

Genesis 29:1–30: More than one wife?

Polygamy (the technical name for having more than one wife) was common in the Old Testament. Key characters such as Abraham, Jacob and David all had more than one wife. Interestingly, nowhere do we read about God condemning polygamy, and he didn't choose to ban it in the Law. That said, we don't read about God being happy about it either.

So why does God appear to allow polygamy?

It's impossible to be certain, but this is one possibility. The Bible was written in a male-dominated society in which women were seen as second-class citizens. But as we read the Bible, we see that God wants women to be treated fairly. Surprisingly, this may have been why God allowed polygamy. You see, there have always been more women in the world than men, and in Bible times it's likely that women far outnumbered men. War was common and brutal and as a result many men lost their lives. Women were usually uneducated and relied on men to provide for them as they were unable to provide for themselves. Therefore, unmarried women who had neither father nor brother often found themselves in extreme poverty and were usually forced into slavery or prostitution. Perhaps God allowed polygamy so that women would be protected and provided for? It was certainly not the ideal situation for women to be in, but it does seem to be better than the alternatives.

Is polygamy still an option for today?

Throughout the Bible, we learn that God's ideal for marriage is for one man to marry one woman. Creation revealed how God intended things, but once sin entered into the world, things became distorted. However, through the Law, God instructed people as to how he wanted them to live in a way that pleased him, and through Jesus he initiated his plan to bring about a new creation and to return the world to the way he had intended it to be. Therefore, the early church clearly taught people that they should return to God's initial plan for marriage – one man, one woman. In addition, the reasons why God may have allowed polygamy in Bible times are, in most cultures, not around today, as women are able to support and provide for themselves.