel. From their historical sketches and case studies, it is clear that (1) missionaries and churches have varied in their treatment of individuals from polygamous families who wish to join the fellowship of Chris-

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tian believers, and (2) treatment of such individuals by the wider Christian community and its representatives has, at least in a number of instances, occasioned social distress that has adversely affected the perception of Christianity among the groups to whom these individuals belong.

While varying treatment and social distress sound negative, we should not automatically assume that they represent problems to be solved in the present era. In defense of varying treatment, God himself is like a good parent in that he treats people at different times and places in a variety of ways, depending on factors such as their special backgrounds and needs, developmental stages, relationships to him, and influence on others. For example, God blessed Jacob even though he was married to two sisters (Gen 29-31), but later forbade such marriages (Lev 18:18). Even more to the point of our topic, in Old Testament times God permitted or even appointed polygamists (e.g., Jacob, David, and subsequent kings) to lead his chosen covenant people, but in the New Testament a polygamist is barred from serving as a

leader in the Christian church (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6). Does this mean that God is inconsistent? No, he is consistently applying his principles (cf. Mal 3:6; 1 John 4:8) to different needs. So, Christian churches and their representatives can hardly be faulted *if* they follow the Lord's example in this regard. But the question must be asked: To what extent are church leaders really following God, or do flaws in their limited worldviews generate actual inconsistencies that cause unnecessary damage, especially when they treat people with the same needs differently?

ers and its mission. The apostle Paul knew that a man living in sin with his stepmother liked that arrangement or he wouldn't be doing it, but the apostle called on the Corinthian church to inflict disfellowshipping and shunning to help the offender choose to leave his lover as the lesser discomfort (1 Cor 5).

The question that concerns us here is: Does polygamy entered before conversion in the context of an established polygamous society fit in the category of sexual offenses that should exclude a person from membership in the Christian church, so that undergoing the

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Nor should it automatically be assumed that Christian conversion should never entail social trauma for some people. Would it be right, for example, for a church to permit unwed (including adulterous and homosexual) couples to continue cohabiting after conversion in order to avoid disturbance of their private lives? Of course not. Such violations of divine principles cannot be condoned or they will harm the reputation of God in the world, which should attract people to him, by sullying the community of believ-

social trauma of terminating the polygamous arrangement is prerequisite to membership? Notice the qualifications in this question, limiting its scope to (1) polygamous marriage entered into before conversion, not allowing for this right after conversion, (2) within a deeply polygamous society, not including western countries such as the United States, where a polygamous "marriage" would be tantamount to adultery, and (3) membership alone, not leadership, from which 1 Tim 3:2 and Titus 1:6 excludes polygamists.

To address the question, some general and specific biblical principles or factors and implications relevant to polygamy will be identified, as Russell Staples has already started to do in his article, but whereas Staples writes from a missiological perspective, I will approach the subject from an exegetical one (especially pentateuchal law).

General Biblical Principles or Factors Relevant to Polygamy

In this section perspective is provided on polygamy by viewing it in the context of broader issues, but including polygamy.

God's Ideals for Marriage and Human Departures from Them

According to the Bible, at creation God instituted marriage between one man and one woman (Gen 2:22-24). Marriage was a permanent, monogamous, heterosexual union between two human beings. Like everything else the Lord did in the beginning, this set up an ideal pattern for subsequent time on planet earth (cf. Mark 10:6-9). After the fall into sin, human beings departed from God's ideal for marriage through aberrations such as divorce, polygamy, adultery, promiscuity, rape, premarital sex, homosexuality, and bestiality.

In legislation of the Pentateuch, the foundation of the Bible, sexual departures from God's ideal are assessed with varying degrees of severity, as shown by the levels of sanction applied to them:

1. Where heterosexual relations between human beings are concerned, violation of permanence (by divorce) or monogamy (by polygamy) is tolerated without penalty, although restricted, but practices that not only violate permanence but also occur outside the marriage relation incur penalties under the Israelite theocracy (adultery—Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22; promiscuity—Deut 22:20-21; rape—Deut 22:25-29; premarital sex from seduction—Exod 22:16-17).

2. Sexual relations with partners other than human beings of the opposite sex are categorically condemned and incur the death penalty (homosexuality—Lev 18:22; 20:13; bestiality—Lev 18:23; 20:15-16) (Gane 2004:323, 324, 361, 365).

While God frowns on divorce (cf. Mal 2:16), in the Pentateuch he tolerates it under certain circumstances and regulates it to prevent disastrous effects on divorced women, who could be lynched for adultery if they did not possess divorce documents (Deut 24:1-4). Likewise in the Pentateuch, the Lord tolerates polygamy but regulates it, mainly for the benefit of the women involved, in order to mitigate evil consequences, such as favoritism, neglect, and rivalry (Exod 21:10-11; Lev 18:18; Deut 21:15-17). Thus, in the Old Testament, God's approaches to divorce (which violates the principle of permanence) and polygamy

(which violates the principle of monogamy) are quite close (Gane 2001:35-61). Since both divorce and polygamy can mean that a man takes a second wife while the first is still living, it is not surprising that they are treated similarly.

Progressive Revelation

The Bible shows that since the fall, God is patiently leading human beings back to his ideals, holding them accountable for progressively learning and implementing improvements in

was struggling to protect his own interests in the divine plan through his own devices, such as claiming that Sarah was his sister (Gen 12:11-15) and begetting an heir through a second wife as surrogate mother (Gen 16), he surely would have flunked (see Borgman 2001:38-114 for information on Abraham's learning curve).

Below are additional illustrations, limited to the area of marriage, showing that God progressively reveals himself and his will:

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their lives as they are able to handle these changes. God does not force people to instantly come up to his standards, just as diving instructors do not compel their pupils to ascend too quickly from the depths, lest they suffer "the bends." For example, the Lord led Abraham for decades before testing his radical faith in God's universal plan to bless all nations through him by commanding him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah (Gen 22). Had this towering test come much earlier in Abraham's experience with God, when he

1. The children of Adam and Eve must have married each other, but later the Lord prohibited incestuous marriages (Lev 18:6-18; 20:17-21).

2. God permitted Jacob to marry two sisters and to beget the patriarchs of his chosen people through them and their maidservants (Gen 29-30, 35), but later he forbade Israelite men to marry two sisters (Lev 18:18).

3. In his "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus raised the standard for marriage by making the ground for legitimate divorce more stringent:

It was said, "WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE"; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matt 5:31-32; NASB95 here and in subsequent biblical quotations unless marked otherwise).

4. As mentioned above, God permitted or even appointed polygamists to be leaders of his chosen people, but inspired New Testament policy raises the lifestyle standard of Christian leaders by stipulating that each must be the husband of only one wife (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6).

Divine Accommodation to Human Weakness

The relatively slow pace of progressive revelation is a kind of divine accommodation to human weakness. The fact that God permitted the Israelites to divorce their wives, practice polygamy, and hold slaves shows how far he stooped down to take them from where they were in their hard-heartedness (cf. Mark 10:5). God did not institute any of these evil practices, but rather he tried to help his people to begin moving away from them by limiting/regulating them, undermining the motivation for them, and illustrating problems with them. If God had immediately prohibited all divorce, polygamy, and servitude, it is inconceivable that the Israelites would have been mature enough to treat well the wives whom they could not divorce, support extra women in society without enjoying them sexually, and to grant loans to the needy without the security of human labor as collateral. So draconian divine measures could have hurt the very same vulnerable members of society that the Lord was trying to protect!

Divine accommodation has its limits. The Lord did not permit anything to compromise basic loyalty to God through idolatry or practices that would inevitably lead to it. Thus, while God allowed Israelites to marry non-Israelites who assimilated into the Israelite nation (e.g., Rahab, Ruth), he strictly forbade the kind of parity intermarriage with Canaanites by which two groups made alliances, lest his people be assimilated into idolatrous culture (Deut 7:1-4, cf. Gen 34:8-10—the Shechemite offer to Jacob, and 1 Kgs 11:1-8—Solomon's rampant intermarriage with foreigners). Ezra called for obedience to this law as late as the Persian period, so that Jews who had contracted illegitimate marriages with foreigners pledged to divorce their non-Israelite wives (Ezra 9-10). This seems like a drastic and cruel solution, but the survival of the covenant nation was at stake, just as Abraham had to divorce Hagar in order to regain peace and safely pass on the covenant promise through Isaac (Gen 21:9-14). For another example of divorce under pressure to annul what is regarded as an illegitimate marriage, see 2 Sam 3:12-16, where David takes

Michal, Saul's daughter, from the husband to whom Saul gave her after Saul forced David to flee (1 Sam 25:44). David regarded himself as Michal's rightful husband because Saul's action was unjustified.

Divine Principles Versus Human Culture

God speaks to real, contextualized people rather than in a cultural vacuum. Thus Old Testament laws and New Testament church policies often clothe timeless divine principles in culturally conditioned garb that exemplifies how these principles

Bibles and chant the mantra of knee-jerk obedience: "Just read and do!" Oh? Do we need massive reform to implement levirate marriage in our faith community? Is the ancient custom of levirate marriage, which preceded the law of Deut 25 (see Gen 38:8-11), a timeless principle itself? Or is it a culturally conditioned application of one or more underlying principles, such as respect for the dead (see further below), which we may need to carry out in ways appropriate to our own cultures? Addressing such a question involves "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2

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can be carried out in a particular time and place. It is the principles, not the ancient cultural elements or examples that are authoritative for us to obey. But this does not mean that the cultural factors should not be taken into account in the process of identifying the principles and ascertaining how to apply them (see Gane 2004:308, 309).

For example, Deut 25:5-10 legislates levirate (brother-in-law) marriage and prescribes the punishment of shaming for a man who refuses to perform this service for his sister-in-law. This passage raises a dilemma for Christians who pound their

Tim 2:15; NKJV), i.e., properly analyzing divine communication. So between the reading and doing there is a process of *thinking* to understand what the Lord is trying to tell us.

Specific Biblical Principles or Factors Relevant to Polygamy

In this section data that is more narrowly focused on the Bible's treatment of polygamy in particular will be looked at.

Polygamy Is a Form of Marriage

In the Bible, polygamy is multiple marriage, in agreement with the etymology of the word

"polygamy" (Greek *polus*, "much, many" + *gamos*, "marriage"). It is not adultery, which it would be if it were not regarded as marriage. This is clear from a number of exegetical factors:

1. Hebrew terminology for contracting multiple marriages is the same as for monogamous unions. Thus Lamech, the first polygamist, "took" (Qal of לקח) for himself two wives (Gen 4:19) and Esau went to Ishmael and "took" Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael for himself as (his) wife in addition to the wives he already had (Gen 28:9), just as Abram and Nahor "took" wives for themselves, i.e., one wife each (Gen 11:29), and Aaron's son Eleazar "took" for himself one of the daughters of Putiel as (his) wife (Exod 6:25).

2. There is no biblical passage that directs the Hebrew terminology or sanctions of adultery (Qal of נאף in Exod 20:14; Lev 20:10; Deut 5:18; death penalty in Deut 22:22) against anyone for contracting or living in a polygamous state of matrimony (on the special terminology for adultery in the law of the suspected adulteress (Num 5:11-31), see Gane 2004:521-523).

3. Expulsion of a second wife (including a servant-wife) is described with Hebrew terminology that is employed elsewhere with reference to divorce. Thus Sarah demanded that Abraham "drive out" (Piel of גרש) Hagar along with her son (Gen 21:10), just as a priest is not permitted to marry a woman who has been "driven out" (Qal passive of גרש), i.e., divorced,

from her husband (Lev 21:7; cf. v. 14; 22:13; Num 30:9 [Heb v. 10]; Ezek 44:22). On the dual status of Hagar as servant and wife (called "wife" in Gen 16:3), see Westbrook, 1991:153-154.

4. In the context of ancient Israel, contracting a marriage involved formation of societal bonds with the extended family of the bride, whether she was wife #1, #2, or #700 (in the case of King Solomon). Thus Esau, who already had more than one wife, followed normal protocol by approaching Ishmael to (ask for and) take his daughter in marriage (Gen 28:9; cf. 29:18 of Jacob asking Laban for his daughter Rachel). In this way, Esau linked himself to the family of Ishmael, and if Esau had subsequently divorced this wife, such an action presumably would have affected his relationship to the Ishmaelites (cf. Laban's words to Jacob in Gen 31:50—"If you mistreat my daughters . . ."). The fact that marriage, including multiple marriage, forges family, tribal, and even national alliances at least partly explains why the Shechemites wanted to intermarry with the family of Jacob (Gen 34:8-10), why Solomon wanted to marry foreign women (1 Kgs 11:1-3), including the daughter of Pharaoh (1 Kgs 3:1), whom Solomon was careful to treat very well by building her a special palace (7:8; 9:24; 2 Chron 8:11), and why the Lord strictly prohibited intermarriage with the idolatrous Canaanites, who were to be utterly exterminated as a divine judgment (Deut 7:1-6; cf. 20:16-18).

No Blanket Prohibition of All Polygamy

If the Bible categorically forbade polygamy, as it does adultery and other sexual sins (see above), modern churches and their representatives would have every reason to deny Christian membership to people who did not give up this lifestyle. However, Russell Staples refers to "the fact that there is not a single forthright prohibition of polygamy in the Old Testament" (see page 15). He is right. The first official Jewish ban on polygamy was that of Rabbi Gershom in the tenth century A.D., and this affected only Ashkenazi Jews. Under Rabbi Gershom's ruling, a man could receive permission to take another wife in the unlikely event that it was granted by one hundred rabbis from three different countries or districts (Sinclair 1997:540).

Not everyone agrees with Staples. Some scholars think Lev 18:18 is a blanket prohibition of all polygamy, which the rabbis must have missed. This verse reads: "And you shall not marry a woman producing rivalry to her sister, uncovering her nakedness during her (sister's) lifetime" (Milgrom 2001:1924).

From ancient times, some have interpreted the words that literally mean "a woman to her sister" in a broad sense as any woman in addition to a first wife (Yadin 1983:2:407, ben Elijah 1997:130). Support for this is found in the idiomatic way the same Hebrew expression elsewhere can refer to "one (feminine thing) in addition to another (feminine thing)," with "another" referring to a counterpart object denoted by a grammatically feminine word, rather than to a literal sister (Exod 26:3, 5, 6, 17; Ezek 1:9, 23; 3:13). The masculine equivalent expression quite often functions as an idiom for "one (masculine person) to another (masculine person)" or "to one another" (Gen 37:19; 42:21, 28; Exod 16:15; 25:20; 37:9; Num 14:4, etc.). For reinforcement, A. Tosato has argued that the formulation of Lev 18:18 goes with the style of the following verses 19-20, the scope of which is not limited to relatives, rather than with the previous legislation regarding incest in verses 6-17 (1984:202-208).

If the arguments summarized in the preceding paragraph were to hold up, verse 18 prohibits marriage to any other woman, not just to a literal sister, thereby categorically banning all polygamy (see du Preez 1993:62-78). However, I have found that this conclusion does not withstand scrutiny:

Against Tosato's interpretation, because verse 18 immediately follows laws regulating sexual relations between literal kin, including sisters (vv. 9, 11, 12, 13), it is difficult to avoid the impression that the women in verse 18 are related to each other. The literary affinity with the following verses could be due to the fact that by contrast to the previous cases, the prohibitions of verses 18-20 are limited to conditions that can end: the lifetime of one's wife (v. 18), menstruation (v. 19), and the marriage of a woman to another man (v.

20). So verse 18 could be regarded as transitional, simultaneously (Janus-like) looking backward to incest laws and forward to time-limited laws. Notice that verses 18-19 are paralleled in chapter 20, where an unambiguous prohibition of marriage to a literal sister (20:17) is immediately followed by prohibition of sex during menstruation (20:18).

Why does 18:18 include "as a rival" . . . which introduces a social dynamic over and above the objective kinship relation between the two women? Would this not apply to any polygamous situation? Indeed, 1 Sam 1:6 refers to Peninnah as the "rival" . . . of Hannah, and there is no inkling that the two were sisters. It appears that the law of Lev 270 on the unequal social relationship between an older and younger sister as a complicating factor sure to produce rivalry in a polygamous household, and therefore ruled out by Lev 18:18).

Strong Discouragement of Polygamy

Alas, already before the formulation of Lev 18:18, the stories of Leah and Rachel (Gen 29-30) lavishly illustrate the bitter rivalry that can arise when a man, even a great patriarch such as Jacob, marries two women, even (or especially!) when they are literal sisters. Knowing this and other biblical stories of disasters arising from polygamous house-

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18:18, like other laws in the Torah, was capable of expansion by logical extension. So while Lev 18:18 in association with incest laws would refer to a literal sister as a rival, the placement and formulation of the law lend themselves to the conclusion that the social dynamic principle applies more broadly to any other woman. In this way a single law economically met people where they were and led them to a higher level as their experience and reflection matured (Gane 2004:319, 320; see also Milgrom 2001:1549; Davidson forthcoming: chapter 4; Patrick 1985:49 on the expanding principle of the third commandment of the Decalogue; and Fridle 2000:265- holds, with contention not only between wives (cf. 1 Sam 1:1-8), but also among their children (Judg 8:30-31; 9:1-57; 11:1-3; 2 Sam 13; 1 Kgs 1-2), my wife and I were shocked a couple of decades ago when a polygamist from Utah was interviewed on TV with five of his nine wives and justified the arrangement as following "the patriarchal ideal." If he were to merely casually scan the biblical narratives, he would find that polygamy consistently causes contention, never peace, and in this light to call it "ideal" smacks of a cruel joke.

While the Bible does not expressly forbid all polygamy with a "Thou shalt not," it implicitly discourages the practice to the point of overkill, as if to say: "Make a wise choice in light of what has happened to others. You are *STUPID* if you go ahead and take more than one wife." It is true that in Bible times God used men to accomplish his purposes in the world *in spite of their folly* of polygamy, but this does not exonerate polygamy any more than it justifies all the other character and lifestyle blemishes of these heroes of faith.

Among Israelites, polygamy was especially tempting to kings and other powerful, wealthy individuals, for several reasons:

1. They could afford the "luxury" of multiple wives.

2. They would naturally desire to have many sons to extend their power, administer their estates, and inherit their roles and properties.

3. By taking daughters of other leaders as their wives, they could establish and cement political alliances to their own advantage and that of their people.

4. Because polygamy was common among ancient Near Eastern rulers outside Israel, Israelites would have expected to follow suit as they did in so many other areas of life.

While the Lord granted the request of the Israelites to have a king, whom they wanted in order to be like all the other nations (1 Sam 8:20), he had warned against the danger of royal polygamy and commanded that a king "shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself" (Deut 17:17). Thus God linked rampant polygamy with apostasy in close connection with excessive pursuit of personal gain. The combination of polygamy with wealth and apostasy already appears in the life of Gideon, who refused to rule over Israel (Judg 8:23), but then acted like an ancient Near Eastern monarch by making himself rich from battle spoil (8:24-26), fabricating an object of worship that was not authorized by God (8:27), and having many wives (8:30). With this kind of leadership, it was a fairly short step for Israel to sink back into idolatry as soon as Gideon was dead (8:33-34) (Gane 1996:79-81).

While royal polygamy (including intermarriage with foreign women) went hand in hand with wealth and apostasy throughout the period of the monarchy, the supreme offender in this regard was King Solomon, who had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kgs 11:1-4). Solomon's excesses and disobedience lured him into idolatry, by which he broke the covenant with God and incurred divine judgments upon himself and his dynasty (11:5-40). Already near the beginning of the united monarchy, Solomon laid a solid foundation for the destruction of his nation.

During the Old Testament

monarchy, the fact that polygamy was prominently featured in the royal lifestyles of the rich and famous, in violation of Deut 17:17, would have made this practice desirable for other men. The New Testament enforces the principle behind Deut 17:17 (leaders should not multiply wives) and raises discouragement of polygamy to a new level by requiring a leader (bishop/overseer or elder) in the Christian church to be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6). Since the leaders were to be examples to other Christians (cf. 1 Tim 4:12),

like that of Leah and Rachel is Deut 21:15-17, which prohibits a man from discriminating against his eldest son in the matter of inheritance if the mother of this son is an unpreferred wife. In Exod 21:10-11, slavery and polygamy come together. Here passive abuse of a slave-wife whose master/husband reduces provision of her basic needs when he takes another wife results in her freedom without payment to her master. Cf. Exod 21:26-27, which protects male or female slaves from active abuse: a blow by the master that results in loss of an

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this rule portrays polygamy as less than ideal and encourages those who aspire to leadership to refrain from contracting additional marriages.

Regulation of Polygamy to Avoid Its Worst Effects

God did not institute or like polygamy, just as he did not institute or like slavery, but he regulated these human institutions to protect women and slaves, who were vulnerable members of society, from abusive situations. We have already discussed Lev 18:18, which prohibits marriage to two sisters, thereby creating rivalry between them. Another law that addresses situations

eye or tooth results in freedom for the slave. If the slave were female and happened to be his slave-wife, presumably the "marriage" would end at that point with termination of her servitude.

If slavery and polygamy are evil, why did God not simply abolish them? From our modern perspective, it is obvious that he should have done so immediately, at the foundation of the Israelite nation. However, we should pause and consider what this approach would have done to people in their ancient society. It appears that God allowed the type of servitude by fellow Hebrews that he limited to six years in Exod 21:2 and Deut

15:12 as a means of keeping people alive who would otherwise starve. Such temporary "slavery" was most likely entered through debt or insolvency (cf. 2 Kgs 4:1), as implied by the close connection between servitude and debt in Deut 15 (debt in 4:1-11, then servitude in 4:12-18). A person who voluntarily incurred debt but was unable to pay could be forced to make restitution by performing service because in those days human beings could be collateral for debts. Alternatively, persons who could not survive on their own could choose to become servants (cf. Lev 25:39). Such servitude sounds dreadful, but it was preferable to death by starvation, which is what would

outlawed polygamy. In ancient Israelite society it was crucial for a man to have an heir to keep his ancestral line of inheritance alive (see further below). So if his wife turned out to be barren, he would feel powerful pressure to divorce her, even if he loved her, if he could not take a second wife. If this sounds too theoretical, plug in the names "Elkanah," "Hannah," and "Peninnah." Elkanah loved Hannah, but she was barren, and he had a second wife (Peninnah), who bore him children (1 Sam 1). What would have happened to a woman like Hannah if she were divorced? She could be in deep trouble, with nobody to provide for her and no children to take care of her

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have happened if those who had the means to extend loans and maintain servants would have received no benefit to offset their outlay of resources. God exhorted the Israelites to help their poor brethren (Lev 25:35-38; Deut 15:7-11), but the actual results were up to their choice and were constrained by their economic limitations. On the question of why God tolerated slavery (including permanent slavery of foreigners; Lev 25:44-46) in biblical times, see Gane 2004:439-442.

Now consider what would have happened if God had simply

in old age. Lev 22:13 mentions a priest's daughter who "becomes a widow or divorced, and has no child and returns to her father's house as in her youth." But what if the father and other relatives of a divorcee are dead or cannot help her? The possibility of remarriage would be remote for a divorced woman, especially if she had been barren. She might feel forced to become a prostitute to keep from starving.

In the context of a world broken by sin, ironically, God has sometimes mercifully allowed evils such as servitude and polygamy to continue for awhile in

a controlled form because ending them too quickly could result in even greater suffering, just as too strong a medicine can kill the patient along with the disease. So God is pragmatic as well as idealistic. While he is concerned to uphold the principles of his law, he is also concerned for the actual well-being of real people in real time, and he takes their limitations into account. Oh that his people would learn to be like him, not in order to let evil flourish unchecked, but to achieve a truly lasting cure!

Levirate Marriage

What is the relationship between levirate marriage and polygamy? This ancient custom called upon the brother-in-law of a childless widow to take her as his wife in order to produce a child that would be reckoned to the widow's deceased husband. Although it was an unusual union, the various Hebrew terms for contracting it are those of marriage (Gen 38:14; Deut 25:5, 7; Ruth 4:10) (Westbrook 1991:85 and Friedl 2000:243) which implies a permanent bond rather than temporary cohabitation that lasts only long enough to get the woman pregnant.

The biblical passages dealing with levirate marriage (Gen 38; Deut 25; Ruth 4; Matt 22:23-32 and parallels in Mark 12 and Luke 20) do not combine their treatment of this arrangement with the matter of polygamy, for example, by saying what should happen if the brother-in-law is

already married before he fulfills his duty for his sister-in-law (cf. Friedl 2000:242). Westbrook observes: "Both the law and the narratives are concerned only with the necessary minimum, not the further possibilities (1991:82).

Deut 25:5-10, the only legislation regarding levirate marriage, contains no exception clause to exempt an already married man from taking his sister-in-law as a second wife. Even in a levirate household where the brother-in-law is married only to his sister-in-law, there is a kind of legal polygamy (in this case polyandry) in the sense that she is still regarded as married to her dead husband so that she can provide him with an heir (Friedl 2000:243). So it appears that the brother-in-law would be expected to take her, and this expectation would be reinforced by the threat of public humiliation for non-performance (Deut 25:7-10). However, although this social pressure involved the punishment of stigma, a man who felt strongly enough that he should not marry his sister-in-law could get out of the obligation without suffering a financial or physical penalty. So although the law seems to *expect* an already married man to become a bigamist in this unusual situation, he is not forced to do this. To say that the law *absolutely requires* such a man to become a bigamist would be too strong a statement.

Raymond Westbrook shows how a man whose first marriage

was levirate could feel a legal need for a second wife. Through analysis of Gen 38, Deut 25, and Ruth 4, he demonstrates that the goal of the institution of levirate marriage was to maintain the legal legacy of a dead brother by preventing his exclusion from the line of those who possessed ownership of a landed inheritance through providing him with an heir, so that his line of succession would continue (1991:71-80). The firstborn son of a levirate union was counted as the heir of the deceased, but what about other sons born to the same couple, i.e., the widow and her brother-in-law? Were they also regarded as raising up the legal name = title of the dead brother? Westbrook suggests: "Although the sources were silent on this point, in our opinion they most probably did, and all the sons of the levirate union shared in the inheritance of the deceased" (82). If so, how could the surviving brother-in-law obtain a successor to his own estate? There would only be one way: "If the levir wanted heirs of his own, he would take another wife" (82).

Of course, as Westbrook recognizes, the vulnerable link in his reconstruction is the idea that all sons of the levirate union were counted as heirs of the dead brother. If only the firstborn served as the successor of the deceased, subsequent sons would be heirs of the living brother, who would not need another wife. We simply do not have sufficient evidence to conclusively settle this question.

If levirate marriage could be an unusual cause or motivation for polygamy, it was unusual in another way by constituting an exception to the incest law against a man taking his brother's wife (Lev 18:16; 20:21). Another option for reconciling this conflict between Deut 25 and Lev 18 and 20 is the possibility that the prohibition in Leviticus only applies while the brother is alive (Westbrook 1991:82). However, weakening this idea is the fact that in Lev 18:18 the condition that one party is alive is explicitly stated in the case of marrying the wife of one's sister. So the absence of this qualifier in verse 16 could be taken to mean that taking the wife of one's brother is forbidden even when he is dead. If levirate marriage was sanctioned by God for the Israelites as an exception to incest law, we should not be surprised if levirate marriage could have also generated exceptions to the ideal of monogamy. This would not justify polygamy any more than it would justify incest.

Conclusion

The exegetical evidence agrees with Russell Staples that Christian missionaries should always uphold the creation ideal of monogamy, should not allow any Christian member to take an additional wife, and should follow New Testament teaching by not permitting any polygamist to serve as a leader and therefore as an example to the members

of the church. My exegetical investigation has also resulted in agreement with him that evangelists proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ should not be in the business of breaking up homes, even homes that became polygamous before conversion in societies that are like ancient Israel in that they accept polygamy as a legitimate form of marriage. There is no biblical warrant for forcing converts from such societies to suffer the social trauma of immediately reaching a higher level to which God gently led his people over many generations. By consistently allowing polygamous converts one generation of transition, we will be in harmony with the character of God and his biblical principles, which we are seeking to represent to the world, and we will ensure that the "medicine" of the gospel heals rather than kills the "patient."

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