

## The Custom of Polygamy

**P**olygamy was an accepted social custom throughout the ancient Middle East. It was also a common practice among the ancient Israelites. Although it may seem that polygamy deviated from God's original plan for marriage (as illustrated in Gen. 2:24), the practice was permitted under God's law, particularly in cases of a childless first marriage or a levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-10).

In ancient Israel, failure to have children was regarded as a family tragedy, for several reasons. In an agrarian culture, children were needed to help with the work of everyday life. Without sons, the family name would not be preserved, and without an heir, the family would be unable to maintain its place in the tribal allotments. Finally, a woman without children would never be the mother—or an ancestor—of the promised Messiah (Gen. 3:15).

Elkanah most likely took a second wife, Peninnah, for a reason that was legitimate in the ancient world: His first wife was barren. At that time, the blame for not having children was always assigned to the woman, and barrenness was often the cause of divorce.

Even though polygamy was an accepted custom, God's law warned rulers against marrying many women (Deut. 17:17). Furthermore, the Scriptures record the tragic results of polygamy: turbulent and divided families.

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