The Matter of Polygamy
(As Derived From Scripture)

By Harvey E. Seibel

God instituted marriage in the beginning by providing the following word:

"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24).

Notice that this God given provision did not make allowance for a man to have more than one wife. It says that he shall cleave unto his ‘wife,’ not ‘wives,’ and they were to be one flesh.

Yet we know this injunction was ignored or lost not long after the creation, because we have record of men having more than one wife even as early as Cain’s grandson Lamech, who had two wives, Adah and Zillah. By the time of Abraham, Abraham not only had his wife Sarah, but her handmaiden Hagar, plus concubines.

This practice continued down to Moses and was permitted to continue under the Mosaic law, but with certain added rules. And so we come to the days of David and Solomon who had many wives and concubines, David being told, on one occasion, that God could have given him as many as he wanted, that he need not have taken another man’s wife as in the case of Bathsheba.

There was one stipulation in the taking of multiple wives. They were forbidden to marry outside of the house of Israel, or to make affinity with the strangers round about them, because, if they did so, they would fall into the snare of worshipping the gods of those strange or foreign wives. And this is what did happen with Solomon. In his old age his heart was turned away from the Lord and he permitted those idol gods of his wives to be put in the temple.

But why did the Lord permit this practice? It was because of the ignorance of the people. From Matthew we read:

"The Pharisees also came

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unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, 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? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses 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, Whosoever 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" (Matthew 19:3-9).

This, of course, is speaking of divorce. But divorce was permitted in the days of Moses because of the hardness of their hearts, and so it was written in the law of Moses despite the fact that it was not so in the beginning, nor according to the plan of God. But notice the language here. He says to them, Have ye not read that he which made them in the beginning made them male and female? For this cause shall a man leave his parents and cleave unto his wife (singular) and they TWAIN shall be one flesh. ‘Twain’ means ‘two’ not ‘three or more.’ The truth is even more pointed than this. Consider the following requirement which is made to the ministry of Christ.

“A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2).

Bishop is another word for elder. He is to be the husband of ‘ONE WIFE,’ not two or more. It is not the intent of the Lord that a man should have more than one wife, and certainly this holds true for one who holds the ministry of Christ. The same is true of the lesser ministry, as we see from the following:

“Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well” (1 Timothy 3:12).

In addition:

“Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid. What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that commiteth fornication

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himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband” (Ephesians 5:22-33).

Notice that the husband is the head of the wife, not wives, even as Christ is the head of the church, not churches. In the last verse it instructs every husband to so love his wife (not wives) as himself, and let the wife (not wives) see that she (not they) reverence her (not their) husband. As Christ is the head of the Church, so also should the man be the head of the wife. This is the mystery mentioned by Paul here, the marriage of husband and wife is a shadow of the union of Christ and the church (His bride). And

so we again read,

“For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldst set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly” (Titus 1:5-6).

It is plain from this scripture that righteousness or righteous living is equated with the husband having one wife, along with obedient children.

There is another spiritual record which, though possessed by the Mormons, is strangely ignored by them in this matter of polygamy. The following quotations illustrate this point exceedingly well. Consider:

“And now it came to pass that the people of Nephi, under the reign of the second king, began to grow hard in their hearts, and indulge themselves somewhat in wicked practices, such as like unto David of old, desiring many wives and concubines, and also Solomon, his son” (Jacob 1:15).

This was a concern to their spiritual leader which, at the time, was a minister to them. He thus came to them and delivered the following words:

“Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives, and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord, Wherefore, thus saith the Lord, I have led this people forth out of the land of Jerusalem, by the power of mine arm, that I might raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph. Wherefore, I, the Lord God, will not suffer that this people shall do like unto them of old. Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none: For I, the Lord God, delighteth in the chastity of women. And whoredoms are an abomination before me: thus saith the Lord of hosts” (Jacob 2:33-37).

This is pretty strong language. Even though God permitted this practice in the days of David and Solomon, it was not according to His will. It also illustrates that the Book of Mormon does not condone or teach polygamy at all. But read on:

“Behold, the Lamanites, your brethren, whom ye hate, because of their filthiness and the cursings which hath come upon their skins, are more righteous than you; For they have not forgotten the commandments of the Lord, which were given unto our fathers, that they should have, save it were one wife: and concubines they should have none; and there should not be whoredoms committed among them. And now this commandment they observe to keep; wherefore because of
this observance in keeping this commandment, the Lord
God will not destroy them, but
will be merciful unto them;
and one day they shall become
a blessed people. Behold,
their husbands love their
wives, and their wives love
their husbands, and their
husbands and their wives love
their children” (Jacob 2:54-
57).

“And it came to pass that
Riplakish did not do that
which was right in the sight
of the Lord, for he did have
many wives and concubines,
and did lay that upon men’s
shoulders which was grievous
to be borne; yea, he did tax
them with heavy taxes; and
with the taxes he did build
many spacious buildings”
(Ether 4:48).

In each instance the prac-
tice of polygamy is condemned.

There was one occasion
when, because of the great wars
they had had among them, the
women greatly outnumbered
the men. Yet those women were
cared for by the people without
any man having to resort to plu-
ral marriage in order to care for
those unfortunate women who
had lost their husbands, sons, or
brothers in the war. This would
have been an excellent oppor-
tunity (excuse?) for them had they
been so inclined, or had it been
the will of the Lord.

Again:

“And it came to pass that
when they came up to the tem-
ple, they pitched their tents
round about, every man ac-
cording to his family, consist-
ing of his wife, and his sons,
and his daughters, and their
sons, and their daughters,
from the eldest down to the
youngest, every family being
separate, one from another…”
(Mosiah 1:33).

Notice here that each man
brought his wife along, not
wives.

But what is the will of God
in these matters?

“Let thy fountain be
blessed: and rejoice with
the wife of thy youth. Let her be
as the loving hind and pleas-
ant roe; let her breasts satisfy
thee at all times; and be thou
ravished always with her
love. And why wilt thou, my
son, be ravished with a
strange woman, and embrace
the bosom of a stranger?”
(Proverbs 5:18-20).

Again the word is, rejoice
with the wife of thy youth (not
the wives) and be ravished al-
ways with her love (not with
their love).

“Nevertheless, to avoid for-
nication, let every man have
his own wife, and let every
woman have her own hus-
band. Let the husband render
unto the wife due benevolence:
and likewise also the wife
unto the husband” (1 Corin-
thians 7:2-3).

Both the man and the
woman are on an equal footing
here. Every man is to have his
own wife (not wives) the same
as every woman is to have her
own husband.

The word to the men is:

“Likewise, ye husbands,
dwell with them according to
knowledge, giving honour
unto the wife, as unto the
weaker vessel, and as being
heirs together of the grace of
life; that your prayers be not
hindered” (1 Peter 3:7).

Notice the singularity of
the relationship here. It is one
wife only to which husbands are
to give honor. Even though
more than one wife was permit-
ted in Old Testament times, it
was not so among the Chris-
Except for the single mention
of this practice in the days of Jacob
(found in the Book of Mormon
record), it was put down and
was apparently not practiced
again by that people.