

What's the biblical definition of marriage?

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May 26, 2015

In the recent U.S. Supreme Court hearings on whether states have a constitutional right to ban (or refuse to recognize) same-sex marriages, the conservative justices seemed to be preoccupied with the definition of marriage. As Chief Justice Roberts stated, in response to advocate Mary Bonauto, “Every definition that I looked up prior to about a dozen years ago, defined marriage as a unity between a man and a woman as husband and wife. Obviously, if you succeed, that core definition will no longer be operable.”

Whereas this and similar comments made during the hearing are perhaps true on their surface—marriage in the past has not been defined as a relationship between same-sex couples—such comments are misleading, suggesting that the definition of marriage has been unchanged “for millennia,” or disingenuous. For example, later in the hearing, Justice Ginsburg corrected the historical record when she noted that in the recent past, “Marriage was a relationship of a dominant male to a subordinate female. That ended as a result of this court’s decision in 1982 when Louisiana’s Head and Master Rule was struck down.” The so-called “traditional definition of marriage,” used in conservative arguments, rarely takes into account the status of the marriage partners, or the character of the marriage, both of which have changed and evolved with changing culture and values.

Often behind the traditional definition of marriage is the biblical tradition where, it is claimed, marriage was created by God between one male and one female, citing [Genesis 2:24](#). Although this is not a definition of marriage per se but rather an explanation for why men and women join together in the social union we call marriage, the text may serve to justify heterosexual marriage. But what is the status of the partners and the character of the marriage? The immediate biblical context of this passage only gives a few indications: marriage is presented as the alternative to the man being alone; the woman is created to help the man; and the husband will rule over his wife. ([Ephesians 5:22](#) simply says, “wives, be subject to your husbands.”) Elsewhere in the biblical tradition, marriage should be within the

extended family, tribe, or people; is arranged by the fathers; and is the result of an economic exchange. Is this the traditional marriage that the justices are concerned to defend? It is marriage between one man and one woman, but the wife is subordinate to her husband, has little or no choice to whom she marries, and certainly does not marry for love.

But this understanding of marriage is not the only definition endorsed by the biblical tradition. There are numerous examples of marriages between one man and two or more women (Jacob, Elkanah, David, Solomon, and others). Polygyny was widely practiced in the biblical world, as it is today in the Middle East, among those who can afford it. The biblical tradition endorses such polygynous unions and only expresses concern regarding marriage to foreign women and the possible favoritism toward one son based on favoritism toward one wife.

Related to polygynous marriages are marriages that involve concubines or slave-wives. Abram takes Sarai's slave-girl Hagar for a wife, and Jacob takes Rachel's slave Bilhah and Leah's slave Zilpah for wives. David had at least ten concubines. These wives are tantamount to the man's property; they are used for sexual and procreative purposes, and may be discarded at will.

The Levirate marriage also treats the wife like property. If a man dies before he produces a child, his wife, who belongs to her husband's family because of the economic exchange that resulted in the marriage, is given to one of her husband's kinsmen. Although the [Levirate marriage](#) provides some measure of economic and social security for the widow, she is forced into a marriage to fulfill a marital obligation (to have children).

Generally, the Bible warns against Israelite men marrying foreign women, largely because foreign women will continue to worship foreign gods and lead their husbands astray (as is the case with Solomon). But when a woman is captured in war, the Israelite man [may marry her](#) as long as he gives her a month to mourn her dead family. The man has taken possession of her through war. By a similar logic, if a man [rapes an Israelite virgin](#), he must pay her father the appropriate bridewealth and then marry her. Unlike the foreign father who is killed in war, the Israelite father must be compensated as if he had arranged the marriage. In both cases, the woman has no say.

These examples of marriage in the biblical tradition illustrate the fluidity of the institution. To 21st-century Americans, these biblical understandings or definitions of marriage are strange and oppressive, but they are expressions of the culture and values of the biblical world. And as the culture and values of the society changed, so did its understanding of marriage. Society continues to change. In 2004, when gay marriage first became legal in Massachusetts, 61 percent of Americans opposed same-sex marriage. Today, gay marriage is legal in 37 states, and public opinion polls have ranged as high as 63 percent in favor. With such changing values, should we not expect the definition of marriage to also change? It always has.

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