

Iowa View: 1 man, 1 woman isn't the Bible's only marriage view

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The debate about marriage equality often centers, however discretely, on an appeal to the Bible. Unfortunately, such appeals often reflect a lack of biblical literacy on the part of those who use that complex collection of texts as an authority to enact modern social policy.

As academic biblical scholars, we wish to clarify that the biblical texts do not support the frequent claim that marriage between one man and one woman is the only type of marriage deemed acceptable by the Bible's authors.

The fact that marriage is not defined as only that between one man and one woman is reflected in the entry on "marriage" in the authoritative Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible (2000): "Marriage is one expression of kinship family patterns in which typically a man and at least one woman cohabit publicly and permanently as a basic social unit" (p. 861).

The phrase "at least one woman" recognizes that polygamy was not only allowed, but some polygamous biblical figures (e.g., Abraham, Jacob) were highly blessed. In 2 Samuel 12:8, the author says that it was God who gave David multiple wives: "I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom. ... And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more" (Revised Standard Version).

In fact, there were a variety of unions and family configurations that were permissible in the cultures that produced the Bible, and these ranged from monogamy (Titus 1:6) to those where rape victims were forced to marry their rapist (Deuteronomy 22:28-29) and to those Levirate marriage commands obligating a man to marry his brother's widow regardless of the living brother's marital status (Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Genesis 38; Ruth 2-4). Others insisted that celibacy was the preferred option (1 Corinthians 7:8; 28).

Although some may view Jesus' interpretation of Genesis 2:24 in Matthew 19:3-10 as an endorsement of monogamy, Jesus and other Jewish interpreters conceded that there were also non-monogamous understandings of this passage in ancient Judaism, including those allowing divorce and remarriage.

In fact, during a discussion of marriage in Matthew 19:12, Jesus even encourages those who can to castrate themselves "for the kingdom" and live a life of celibacy.

Ezra 10:2-11 forbids interracial marriage and orders those people of God who already had foreign wives to divorce them immediately.

So, while it is not accurate to state that biblical texts would allow marriages between people of the same sex, it is equally incorrect to declare that a "one-man-and-one-woman" marriage is the only allowable type of marriage deemed legitimate in biblical texts.

This is not only our modern, academic opinion. This view of the multiple definitions of "biblical" marriage has been acknowledged by some of the most prominent names in Christianity. For example, the famed Reformationist Martin Luther wrote a letter in 1524 in which he commented on polygamy as follows: "I confess that I cannot forbid a person to marry several wives, for it does not oppose the Holy Scriptures."

Accordingly, we must guard against attempting to use ancient texts to regulate modern ethics and morals, especially those ancient texts whose endorsements of other social institutions, such as slavery, would be universally condemned today, even by the most adherent of Christians.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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