

Lesson #12 – How do we explain Polygamy being practiced in the early LDS Church?

By Cordell Vail

We are often asked by non-members how the Church could have lived polygamy if it is a Christian church. That is easily explained. The best way I have found to explain it is to refer the person to the Bible. Most people have heard the Old Testament stories of the Bible as a child and know them well enough to at least know the story. They may not know all of the details but they normally do remember to characters in the Bible story.

To start out, ask the person if they believe that the Old Testament Prophets were called of God. Ask them if they believe that they were Prophets. It is important that you get them to express their feelings related to the Old Testament prophets being God's servants on the earth at the time and true and living prophets. Ask them if they believe Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were prophets of God. Ask them if they believe Moses was a prophet of God. Once you have established that as one of their fundamental beliefs about the Bible you can proceed.

Ask them if they remember the story in the Bible where Jacob worked 7 years to marry Rachael and then her father tricked him on the wedding day and he actually married Leah who was the oldest daughter because it was Jewish law that the oldest daughter be married first. (Genesis 29:16-30 see story below)

Most people will remember that story from Sunday school when they were a child. If they are not familiar with the story you can read it to them from the Bible so they know the story. It is very important that they know the full story of how Jacob first married Leah and then worked 7 more years so he could marry the daughter that he really loved, Rachel.

Once they understand that story then you can ask them how many wives Jacob had. They will of course say 2. Then ask them again if they believe that Jacob was a prophet of God. Ask them how a prophet of God could live the law of polygamy and still be a prophet. That is the key point to the discussion.

Once they come to the realization of the fact that Jacob legally had two wives then you can further explain to them that Jacob was the father of the 12 tribes. I have never met any person with any religious training that did not know about the 12 tribes of Israel. They may not know much about them but at least they know that they are a central figure in the history of Christianity. This Jacob who is the father of the 12 tribes is the same Jacob that is referred to when we so often say Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is also the same Jacob who worked 7 years to marry Rachael and then worked 7 more years to finally be able to marry her. (Genesis 29:16-30.... see Bible story below)

Now that you have established that part of the story you can further relate to them the story about how Leah was able to have children and Rachel was not able to. So Rachael gave her handmaiden to Jacob to have children for her. Now he has three wives. So Leah gave her handmaiden to Jacob to have children for her as well. Now he has four wives. Those four women are the mothers of the twelve tribes. Leah was the mother of six of the twelve tribes. Rebecca was the mother of two. The other four were sons of the handmaidens. All of the sons that we know as the twelve tribes had the same father, Jacob, but they did not have the same mother. They were the sons of Jacobs 4 wives. That is a very important point. The twelve tribes of Israel are a very central figure in Christianity and they were the sons of a polygamist marriage relationship. (Genesis 30:1-12... see Bible insert below)

Now that you have established the fact that a Prophet of God did in fact have more than one wife, you can point out that the question then really is not if polygamy is right or wrong. The point is only if God commanded or allowed the law of polygamy to be lived.

Here is the key point of the discussion. You can then say to them that the point of this discussion is to show then that if the prophet Joseph Smith lived the law of polygamy he did it because God commanded him to live it. So the discussion here is not whether polygamy is right or wrong. The discussion is only whether God commanded it to be lived or not.

So now you can tell the person that the thing that they need to do is to find out for themselves if Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. If he was then we can see that God could command him to live the law of polygamy just like he did the Old Testament prophets. If he is not a prophet of God then all that he taught is of no consequence anyway. We can only know that by finding out if Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. The only way you can do that is by reading the Book of Mormon. Then invite them to read the Book of Mormon and pray and ask God if it is true. When they receive a witness that it is true then they will also know that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God called in our time.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

The Story of Jacob, Leah and Rachel

Genesis 29:16-30

¹⁶And Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder [was] Leah, and the name of the younger [was] Rachel.

¹⁷Leah [was] tender eyed; but Rachel was beautiful and well favoured.

¹⁸And Jacob loved Rachel; and said, I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter.

¹⁹And Laban said, [It is] better that I give her to thee, than that I should give her to another man: abide with me.

²⁰And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him [but] a few days, for the love he had to her.

²¹And Jacob said unto Laban, Give [me] my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her.

²²And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast.

²³And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her.

²⁴And Laban gave unto his daughter Leah Zilpah his maid [for] an handmaid.

²⁵And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it [was] Leah: and he said to Laban, What [is] this thou hast done unto me? did not I serve with thee for Rachel? wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?

²⁶And Laban said, It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.

²⁷Fulfil her week, and we will give thee this also for the service which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years.

²⁸And Jacob did so, and fulfilled her week: and he gave him Rachel his daughter to wife also.

²⁹And Laban gave to Rachel his daughter Bilhah his handmaid to be her maid.

³⁰And he went in also unto Rachel, and he loved also Rachel more than Leah, and served with him yet seven other years.

Mothers of the 12 Tribes

Genesis 30:1-12

¹And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

²And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, [Am] I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

³And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.

⁴And she gave him Bilhah her handmaid to wife: and Jacob went in unto her.

⁵And Bilhah conceived, and bare Jacob a son.

⁶And Rachel said, God hath judged me, and hath also heard my voice, and hath given me a son: therefore called she his name Dan.

⁷And Bilhah Rachel's maid conceived again, and bare Jacob a second son.

⁸And Rachel said, With great wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed: and she called his name Naphtali.

⁹When Leah saw that she had left bearing, she took Zilpah her maid, and gave her Jacob to wife.

¹⁰And Zilpah Leah's maid bare Jacob a son.

¹¹And Leah said, A troop cometh: and she called his name Gad.

¹²And Zilpah Leah's maid bare Jacob a second son.

There are many other stories in the Bible that tell of God's prophets having more than one wife.

The story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar

Genesis 16:1-4

¹Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name [was] Hagar.

²And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

³And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.

⁴And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes.

Moses

Numbers 12:1

And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman.

Moses had already married Zipporah (Exodus 2:21). Aaron and Miriam criticized their brother for taking this second wife, but they were immediately punished by the Lord for their criticism, making it plain that Moses had done no wrong in His sight (Numbers 12:1-15).

King David

1 Chronicles 3:1-5

He had 8 wives

Kings Solomon

Kings 11:1-3

He had 700 wives and 300 concubines

King Rehoboam of Judea

2 Chronicles 11:21

He had 18 wives and 60 concubines.

New Testament

1 Timothy 3:2

There are strong indications that during the first century AD some new Christians brought their plural marriages into the Church (in 1 Timothy 3:2 the comment is made that a man to be ordained an Elder should only have 'one wife'. Why would he not just say they should be married. His statement implies that there were others who did legally have more than one wife.

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