

# Jot & Tittle

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## **Marriage Regulations in the Bible**

by Dana L. Goodnough

Every society has found it necessary to regulate marriage. The Old Testament contains marriage regulations that God mandated for the ancient Israelites, many of which have carried down to modern society. In addition, the New Testament teaches the validity of certain marriage restrictions for Christians. As contemporary society wrestles with its Judeo-Christian marriage standards, it's important for God's people to revisit the biblical descriptions and restrictions regarding marriage.

### ***Biblical Descriptions of Marriage***

Genesis 2:18-25 presents the first teachings about marriage in the Bible. In this passage, God states that He did not create the man to be alone. Humans are social beings, and their social needs are predominantly met within the intimacy of a husband-wife relationship. God created Eve to be Adam's counterpart. "The man was thus created in such a way that he needs the help of a partner. Or we may say that human beings cannot fulfill their destiny except in mutual assistance."<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:22 says that the Lord God "brought her to the man," indicating that God joined Adam and Eve in marriage. This initial social structure would make it possible for Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and increase in number" and to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). Genesis, therefore, describes

marriage as a God-ordained union of one man and one woman for the purposes of sharing life together, procreating, and ruling together over God's physical creation. Davis states some of the implications of the Genesis account:

The creation of Adam and Eve teaches us much about the marriage relationship. First, marriage was instituted by God (vv. 22-24). Second, marriage is to be monogamous; God gave Adam just one wife. . . . Third, marriage is to be heterosexual; the mate whom God created for Adam, a male, was Eve, a female.<sup>2</sup>

In the New Testament, Jesus affirmed this description of marriage. Responding to a question about divorce, Jesus recited the Genesis description of marriage and said, "What God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:4-6). By His statement, Jesus upheld the description of marriage in Genesis as authoritative for all times.

### ***Biblical Restrictions on Marriage***

The Old Testament civil law presents the restrictions on marriage that were to be observed in Israelite society. Leviticus 18 lists a number of intimate relationships that were forbidden. It was a violation of God's law for an Israelite man to have sexual intercourse with his mother, his father's wife (presumably a wife by remarriage), his sister, his granddaughter, his half-sister, his aunt, his uncle's wife, his daughter-in-law, or his sister-in-law (Leviticus 18:6-16). In addition, a man was forbidden to be intimate with both a woman and her daughter or her granddaughter (Leviticus 18:17). These restrictions on marriage were additional to the restrictions established in the Ten Commandments regarding adultery (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 18:20). In the same context as these restrictions on sexual intercourse, the law forbade homosexuality (Leviticus 18:22) and bestiality (Leviticus 18:23). However, the Old Testament law code does not seem to restrict an Israelite from marrying a cousin. Even in modern society, there are variations on marriage restrictions.

In some states in the United States, marriage between first cousins is illegal and considered incestuous. Even in states where it is legal, it is not widely practiced. However, in many societies first-cousin marriage is the ideal relationship.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to note that, while the Old Testament law restricted a man from having sexual intercourse with his brother's wife (Leviticus 18:16), the same law required a man to raise up children for a deceased brother by marrying his wife (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). The Old Testament marriage laws restricted a number of relationships between certain men and women, and clearly forbade homosexual unions.

### ***The Question of Polygamy***

One interesting observation from the Old Testament marriage laws involves the possibility of polygamy. The law restricted a man from marrying his wife's sister "as a rival wife" (Leviticus 18:18), but makes allowance for polygamy (Exodus 21:10). Polygamy was practiced widely in ancient times. The earliest reference to polygamy in the Bible involved Lamech, a descendant of Cain (Genesis 4:19). Prior to the establishment of the Old Testament law code, Jacob married two sisters (Genesis 29:22-28). King David had multiple wives (1 Samuel 12:7-8; 25:39-44), and his son Solomon is legendary for having 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3) in violation of the warning of Deuteronomy 17:17.

Although the Bible describes the polygamous marriages of a number of individuals, the Bible also describes the difficulties that most of these men experienced in life as a direct result of their polygamy. Jacob's sons through his wives and concubines quarreled jealously. David's sons acted as deadly rivals to the throne. Solomon's wives led him away from the Lord. Just as God made allowance for divorce due to the hardness of human hearts (Matthew 19:8), it would appear that He likewise made allowance for polygamy for the same reason. Monogamy was God's original creation design, as seen in the fact that God provided only one wife for Adam. The one-flesh relationship between a man and a woman (Genesis 2:24) would be compromised in a polygamous relationship. Monogamy became the standard by the time of Jesus Christ, as Archer points out:

In the course of time, however, a better understanding of God's will in regard to marriage prevailed among God's people. From the time of the return from Babylonian exile (ca. 537 B.C.) onward, there is no reference to polygamy

among God's people to be found in any of the post-Exilic books of the Old Testament. By Christ's time monogamy was the rule among the Greeks and the Romans as well as among the Jews, and Christ's affirmation of the "one flesh" principle of marriage (which makes sense only in a context of monogamy) found ready acceptance among His countrymen (Matt. 19:5-6).<sup>4</sup>

### ***The Question of Becoming Unequally Yoked***

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament restricted marriage to a man and woman who were compatible in their faith. For the nation of Israel, this meant that men and women were not to marry spouses from the surrounding nations (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). In the New Testament, a Christian is permitted to marry only another believer (1 Corinthians 7:39). It is against God's will for a Christian to marry an unbeliever, becoming "unequally yoked" through such a binding relationship (2 Corinthians 6:14). However, God graciously helps those who, through disobedience or conversion, find themselves in a marriage relationship that falls short of His perfect standard. God can still bless that marriage, even when only the husband or only the wife is a believer (1 Corinthians 7:12-14; 1 Peter 3:1-2). God designed marriage to be a blessing—to be a lifelong union of one man and one woman—as the central relationship in a family and as the foundation for society.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross, Allen P. *Creation and Blessing*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> Davis, John J. *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> Grunlan, Stephen A. *Marriage and the Family: A Christian Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Archer, Gleason L. *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982, p. 123.