Polygamy in Light of Old Testament Law & Ethics:

A Contextual & Paradigmatic Approach

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By

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Introductory Considerations

How do we square cases of polygamy in antiquity with the modern Judeo-Christian standard represented in evangelical circles? It seems a hard task to surmount. Concerning ethical issues like polygamy, the course of progressive revelation seems to have a *slow*, yet *determined* redemptive arc. Though the Old Testament can appear ambiguous in its stance toward polygamy, an ideal picture of marriage has been honored as holy from the beginning of Scripture's grand narrative: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." (Gen 2:24 ESV). It is through the narrative of Torah, the ethics of law, and the consummation of the New Covenant that the ideal for marriage is made perfectly clear: *monogamy*. Still, questions persist. Although polygamy was never *proscribed*, neither was it *prohibited*. In the Old Testament, legal requirements often fall short of this ideal image—it is evidenced through in the stories of Old Testament saints that there is a difference between what is *desired* and what is *accommodated*. In light of these considerations, this paper proposes a paradigmatic treatment of polygamy that surveys models of biblical ethics to actively address polygamy in Eastern contexts with pastoral sensitivity.

Addressing Misconceptions

Secondly, the author pauses to consider how this position may be misinterpreted. The Western church is dissected into extremes (both inside and outside evangelical contexts). In a culture of such extremes, one must watch closely so they are not struck dead by the pendulum as it swings. At play are a diverse landscape of positions that both *overstate* and *understate* needed

ethical responses to polygamous behavior. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. rallies against the frequency with which Christian theologians and Christian anthropologists fail to make an objective moral claim against polygamy on Scriptural grounds. Among those criticized is Karl Barth, who understates the issue writing, "We can hardly point with certainty to a single text in which polygamy is expressly forbidden and monogamy is universally decreed." [1] Similarly, Oswald Fountain stated that the Church's reply contra polygamy was, "on the basis of Scripture a flimsy one." These characterize a response that says far too little concerning the ethical behaviors evidenced in Scripture.

And yet, the evangelical response to polygamy in Eastern contexts seems hardly much better: for in expressly condemning the practice, it neglects other aspects of God's Torah; namely, Torah's ethical foundations of צְדָקָה (ṣᵊdāqâ—righteousness), מִשְׁפָּט (mišpāṭ—justice), and חֶסֶד (ḥesed—loyal love). In this opposite extreme, missionaries like Robert Moffat quickly deem polygamy as *satanic*. Moffat saw its decline as, "symbolizing the fall of Satan and the victory over the powers of darkness." In 1902, another Missionary, Haydon Lewis, wrote, "Polygamy still holds the people in its grip and has the chief as the prime advocate".[2] It is my fear that in such missional contexts, automatically *demonizing* polygamists ignores pastoral sensitivity and righteous familial care among vast segments of 'unreached peoples'. Brash, hasty or thoughtless actions in polygamous contexts may endanger the very communities to which we hope to minister (when we enter unaware of socio-economic and socio-political contexts).

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[1] Barth continues, "If, then, we approach the Bible legalistically, we cannot honestly conclude that in this matter we are dealing with an unconditional law of God…" SEE (Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics 3-4: 199) in Kaiser, *Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament*, 101.

[2] SEE (Chirenje, 1977:273) in Fidelis Nkomazana, "Polygamy and Women within the Cultural Context in Botswana," *Scriptura* 92 (2006): 273.

Just below the surface of what seems a simple prohibition against polygamy is a complex web of, "patterns, connections, alliances, security, cohesion and multiple support systems" buttressed by a web of polygamous relationships.[3] Simply coercing new converts out of polygamous relationships, as was the trend in the missionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries, can undermine the ethical basis of our Christian calling to care for the orphan, widow, and foreigner.[4] It is the 'least of these' that are often affected by the dissolution of polygamous marriages. Should we attempt to relax these commandments by hastily dealing with the complexity of polygamous practice under the premise "we are no longer under the law", we should be reminded of continuity between the Testaments embodied in the *Messianic Torah* (law of Christ). We must take Christ seriously when he says, "I tell you the truth, just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it for me" (Matt. 25:40).

A Biblical, Contextual Treatment of Polygamy

The Divine Standard

"Does the Old Testament endorse polygamy? Does it turn a blind eye to polygamy? Is the same God who ordained a 'one man-one woman' marriage the same one who allows polygamous marriage?" Such are the barrage of questions tackling this topic. But, from the outset of creation, Scripture fashions a normative model of the ideal marriage! Genesis 2:21-24 presents a monogamous example of one man and one woman that extends from Adam until the era of the Patriarchs in Genesis 12-50. It is only after this point, that Polygamy begins to crop up throughout Pentateuch, despite God's divinely sanctioned norm for the sexes in Gen. 2:21-24. Equally, consider Jesus's words, "But it was not this way from the beginning" (Matt. 19:8).

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[3] Nkomazana, 270.
[4] (cf. Deut. 15:7-11; 24:17-18; 26:12; 27:19; 31:12; Prov. 15:25; 23:10).

Although these words are concerning divorce, Christopher J.H. Wright suggests, "they could equally be applied to polygamy."[5]

So too does Wisdom Literature attest to the divine design of a 'one-marriage', 'one-flesh' relationship. Wisdom literature operates on the presupposition of faithful, monogamous relationships (Cf. Prov 5:15-20; 18:22; 31:10-31). The prophets even utilize monogamy as a symbol of the union between God and Israel, contrasting that imagery with polygamy as a representation of idolatrous worship (cf. Isa. 1:1; Jer. 2:2; Ezek. 16:8; Hos. 2:18). Wright comments, "Polygamy…was tolerated without explicit approval, but with legal safeguards that were latent criticisms of it."[6] Although Polygamy is never explicitly prohibited, it is well evidenced that it falls far short of the divine standard. With the ethical ideal of monogamy established, the following section will observe two ideas within the scope of the Old Testament as they concern polygamy. First addressed is the function of 'Story as Torah' in the attempt to push Scripture's constituents toward the divine standard. Secondly addressed is difference between this 'Ethical Ideal' and the 'Legal Requirement of Torah'.

<div align="center">Story's Function as Torah</div>

Often, Torah is conveyed through *apodictic* and *casuistic* law (as is the case in the judicial regulations of the 'book of the covenant').[7] However, *narrative* also has a profound function as *Torah*. The Old Testament, "by recounting the deeds of its protagonists, aims to teach ethical behavior." Building on principles of *literary criticism* Gordon J. Wenham argues for the

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[5] Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 351.

[6] Wright, 330–31.

[7] Averbeck notes, "Casuistic statements of law are particularly suited to the judicial management of God's design in the world of humanity. Apodictic regulations lay out the design. Casuistic regulations manage the design in light of the fact that both humanity and our conditions within the world have become corrupt." Richard E. Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church: Reading the Torah in the Light of Christ* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2022), 162.

importance of seeing the organization of a piece of literature as a whole and the viewpoint of its writer.[8] Persuasive techniques undergird Scripture's clear ethical instruction and demonstrate a *telos*.

Genesis displays such a technique. Though Genesis is a book about creation, divine calling and obedience, it is also prominently the first book of the *law* (despite the fact that it is almost entirely narrative)![9] Wenham writes, "the Bible storytellers are not advocating a minimalist conformity to the demands of the law in their storytelling, rather that they have an ideal of godly behavior that they hoped their heroes and heroines would typify."[10] Through narratives that examine the moral failings of principal characters, Torah is exalted! It is through narrative that ethical ideals are revealed! Gen 2:24 establishes a pattern for every marriage—and Adam is satisfied with the עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ (*Ezer Kenegdo*) God provides. By employing the singular "his wife" (בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ) the narrator emphasizes that having one wife is as natural as having a mother and a father. After generalizing the principles of Genesis 2:24 to all marriages, the narrator soon lands in the "harsh realism" of Chapter 3. Lamech appears on the scene as the *first* polygamist. He is willfully violent and even brags about the havoc he will enact (Gen. 4:19-24)! Lamech succumbs to sensuality, violence, and pride…behavior *hardly* worth emulating.

Following this, problems highlighted in polygamous marriage only multiply. Utilizing the function of story as Torah in Gen 16:1-6, the narrator subliminally condemns Abraham's taking of Hagar, "who implies that the birth of Ishamel slowed down the fulfillment of the promise of a real son to Abraham by his true wife."[11] The narratives of Genesis 29:8-30:10 only furthers the

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[8] Bridging this methodology with *rhetorical* criticism, which "links the concerns of literary and historical criticism", we can observe the persuasive techniques built into every text. Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically*, Old Testament Studies (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 1.

[9] Wenham, 2–3.

[10] Wenham, 2–3.

[11] Wenham, 85.

case of polygamy's dangers, exhibiting the tensions, competitions and problems that arose

between Jacob, Rachel and Leah. Despite the striving attempts of Leah to earn Jacob's affection,

the act of bearing child after child was simply not sufficient (Gen. 29:32, 34).[12] Polygamy always

seems to divide into the family into sub-families. Parallel difficulty is exhibited in the story of

Elkanah and his two wives: Hannah and Peninnah. Hannah's barrenness causes a barrage of

emotional turmoil for both women—and only God, by his divine enablement, weakens the

tension when he allows Hannah to conceive.[13]

Clearly, when narrative functions as Torah, the Creator's normative intent is revealed:

"life-long monogamy as Adam and Eve enjoyed, not turbulent polygamy of Lamech and

Jacob."[14] When we fail to apply the literary facets of Scripture, we risk missing the power of

story to ethically instruct listeners and readers. One must not neglect the narrative portions of

Scripture which ethically instruct.

The Gap Between Legal Requirements and Ethical Ideals

So then, if polygamy was not the divine standard, why does it appear to be tolerated? In

this section we will explore misunderstandings concerning 'ethical ideals' and 'legal

requirements'. In bridging the gap of understanding between ethical ideals and legal

requirements, this section dialogues with canonical law, and attitudes of early Rabbinic

communities faced with such questions. The redemptive arc of progressive revelation hints at a

negative evaluation of practices over time that seeks to correct those practices. Joe M. Sprinkle

writes, "Narratives describe, and laws regulate, the family strife polygamous marriages

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[12] Though Rachel was barren she was unquestionably the recipient of Jacob's unmerited affection (Gen 29:20, 30), in blatant favoritism above Leah. Bilhah and Zilpah presence only multiplies troubles. Ultimately, Rachel is afforded a child through the servant girl Bilhah (Gen. 30:3), yet in the narrative indicates that the addition of such women at Jacob's side to combat barrenness only compounds the troubles of intimacy, favoritism and competition. Kaiser, *Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament*, 90–91.

[13] Kaiser, *Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament*, 92.

[14] Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 152.

created."[15] Narratives such as Sarah and Hagar (Gen. 16:5; 21:10), Rachel and Leah (Gen. 29:30-33), and Hannah and Penniah (1ˢᵗ Sam. 1) can be analyzed in light of Ex. 21:10-11; Lev.18:18; and Deut. 21:15-16. Out of these examples, Leviticus 18:18 seems to come the closest to a verse explicitly prohibiting polygamy. [16] However, when one considers the verse's wider context (and its association various anti-incest laws), the argument for this verse as an all-encompassing prohibition against polygamous relationships seems less clear.[17]

Such analysis demonstrates the gap between the legal requirement and the ethical ideal. There are a variety of institutions affected by the law: *marriage, slavery, child-rearing*. In the Torah, surely there is a difference between the *minimum* behavior that the law requires and the *ideal ethic* that it intends to cultivate. Simply because the Torah regulates something, does it then render it desirable? Deuteronomy 19:16-21 only claims the punishment of death for adultery when the woman involved was married. Does this then excuse husbands in the practice of illicit

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[15] I differ with Sprinkle somewhat here. Story's function as Torah can go beyond description, to provide ethical behavior worth emulating—i.e., in literary fashion the attitude of the narrator communicates the commendation or condemnation of certain acts. Joe M. Sprinkle, *Biblical Law and Its Relevance: A Christian Understanding and Ethical Application for Today of the Mosaic Regulations* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2006), 157.

[16] Certain Jewish sectarian groups read this verse as a blanket statement against polygamy, modeling, "…their law on priestly tradition and interpreting the law against taking a 'woman and her sister' (Lev 18:18) as meaning any other woman." This is referring to the Zadokite Documents (1954). Similarly, some scholars, like Paul Copan argue that the verse is a clear prohibition against polygamous behavior. Making an argument based on constructions in the verse, Copan writes, "In verses 6–17, we're dealing with kinship bonds while verses 18–23 address prohibited sexual relations outside of kinship bonds." Étan Levine, *Marital Relations in Ancient Judaism*, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Altorientalische Und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte, 1439-619X, Bd. 10 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 71 & Paul Copan, Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2011), 113.

[17] In Lev. 18:18, a plain reading of the phrase "a woman to her sister" (וְאִשָּׁה אֶל־אֲחֹתָהּ) is in consideration of the closeness/proximity of relationships. These "incest prohibitions" forbid a plethora of relationships including woman and her brother-in-law, a mother and son, and an uncle and niece. This very volition of such a 'proximity-based' relationship is violated by Jacob by marrying both Rachel and Leah (cf. Gen. 29:21-28). In fact, many of the regulations in Lev. 18:6-18, "prohibit conjugal relations between close relatives, many of which were violated by the patriarchs who lived before these laws were given" (Sprinkle, 157-60). In essence each of these relationships represents a sexual taboo—every person mentioned is in some way bound or tied to the nuclear, paternal, or extended family—encompassing not only blood kin, but also those linked through marriage. Joe M. Sprinkle, *Biblical Law and Its Relevance: A Christian Understanding and Ethical Application for Today of the Mosaic Regulations* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2006), 157–60 & Rainer Albertz, Rüdiger Schmitt, and Rüdiger Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 422.

sexual relationships? *Righteousness is more than a checklist!* Concerning the prohibitions of Exodus 20:3-7 Wenham writes, "fearing, loving and cleaving to the LORD was not fulfilled just by avoiding the worship of other Gods. The 'ethico-religious' goal was far deeper and more embracing: it involved both loyalty to God and an enjoyment of his presence."[18] An ethical lifestyle doesn't only revolve around making sure we haven't profaned God's name, but dually seeking to worship Him, giving to Him the praise and honor he deserves! Even the Psalmist affirms this desire, not to merely keep what is required, but for His heart to celebrate YHWH's precepts, commands, words, and laws out of a delight in the character of God (Ps. 119:24).

Legal texts in Scripture, while *accommodating* certain types of relationships and situations, starkly outline their undesirability. Such an instance is represented in Deuteronomy 21:10-14, which guards and preserves the rights of a female captive taken in the conquest of war. This law demands that *when* soldiers acquire female captives, they must not be treated as slaves, but rather are taken as wives. The soldier first must first, "bring her home to your house, she shall shave her head and pare her nails. And she shall take off the clothes in which she was captured and shall remain in your house and lament her father and her mother a full month" (Deut. 21:12-13). Despite the dismal circumstance, and broken reality of war, the dignity of the female captive is preserved, and the undesirability of war is underscored. Recognizing the 'less-than-ideal' reality of war, the law regulates these circumstances, and creates legal requirements that deal with a broken reality of human sin. Here we see the gap between the ethical ideal, and the legal requirement embodied. Similar regulations in Torah highlights the undesirability of polygamy. Deuteronomy's treatment of the inheritance in a polygamous household in 21:15-17

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[18] To these kinds of questions Gordon J. Wenham suggests, "ethics is much more than keeping the law…righteousness involves more than living by the decalogue and the other laws and the Pentateuch." Wenham, 35, 80, 82.

underlines the legitimacy of polygamy, while also screaming its weakness and the practical nuisances it creates. The gap between the desirable ideal, and the grim realities that the law regulates has always existed.

Ethical Ideals vs. Legal Requirements in Rabbinic History

This gap is reflected in Rabbinic history and literature. Among Jews of the Second Temple Period there is an uneasy tone concerning polygamy. The Damascus Rule[19] and forms of rabbinic literature sheds light on this idea of the difference between an ideal and a requirement. In a work titled 'Concessions to Sinfulness in Jewish Law', D. Daube writes, "Polygamy was widely rejected as below the standard set for man by his creator. But there are nuances. For Rabbis, it is legally correct, though against what is naturally fitting as manifested in the first union between Adam and Eve."[20]

Rabbis seem to avoid association with the topic of polygamy. Counting the 2,000 named sages in the Talmud, not a single case of polygamy is noted. Rabbinic communities were even known to propose that the bible's polygamous marriages were chiefly initiated by first wives.[21] Even more stringent conclusions are drawn in the Damascus Document (1st Century BC). The Document describes bigamy as "fornication", notes the use of the singular 'male and female' (זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה) in Gen. 1:27, and drives home its point by emphasizing that "those who entered the ark came in two by two."[22] Moreover, it appears that few marriage contracts touch on polygamy. Rabbinic texts of the 2nd temple period attest to a predominantly monogamous society. [23]

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[19] Also called the 'Zadokite Fragments', one of the most important extant works of the ancient Essene community of Jews at Qumrān in Palestine. Wenham, 84.

[20] D. Daube, pg. 6 D. Daube in Wenham, 84.

[21] i.e., Sarah "voluntarily granted" Hagar her status as a free, co-wife and only after "Hannah's urging" over a decade did Elkanah take a second wife. Levine, *Marital Relations in Ancient Judaism*, 70.

[22] Levine, 70.

[23] As somewhat of an anomaly, the words of Josephus Flavius (1st Century AD) are worth noting. He writes, "The woman in the law is subject to the man…it is our ancient custom to have several wives concurrently." Levine, 72.

Time and time again Rabbis have mused at the situation of Job's protest of innocence when he chastely states that he will not look upon the 'virgin/maiden/unmarried' woman (בְּתוּלָה). Vindicating himself, Job proclaims, "I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?" (Job 31:1-2). This is curious. Though polygamy was permitted, Job exhibits an even ethic greater than what the law itself accommodates or permits. In one homily, Judah Bar Batyra (2nd Century AD) writes, "Had it been proper for ten wives to be given to Adam, God would have granted them to him. But it was not proper for him, so for me too my wife is my own portion."[24] The contexts of 2nd temple Judaism and Rabbinic literature seem to echo the gap between what is *desirable* and what is legal. [25] In light of these considerations, we will now survey polygamy in the contexts of Ancient Israel.

A Survey of Polygamy in Ancient Israel

Marriage, Kinship and Households in Light of the Law

Equipped with theological awareness of the ethical ideal, we can assess why Polygamy was tolerated as a social custom within Israel. H*ow did polygamy operate historically in ancient Israel?* During the Patriarchal period (2000-1750 BC) only four examples of polygamy can be located in Scripture (cf. Gen 12-50).[26] Therefore, until circa 1750 BC, during the predominance of the patriarchs, there are only a handful of examples. Notably, Abraham and Isaac were both monogamous. Ironically, Jacob (whose intention monogamy) landed in a tumult of marriages,

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[24] Levine, 71–74.

[25] Even the Jewish philosopher Philo deeply criticized polygamy in his own writing as a, "betrayal of a man's responsibility to his wife and children due to lust for another woman." SEE (Spec. Leg. 2:135) in Levine, 72.

[26] (1) The concubine of Nahor (Abraham's brother) (2) Abraham's sexual relations with Hagar (in competition with Sarah) (3) Esau's Rebellious Marriage to two Canaanite Women (Judith and Basemath from Hittite families) and one marriage to Mahalath (whose father was Ishmael); (Cf. Gen 28:9 & Gen 36:1-5)—to "Adah the Hittite, to Oholiabamah the Hivite, and to Ishmael's daughter Basemath" (4) Jacob's marriage to two sisters (Rachel and Leah) and reception of their handmades. *Adapted* from Kaiser, *Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament*, 96 & Rainer Albertz, Rüdiger Schmitt, and Rüdiger Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 396.

with every party involved vying for his attention. In the time of judges, the names of mentionable polygamists include: Gideon, Jair, Ibzan, Abdon, Samson, and Elkhannah. However, it should be noted than many of these individuals, "possessed absolute power, normally as leaders of the people."[27] Naturally this leads us to consider the slew of kings, whom would have possessed such absolute power: Saul, David, Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah, Ahab, and Jehoram. The matter of kings will be discussed in detail below.

Historically, some have proposed slow evolutionary steps that led to the dissolution of polygamy in Israel, proposing, "Israel's society developed from a semi-nomadic, pastoral society that commonly practiced polygyny into a sedentary, agrarian society that favored monogamous marriages."[28] More recent studies have overturned these theories of evolutionary trajectory, and rather posit that polygamy was the least common form of marriage in Ancient Israel.[29] Polygamous practices appealed when a mother was barren, or when a family was left no male heir. Torah crafts provisions for a man to obtain a 'secondary wife' if his 'primary wife' wife struggled under the condition of barrenness; as is illustrated by the righteous OT saint Elkannah (1st Sam. 1:1-8).

Polygamy was a privilege of the rich. It was not economically viable to support more than one wife. Multiple bride prices were only possible for the wealthy stratum of the upper class.[30] Ephraim Neufeld writes, "a poor Israelite might feel the desirability of having a number of wives and their attendant slaves to help him in his household, but his financial standing would

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[27] Kaiser, *Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament*, 96.
[28] Albertz, Schmitt, and Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant*, 395.
[29] Recent Scholarship includes work by Gunkel, Wolff, Scharbertm, Brenner, and Friedl. Schmitt writes, "Arguments of this sort reflect erroneous hypotheses regarding the existence of general evolutionary trajectories from early polygyny to later monogamy." SEE Albertz, Schmitt, and Schmitt, 395–96.
[30] Sprinkle, *Biblical Law and Its Relevance*, 157.

make this impracticable."[31] As evidenced by Deut. 21:15-17, polygamy caused legal debacles concerning inheritance. Further evidenced by the rabbinic sources in the previous section, it is clear that there was a general "social inclination" in the direction of monogamy that may have even been rooted in the awareness of the tumultuous lifestyle of the Patriarchs (Gen 30:1-24).[32]

Surveying polygamy, one must necessarily address both Levirate custom and concubinage—two social customs which may entail polygamous entanglements. The Levirate marriage custom (cf. Lat. *levir*, "brother-in-law") combats the obstacle of bareness, and seeks to extend the lineage of a deceased man without any heirs. The 'Levirate' custom, derived from the Hebrew (יִבֵּם yibēm), creates an obligation for the, "the oldest living brother to marry his brother's childless widow in order to provide the deceased an heir to continue his family line."[33] The redeemer (גואל *go'el*) is expected to marry the widow (יבמה yebāmāh). This scenario is legally proscribed Deut. 25:5–10, and can be crudely observed in the situation concerning Er, Onan, Judah and Tamar in Gen. 38 (though it is improperly conducted). Levirate marriage may entail a polygamous situation (such as in the broken case of Judah, Shuah and Tamar). But, ultimately the custom aims at the protection of the widow, continuation of lineage, and ensures "social and economic protection for the widow."[34] Such a marriage had the unique function of preserving the family line, while also providing the widow with sustenance and security.

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[31] Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws, with Special References to General Semitic Laws and Customs,* 119.

[32] Albertz, Schmitt, and Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant*, 395–96.

[33] R. L. Hubbard Jr., "Kinsman-Redeemer and Levirate," ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 379.

[34] Albertz, Schmitt, and Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant*, 398–99.

Like the Levirate marriage custom, the issue of concubinage[35] also tracks in a slightly different category than polygamy. Legally a concubine is not an additional wife because the concubine does not share the same social status. Under Torah, a concubine was considered legally inferior to a man's wife, yet the legal rights of concubines are preserved as in Ex. 21:7-11. Such laws prevented the concubine from being resold by her owner, and marked her as one man's concubine (rather than a "plaything of father and son").[36] Such laws secured certain material provision and sexual rights. Concubinage then is not inherently a polygamous practice based on the legal standing of the concubine (i.e., she is not legally someone's wife).

But in this case, why would concubinage be considered a viable option (when polygamy is perfectly legal)? The answer lay in the economic difficulty of sustaining multiple wives in an ANE society. One author writes, "The maintenance of a number of wives was very often a burden entirely beyond the resources of the Israelite."[37] The retention of concubines, rather than multiple legal spouses (i.e., polygamous wives) was less "onerous", and would provide help in the areas of bearing children as well servants to enlist in the labor of household and fieldwork. With the issue of barrenness, concubines could preserve dignity of the 'first-wife' (Gen. 16:2-3).

If Ex. 21:7-11 secures certain legal provisions for a concubine, "the rights of wives in polygamous situation cannot have been less."[38] Christopher J.H. Wright, notes, "there were laws

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[35] There appear to be three biblical terms are utilized for a concubine. They are: pîleḡeš פִּילֶגֶשׁ, 'amah אָמָה, and šip̄ḥâ שִׁפְחָה. Neufeld suggests a philological difference between the terms. 'Amah אָמָה frequently refers to a female servant and denotes a sense of deep humility (Cf. Ruth 2:9; 1st Sam. 1:16; 25:24; 25:28 & 31; 2nd Sam 14:15). Those deemed šip̄ḥâ שִׁפְחָה seem to share more "menial" tasks in the ancient household (Cf. Ex. 21:5; 1st Sam. 25:41; 2nd Sam. 17:17). The final term, pîleḡeš פִּילֶגֶשׁ seems to speak of a concubine of foreign origins as hinted at by 1st Chron. 7:14, and Neufeld suggests the term is associated with a "greater laxity of morals" (Cf. Gen. 35:22, 2nd Sam. 15:16; 20:3). While all three terms indicate a concubine this might suggest that the pîleḡeš פִּילֶגֶשׁ occupied a socially lower tier. Often these concubines were foreign women taken by the conquests of war (cf. Lev. 25:44; Numb 31:9, 18; Deut. 20:14; Jdg 8:31; 19:1; 2nd Sam. 5:13). SEE Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws, with Special References to General Semitic Laws and Customs,* 121–24.

[36] Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 331.

[37] Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws, with Special References to General Semitic Laws and Customs,* 129.

[38] Wright, 351.

[Torah]...that sought to limit polygamy's potentially exploitative effects on women."[39] The 'inheritance law' of Deuteronomy 21:15-17 operates in a similar fashion. Acknowledging the social custom of a less than ideal situation, the law *regulates* what it cannot *prevent*. In legislating against the illness generated by the practice of polygamy, guarding the inheritance of the first-born son by the "unloved" wife, this law safeguards the dignity of the mother and son who risk being disenfranchised and neglected.[40] At the heart of this law is not a blatant affirmation of polygamy, but rather a heart that echoes the words of Matt. 25:40, and embodies values of of צְדָקָה ṣᵉdāqâ (righteousness), מִשְׁפָּט mišpāṭ (justice), and ḥeseḏ (loving-kindness/loyal love), while dealing in realities of a broken world.

<div align="center">*Polygamy in the Monarchy and Among ANE Rulers*</div>

But what about the Monarchy...what about Solomon? The excessive practice of polygamy is an anomaly of the monarchy. Similar patterns are witnessed to in other ANE rulers. Royal polygamy served the unique function of ensuring political alliances. The vast majority of Judean Kings demonstrate polygamous marriages to multiple wives.[41] Concerning polygamy in Israel and other segments of the ANE, Dr. Gordon Johnston writes, "Its existence in Israel likely represents divine concession at an early stage in the ethical trajectory that reached its apogee in the teaching of Jesus."[42] Moving toward that apogee, a discussion polygamy among rulers is key.

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[39] Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 330.

[40] A similar ethic is represented in the treatment of Deuteronomy 21:10-14, which guards and preserves the rights of a female captive taken in the conquest of war when she is taken by a soldier as a wife. It ensures, explicitly, that she is taken as a *WIFE*, rather than a slave! At the heart of this Torah is sensitivity that embodies itself in care and acknowledgement of the most vulnerable: orphan, widow, and foreigner (Deut. 15:7-11; Deut. 24:17-18; Deut. 26:12; Deut. 27:19; Deut. 31:12; Prov. 15:25; Prov. 23:10).

[41] David (cf. 1st Sam. 25:43; 27:3; 30:5, 18; 2nd Sam. 2:2; 5:13; 12:8, 11; 1st Chron. 14:3), Rehoboam (2nd Chron. 11:21), Ahab (1st Kgs. 20:3, 5, 7), Abijah (2nd Chron. 13:21), Jehoshaphat (2nd Chron. 21:17), Joash (2nd Chron. 24:3), and in addition Jehoiachin (2nd Kgs. 24:15).

[42] Gordon H. Johnston, "BIBBC Commentary on the Song of Songs" (Dallas Theological Seminary, July 14, 2023), BIBBC, 8-10.

Although ANE kings and monarchs had a variety of secondary wives, foreign queens, royal concubines, it was not unheard of for one first-wife to hold their utmost affection. Though it may be hard to digest in modern contexts, it is important to distinguish the social hierarchy and relationships of the women surrounding the king in Israel's monarchy. It helps to paint a more accurate picture of polygamy in ancient Israel. In an essay concerning the love poems of Song of Songs (6:8-9) Dr. Gordon Johnston addresses the variety wives and concubines one might discover in an ANE ruler's possession. This includes women with the status of: (1) primary wives of noble status (2) secondary wives (3) foreign wives and (4) concubines.[43] Marriages then, were not as we envision them with 'modern sensibilities' (be wary of chronological snobbery). Marriages were established for the purpose of political prowess and altruistic purposes—not often romantic love. Despite this fact, many ANE rulers still indicate a disposition of love toward one *primary* wife or first-wife.[44] Despite his multiplicity of wives (1st Kgs. 11:1), Solomon honored his primary wife, the "daughter of Pharaoh" above countless others (1st Kgs. 3:1; 7:8; 9:24). Perhaps this is the very woman to whom he pens the words, "But she is unique, my dove, my perfect one!…the maidens saw her and complimented her; the queens and concubines praised her…" (Songs 6:9). Despite a plethora of marriages, often one wife was exalted above all others.

In the case of Solomon and Rehoboam's failures, royal polygamy undoubtedly played a part. Nonetheless, polygamy is not expressly prohibited by the law in the time of the monarchy.

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[43] Concerning the terms in Hebrew that define these categories Johnston includes, "(1) *shegal*: primary wife and royal consort (Ps 45:9), (2) *nashim*: secondary wives (1 Sam 25:43; 27:3; 30:5, 18; 2 Sam 2:2; 5:13; 12:8; 19:5; 2 Kgs 24:15; 2 Chron 11:21), (3) *sarot*: foreign wives (lit. "queens," 1 Kgs 11:3), (4) *pilgesh*: concubine (2 Sam 5:13; 15:16; 16:21, 22; 19:5; 20:3; 1 Kgs 11:3; 1 Chron 3:9; 2 Chron 11:21)." Johnston, 8–10.

[44] Staggering numbers surround Ramesses II: 6 minor wives, not to mention 200 concubines. Nonetheless, he penned love poetry exalting Nefertari (his Chief Royal Wife from a young age). Concerning her, he writes, "My love is unique—no one can rival her, for she is the most beautiful woman alive. Just by passing, she has stolen away my heart." Johnston, 10.

Notice that David was not convicted by YHWH through the prophet Nathan for polygamy, concubinage, or his harem, but rather for adultery and murder (2nd Sam. 12:7-10). In nearly the same breath that he convicts David of his sin, the LORD threatens to take away the *wives (plural)* of David and give them to an enemy in his own household (2nd Sam. 12:11-12)! In light of David's sin, God reflects on all that He has given David from Saul's house. The LORD even recognizes that he could have even added to the *women/wives (plural)* in David's possession (2nd Sam. 12:7-8). Despite these points, it is assumed that Deut. 17:17a, "And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away…" is aimed explicitly at the practice of polygamy. However, it is possible that a better case can be made.

The overall thrust of Deut. 17:14-20 is aimed at preventing the kings of Israel from adopting to the customs of ancient Near Eastern kings. Steven Sanchez paints a clear picture of the purpose of such limitations and prohibitions, despite their seeming excess in other areas. He writes, "The Law of the King gave the monarch two responsibilities: to be faithful to the covenant and to depend on Yahweh for deliverance…dependence into practical effect by purposefully avoiding an arms build-up, not using diplomacy or wealth to secure peace."[45] Politically oriented marriages like those of Solomon were designed to hedge against war.

Striking parallels are found between the warning of Deut. 17:14-20 and ANE documents such as the *Amarna Letters*—which concerned diplomatic marriage in the Egyptian New Kingdom.[46] In these royal marriages in the ANE, daughters and sisters arranged in marriage

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[45] Evidence of these kinds of marriages can be found in the Mari texts which concern Old Babylonian inter-dynastic marriages of the Upper Tigris and Euphrates area (Qatna, Aleppo, Mari).Steven H. Sanchez, "Royal Limitation as the Distinctive of Israelite Monarchy" (Dallas, Texas, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2010), 27, 53, ProQuest.

[46] In one such letter between two 'Great Powers', the king of Alasia—who desired to form an alliance with the King of Egypt—wrote, "To the king of Egypt, my brother: Message of the king of Alasia, your brother. For me all goes well. For you may all go well. For your household, your wives, your sons, your horses, your chariots, and in your country, may all go very well." Topics in this letter bear striking similarity to Deut. 17:14-20. Sanchez, 50.

through alliances might become queens or join a king's harem.[47] Solomon does exactly the

opposite of what is expected in the covenant relationship by molding himself in the image of

foreign nations, rather than clothing himself in the character of YHWH in a spirit of dependence.

YHWH desired for the kings of Israel to be diplomatically weak in a manner that cultivated

needful dependence on Him! Through diplomatic weakness the king would avoid the trust other

nations placed in their own gods, "accumulating military resources (horses for chariots),

marrying foreign treaty wives (to guarantee alliances), or accumulating wealth (to purchase

security)."[48] Solomon's use of this ANE practice goes far beyond that of David, leading him to

marry Moabite, Edomite, Ammonite, Sidonian, and Hittite women (1st Kgs. 11:1). Solomon's

royal marriage to the daughter of Pharoah is perhaps the quintessential example of a such a

marriage (1st Kgs. 3:1; 7:8; 9:16, 24; 11:1). Ironically, Solomon links himself to the very foreign

power from which God once rescued Israel. Under the premise of such false security, Solomon is

blinded to his true need for security in the one true God, YHWH.[49]

Contextual study of this practice recognizes that Deut. 17:14-20 is not a blanket

prohibition of having multiple wives. Rather it is a warning against alliances with pagan nations

that lead to apostasy and decline. 1st Kings 11:1-2 perfectly illustrates the case for this logic.

Concerning the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites, the LORD had warned,

"You must not establish friendly relations with them! If you do, they will surely shift your

allegiance to their gods.' But Solomon was irresistibly attracted to them" (1st Kgs. 11:2). This

passage illustrates failure to heed Deut. 17:14-20 by participation in the vehicle of political

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[47] William A. Tooman, *The Torah Unabridged: The Evolution of Intermarriage Law in the Hebrew Bible*, Critical Studies in the Hebrew Bible 13 (University Park, Pennsylvania: Eisenbrauns, 2022), 53.

[48] Sanchez, "Royal Limitation as the Distinctive of Israelite Monarchy," 27.

[49] Similar Behavior is exhibited by Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, the Sidonian king. Sanchez, 92–94.

marriage.[50] The devastating consequences of disobedience through these alliances is on display for generations to see for when, "Solomon became old, his wives shifted his allegiance to other gods; he was not wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord his God, as his father David had been" (1st Kgs. 11:4) While no blanket statement can be made addressing polygamy, YHWH ultimately desire the King's singular affection and worship. With these Scriptural, historical, and cultural factors in mind, we now turn toward how these factors come to bear on the followers of YHWH today.

A Paradigmatic Approach in the Life of the Church

As stated from its outset, this paper proposes a paradigmatic approach in applying Old Testament ethics to modern evangelical contexts. While the issue of polygamy may seem a bygone practice in Western churches, this social custom is still a major problem for the Christian Church of the 21st Century in parts of the world including Africa, Asia and the Middle East.[51] The problem of polygamy persists in the very contexts where the Church is burgeoning.[52] There is no doubt that this practice is less than the ideal God divinely ordered, and we must seek to combat it—by pointing communities in such contexts toward the *ideal*. While coercing active polygamists out of their multiple marriages might provide an immediate solution, there is some doubt cast upon the effectiveness of such a measure by the escapades of missionaries in the 18th and 19th century. Questions arise: *should converts then release all wives, bar one, into situations that are not economically viable for the employment of those women? Should we bar polygamists—who have displayed the virtues of a transformed and repentant heart from the*

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[50] Sanchez, 126.

[51] Islam allows polygamy, though too recognizes the problems it creates. *Surah* 4:129 in the *Quran* states, "You will not be able to treat your wives with absolute justice not even when you keenly desire to do so…you incline not wholly to one, leaving the other in suspense." — Abul Ala Maududi Translation.

[52] Walter Kaiser comments, "The geographical center of Christianity—the worldwide demographic map that shows the distribution of Christian believers—is now located in the heart of the African continent." Kaiser, *Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament*, 91.

Lord's Supper or baptism? By asking the repentant polygamist to divorce 7 of 8 wives, do we lower the severity of divorce to the category of a 'lesser sin'? Who cares for the abandoned children and separated mothers in the fallout of such a divorce? Through the pursuit of a paradigmatic application of Old Testament ethics to modern evangelical contexts, this final section aims to provide answers to some of these questions.

What then is meant by a paradigmatic approach to ethics in the bible? While this cannot be addressed in full scope of this paper, I will provide a starting point. Old Testament Scholars Christopher J.H. Wright and Waldemar Janzen, contribute graciously to this discussion. Wright offers a place to begin writing, "a paradigm is a something used as a model or example for others cases where a basic principle remains unchanged, though details differ."[53] Israel certainly was a people guided by an *ethical* observance of *Torah*. Naturally the objection rises, "but the law is no longer binding!" Frequently this objection is raised from a misunderstanding concerning the law. The paradigmatic approach offers a solution to such objections. It is not that the law was 'deleted'—though surely certain aspects were rendered obsolete (i.e., animal sacrifice). Rather, while components of the law have been superseded by the model of Christ, aspects of this law are still preserved and can be utilized as a model by Christians in the present day. Even the New Testament reveals that the 'law' is written on the heart of the believer (Rom. 2:15; 2nd Cor. 3:3; Heb. 8:10; cf. Ezk. 11:19, 36:26; Jer. 31:33). Janzen argues that even Old Testament Israel was molded by *paradigm*. He writes, "The question for Christians is what those Old Testament paradigms were, whether they still speak, and how they relate to the paradigm of Jesus Christ."[54] Rather than reducing the law to nothing more than a *principle*, the paradigmatic approach seeks

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[53] Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach*, First edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 26.

[54] Janzen, 28.

to digest the whole counsel of Scripture, applying the stories of Scripture in a way that has a full ethical impact. This "narrative-canonical" approach assumes the *continuity* of grace through both the Old and New Testament.[55]

For example, Wright observes the paradigms operating in ancient Israel to observe how they might be employed to combat modern injustice and oppression among the poor. Surveying the annual gleanings in various harvests (Exod. 23:10-11; Deut. 24:18-22), Wright considers how the Church might operate in a manner that serves those with no viable economic support.[56] Moving beyond a reductionistic principle of generosity, one considers how an ethical system that values the well-being and welfare of others could operate in church bodies today. The cause of the underprivileged is deeply valued. In one example, Ahab's royal access and ultimate abuse of power seeks to strip Naboth of his vineyard (1st Kgs. 21:1-16). Rather than minimize the degenerate exploitation of power to a one sentence *mantra* (i.e., "be wary of greed"), this story can challenge Christians to actively counteract the corruption of courts and legal abuse like that of Ahab and Jezebel in Ancient Israel (cf. Is. 10:1-2). Rather than treat polygamy in a *reductionistic* way, dismissing its complexity without delicate action, Scripture provides us with models of action that are both 'pastorally sensitive', and *acutely* aware of shortcoming. The ethical paradigms Torah guide repentant sinners toward an ethical ideal while navigating the reality of 'less-than-ideal' circumstances.

In the next several paragraphs this essay will examine the eastern contexts of the global Church in Kenya (in Eastern Africa) and Botswana Africa (in Southern Africa), in order to recommend tactics for dealing with Polygamy in a pastorally sensitive manner. While polygamy

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[55] Janzen writes, "Kingdom ethics It does not awkwardly divide the story of the testaments, but rather seeks continuity, assuming that the story itself extending through both Testaments, is the ethic." Janzen, 210.

[56] Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 173.

is less than ideal, we must consider a full biblical ethic which demonstrates continuity between the testaments to address the complexity of this topic. Above we surveyed what might be considered "pragmatic justifications" [57] of polygamy in Ancient Israel (i.e., its provision for women who lack gainful employment, it's relief from those in widowhood, and it's substitution for barrenness). Exceptions should be considered for those supporting a plethora of unemployed women and children *before* their confession of faith. Old Testament ethics seems to make room for such considerations. Considering how the voice of the New Testament may "supersede" or render any of these factors obsolete under the new *Messianic Torah*, the words of both Jesus and Paul are insightful. Threads of conversation surrounding divorce are intimately bound with the conversation about polygamy. Jesus carefully scrutinized the practice of divorce (Matt. 5:31-32; cf. Matt. 19:9, Mark 10:11-12, Lk. 16:18). Westerners balk at polygamy, yet turn a blind eye to a high divorce rate tolerated in Western churches (i.e., "serial polygamy").[58] This denigrates the words of Christ. In 1st Cor. 7:12-14 Paul encourages converts in early Church to remain married to their unrepentant spouse. Although 1st Tim. 3:1-2 bars such parents from leadership, it does not exclude them from membership in the Church (nor deny the transformation they've undergone). While this may initially seem counterintuitive, in the truly repentant individual it could have ripple effects in the family which they continue to shepherd spiritually, socially and economically.

Botswana in Eastern Africa is a patrilocal (often polygamous) society that has frequently wrestled with this issue. Parallel to ancient Israel, polygamy in Botswana was used for the, "birth

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[57] Wright shares keen insights on what might be considered "pragmatic justifications" of social customs, arguing for a tolerant, yet theologically robust response to such issues. Wright adds, "Some degree of toleration, combined with a radical and theological critique and proclamation of the higher ideal, seems to be suggested by the light of the Old Testament." Wright, 350–51.

[58] Wright, 331.

of children, and enhanced security, social status and the esteem of the father."[59] Missionaries like

Robert Moffat captured the sentiment of evangelicals of the 18th and 19th century when he wrote,

"Can we demand a more satisfactory demonstration of the reality of the change? Among the

converts at Griqua Town was a Mosutu, who had ten wives, and he cheerfully parted with nine,

in obedience to the requirements of the Gospel."[60] David Livingstone, Moffatt's contemporary,

even disciplined one convert, Kgosi Sechele, by suspending his church membership when

Sechele 'relapsed' into Polygamy.[61] One Batswana man, Kgosi Sekgoma of the Bangwato had

twelve wives, and reacted differently to the position of these missionaries. In an 1850 interview

he stated:

> "I should like to be a missionary, and to become a Christian, if I should be allowed to
> keep my wives. I don't want any more. I have transgressed, and nothing can ever undo
> that which has once been done; but I cannot turn my wives and children out. All men's
> hearts will be against me; I shall be alone on the earth. To have my wives disgraced and
> my legitimate children branded with a false and ignominious name would bring
> overwhelming ruin and trouble without end upon me."[62]

Perhaps there is a way forward that recognizes the shortcomings and victimizations of

such a system, takes ethical care of all parties involved, and points to the ideal image of

monogamous marriage for forthcoming generations. With future generations in mind, we will

now seek a way forward, assessing the Anglican Church in Kenya.[63]

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[59] Nkomazana, "Polygamy and Women within the Cultural Context in Botswana," 268–69.

[60] SEE (The Journals of Moffatt, 1942:574-575) in Nkomazana, 270–71.

[61] Nkomazana, 268–69.

[62] Despite this comment, Author Fidelis Nkomazana (Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Botswana) has recognized the way polygamy as an institution which disadvantages, and victimizes Batswana women. Despite the provision and procreation this social custom can provide in Botswana, it frequently results in jealousy, problems of inheritance in household distribution, and even witchcraft. SEE (The Journals of Chapman, 1868:220) in Nkomazana, 269–70, 274-275.

[63] Reverend David Gitari, who helped craft the official stance of the Anglican Church of Kenya provides some keen insights, which are reflected in other parts of Africa. During the 6th synod of the Anglican Church of Kenya, in November 1982, Gitari helped craft the resolution which exalted monogamy as the ideal, but also conceded, "Nevertheless, this teaching is not easily understood in many Kenyan cultures in which polygamy is widely practised and is socially acceptable." David Gitari, "The Church and Polygamy," *Transformation* 1, no. 1 (1984): 9–10.

A Way Forward

The position posed in this final section shares much in common, with the biblically holistic, pastorally sensitive attitude of Reverend David Gitari. Applying ethics to modern contexts, this essay then recommends that while no polygamists should be deemed fit for leadership roles within the Church body (1ˢᵗ Tim. 3:1-2), the polygamist, his wives and children should be considered for baptism, after hearing the gospel and professing faith. The polygamist should not be barred from the Lord's Supper, unless that individual takes more wives after his conversion. In the latter instance, such an individual should be immediately placed under Church discipline.

In unison with the ideas, I share in common with Gitari's approach are several additional tactics to be applied. Each polygamist, along with his wives, should be invited and encouraged to attend catechismal class on the 'meaning of marriage' oriented around key Scriptures (Gen 2:24, Matthew 19:5-6 Mark 10:7-9, *et passim).* Often an attitude that seeks heart change in Eastern contexts might be more effective than a "catch-all" rule or rigid mode of operation. Bernard T. Adeney suggests a form of action that rests on the wisdom of the Church's leaders seeking God and observing repentance and heart change. Adeney writes, "Polygamy, like divorce, is an institutional social reality that the Church may condemn without being able to eliminate immediately."[64] A policy accommodating polygamous families, companied by stringent

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[64] Bernard T. Adeney is a Director of Doctoral Studies and Associate Professor of Ethics and Cross-cultural Studies at Satya Wacana Christian University in Central Java, Indonesia writes, "All candidates for church membership would be judged, not on the basis of their marital status, but on the sincerity of their confession of faith…This does not mean that a person's marital status is not important or that polygamous marriages are treated lightly. However, not just a person's marital status but also how well its responsibilities are fulfilled are considered. If a man with only one wife neglects her, has affairs or is abusive and does not show the fruit of repentance, he may be excluded from membership. On the other hand, an old man who has lived for many years with two wives and currently treats them well may be welcomed into the church. The decision would rest on the wisdom of the church leaders rather than on the application of a rule." Bernard T Adeney, "Polygamy: How Many Wives in the Kingdom of God?" *Transformation* 12, no. 1 (1995): 4.

theological education may be the best way forward. Through such catechismal events, and pastoral care from the local church, the family (husband and wives), inculcates a sense of monogamy's value as these broken parents point the next generation of believing children toward the ethical ideal.

Conclusion

The paradigmatic model applied in this research paper to addresses the practice of polygamy upholds the continuity of grace through both Testaments of Scripture. While such a pastorally sensitive ethic towards the issue of polygamy in evangelical contexts may not immediately eliminate the issue, it will ensure care for the most vulnerable as the ethical ideal is pursued. Seeking the scriptures with 'Berean' eyes, this holistic approach seeks the words of the Messianic Torah (law of Christ). It is this *One* who proclaims, "I tell you the truth, just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it for me" (Matt. 25:40). Above we have first sought to understand Scripture through a broad survey of *Torah,* and the ethical lessons it instills through narrative. We then turned to observe the gap between legal requirements and ethical ideals in the context of Rabbinic communities. After exploring a broad landscape of contextual factors along the lines of households, kinship, and kingship, this research paper sought a way forward in the modern Church. Compiling the ethics observed throughout the Torah, this paper applies them in light of studies in the social contexts of Botswana and Kenya, Africa. Now recommending several practices, and tactics I join an ongoing dialogue as the Church aims to minister in the modern age.

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