POLYGYNY AND CONCUBINAGE AS POLITICAL FICTION IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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Hebrew history writing and land claims

This conference is about identity. My own Scottish forebears were 'cleared' from their ancestral lands so that rich lairds could profit from sheep. The lairds wrote the laws, so land title was legal, though unfair (Wightman, 2010). Land acquisition worldwide after the dissolution of empires is problematic for similar reasons: historically those with power took over the land of the powerless. My general starting point is that land ownership is problematic, a point which has stimulated a growing postcolonial research literature (for example Verran , 1998). These general comments are by way of introduction to land ownership issues in ancient Palestine and the specific question of whether some biblical details about polygyny/concubinage served a political purpose relating to possession of land. Polygyny is found in many Old Testament (OT) narratives, involving wives, slave wives and concubines. This paper recommends caution against assuming the historicity and social realism of these stories. The political agendas of authors and redactors are explored, motivated by the desire to create or refute legitimacy. The belief in the divine gift of land still affects attitudes and life opportunities in Israel/Palestine today – what Israeli geographer Oren Yiftachel (2005) calls 'Judaising the homeland'. As interpreters we need to be conscious that one person's 'history' is propaganda to another. Eric Hogsbaum's phrase 'the invention of tradition' (Hogsbawm and Ranger, 1992) though not OT focused, emphasises how 'traditions' are rarely unproblematic. Jonathan Church (1990)[1] borrowed a metaphor from psychology talked of 'confabulations of community' for manufactured imagined memories producing tendentious revision of the past. Each of these historical models can be applied to the OT. History is written by winners, giving little voice to the losers.[2] The 'holy land' was viewed as empty[3]. This paper explores the possibilities of manufactured traditions involving polygyny in OT narratives to establish land claims. This is not a dry academic question – Israel/Palestinian land claims remain problematic; and some women find themselves in polygynous marriages because their communities consider that the Bible validates these. I return to this in the final section.

In the light of post-colonial sensitivities[4], land-ownership underlying Old Testament texts is problematic. The views today of West Bank Palestinians and Jewish settlers could not be more polarised. The belief in the divine gift of land pervades *Joshua* and is implicit in accounts of the return from exile. Inheritance of this land is a huge concern in Old Testament accounts. The

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[1] This anthropological study focused on the Shetlands, Scotland.

[2] In a parallel turn in archaeology, Ian Hodder emphasised that the voices of the silenced be heard (Hodder, 1989). Keith Whitelam (1996) made similar arguments about biblical archaeology.

[3] Neh 2-4; Judith 5.19. See Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools*, 103:"Joshua, as well as Nehemiah and Ezra, has an *ideologically* empty land, in which the indigenous population exists in order to be ignored, removed, or displaced..."

[4] Post-colonial theory is a relatively new but welcome approach to OT studies, see R.S. Sugirthariajah, *Troublesome Texts: The Bible in Colonial and Contemporary Culture* though this focuses on Christian colonialism. I focus here on more general principles of giving voice to the powerless.

biblical text was written long after the purported events are said to have taken place, and at both religious and a scholarly levels, details are hard fought over. It is commonly accepted that OT texts were dynamic, gradually adapted by redactors and 'scribes' to make sense of the text for their own times. Even within oral traditions, different storytellers have their own 'take', though over time frequent retellings may have developed audience expectations which fixed traditions to some extent[5]. An authorized written version is likely to have been controlled by a power clique which had an agenda to present and the social position to discourage dissent. Today, scholars need refined and subtle tools to unravel the meanings intended by the writers, and to set these in a broader context. Scholarship generally has become more cautious about the historicity of OT stories[6] a scepticism which has influenced the useful work on family life of Leo Perdue and associates (1997) and Paula McNutt (1999). Both works however assume an historical and social significance to stories of marriage and family life, in my view unwisely. Archaeologicaly, the only solid evidence of marriage through contracts occurs outside of Palestine, in Babylonian, Nuzi and Elephantine texts[7]. For the OT, we have to base our deductions more loosely on laws, narratives and prophetic material.

OT texts have a complex history, in which the authorial voices of the sources combine with later editors in developing versions of the text. Source criticism regarded redactional additions as intrusions, but literary criticism took greater interest in the concerns of the later redactors. My own introduction and contributions to *Creating the Old Testament* (Bigger, 1989) placed emphasis on understanding the underlying politics of the texts we have, seeking the reasons for the creation and editing of each. This was a call to read the text as a whole rather than atomise texts into supposed sources. This is not the hermeneutic reading of OT books for the modern world, motivated by religious conservatism; it aims for holistic historical readings relevant to the books' creation, context and usage. Mary Douglas (1966), an experienced anthropologist, attempted this with Leviticus; Robert Alter (1981 Alter and Kermode, 1987) had explored selected narratives as art. The biblical books were written purposefully; their social, political, theological or even personal purposes need to be explored. Assumptions about land and religion were part of this. Each editorial stage expressed views, both political and theological, pertinent to their time. Stories of marriage, family and polygyny fit into this pattern, with intentions enmeshed with the specific needs of the time of writing.In this paper I take a particular interest in whether this impacted upon the views expressed on the family in general, and on polygynous marriages in particular.

Polygyny

Polygyny existed in Judaism until the middle ages (Falk, 1966). *Genesis* culminates in stories which assume that the ancestors of Hebrew tribes were brothers or half-brothers in a familyof

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[5] See further Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Israel* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998)

[6] For example, Thomas L. Thompson (1974, 1999), John Van Seters (1975, 2003), John Hayes and Maxwell Miller (1977), Niels Peter Lemche (1988), Philip Davies (1992), Keith Whitelam (1996), and William Dever (2001).

[7] Lipit Ishtar Code 24, 28; Code of Hammurabi 144-148, 170; Middle Assyrian Laws A 41; Nuzi texts, Breneman (1971), texts 1-5,101; Alalakh Tablets 91-92 (Wiseman 1953). Van Selms, (1954:20) notes polygyny in a quarter of families in Ugarit, based on lists. See also A.R Rainey, (1965) 'Family Relationships in Ugarit', *Orientalia* 34: pp.10-22.

four childbearers; their ancestry is developed early in the book through Abram/Abraham and Isaac. These stories try to present Hebrew couples as monogamous but they demonstrate exceptional polygyny, usually because of childlessness.[8] Other family lines – Lamech, (Gen. 4.19-24) and Esau (Gen. 26.34-5) are examples – are shown as typically polygynous. There is nothing prudish about this: sexuality and marriage in biblical stories is often explicit, dysfunctional and chaotic, despite lawgivers uttering death threats for sexual offences such as adultery and incest (for example, Leviticus 20.10-16). Abraham's wife Sarah on two occasions has two husbands simultaneously (Gen. 12.10-16 and 20.11-18), Lot mates with both of his daughters (Gen. 19.30-38), Jacob marries the wrong woman (Gen. 29.22-30), Abraham and Jacob father children by slave-women (Gen. 16; 30.3,9, and Tamar has to trick her father-in-law Judah into sexual intercourse to start her (legitimate) family (Gen. 38.13-19). Joseph in contrast gets into trouble for not committing adultery (Gen. 39.11-20). These are extraordinary tales told for purposes that we have discover, socially meaningful rather than a simple recording of history.

The term 'polygyny' denotes a man's legal marriage to two or more women irrespective of whether they are main wife, slave wife or concubine[9]. No biblical law prohibits polygyny,[10] and the possibility of multiple legal sexual relationships is assumed. Leviticus 18:9-17 prohibits simultaneous marriages to related women (with mother and daughter, and with two sisters), which implies that other plural marriages were allowed.[11] Marriage was not necessarily consensual, as marriages were family affairs. For women, marriage and motherhood were essential for survival, so agreements are likely to have been hard-nosed rather than romantic. The rights of wives, slaves and concubines would, as in other polygynous societies, have varied. Hebrew slave wives were offered some protection within polygynous families (Exod. 21.7-11). No law mentions a concubine (*pîlegeš*).[12]

The purpose of mentioning wives, including polygynous wives, in the *Genesis* material is often to do with tribal ancestry. In the primeval account, Lamech, descendant of Cain (and hence

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[8] Davidson (2008) in a conservative theology of sexuality argues that Genesis declares monogamy to be the ideal for humanity with examples of polygyny being implicitly condemnatory. This is over-simple, and, of course, theology rather than history.

[9] The most detailed pioneering work on OT marriage was by Neufeld (1944). More recently Perdue and colleagues (1997), McNutt (1999) and Davidson (2008) have all been useful.

[10] Notwithstanding Davidson's view (2008*:* 194) that Leviticus 18.18 means this – that is the law prohibiting simultaneous marriage to sisters, that 'sister' is generic for fellow Hebrew woman.

[11] I discussed this in Bigger (1979) where I focused primarily on the antiquity of the 'incest' commandments rather than their redactional purpose, although nevertheless still drawing on Mary Douglas's work.

[12] Women were clearly marginal to the affairs of state and religion and receive scant legal attention. We know that the OT law codes were all applied in the postexilic Persian period, but we have little other clarity about their origins and purposes. Although there are some common themes, much of each code is not found in the others. The old view of the Covenant Code being early cannot be maintained with conviction (Van Seters, 2003), nor that Deuteronomy was Josiah's lawbook (it is more likely that this was a narrative fiction): indeed, Deuteronomy was properly a sermon rather than a law book. The Holiness Code has always been linked to the exile and any likely future revision of date will be to make it later and not earlier (Grabbe, 2004: 174). In terms of marriage and women, the Covenant Code (Exodus) mainly deals with slavery, miscarriage as a consequence of violence, and sex with a virgin; the Holiness Code (Leviticus) deals with personal purity and prohibited sexual relations; and Deuteronomy brings in divorce, and levirate marriage. All condemn idolatry and the abominations of local worship in the same way that Ezra does. The Covenant Code is made up of communal case law; the Holiness Code is Priestly; and Deuteronomy is mostly about holy war (including genocide and ethnic cleansing). Carmichael (1979) argued that Deuteronomy drew direct inspiration from the Genesis narrative, providing a moralistic agenda by critiquing patriarchal behaviour.

Kenite) is the first described with two wives: Adah ancestress of pastoralists, and Zillah of metalworkers, musicians and craftsmen (Gen. 4.19-24). Sarah's slave-woman Hagar is called Abraham's 'wife' when she bears his first child (Gen. 16.3): Ishmael her son is described as loved by his father and blessed by God. However, Hagar after expulsion is called 'slave-woman' rather than wife in a speech by God which declares the primacy of Isaac (Gen. 21.12). Abraham's 'wife' Keturah (Gen. 25.1, after Sarah's death) produces six sons including Midian, eponym of the Midianite tribe (1 Chron. 1.32 calls her 'concubine'). Jacob's sons (and in the case of Manasseh and Ephraim grandsons) are eponyms of Hebrew tribes, coming from a troubled polygynous family with favoured (but relatively barren) Rachel, fertile Leah and two slave-women Bilhah and Zilpah (Gen 29.21-30.13). Only Rachel is declared 'wife' in the genealogy of Genesis 46.19, retaining the fiction of monogamy, even though Bilhah and Zilpah are called wives in Gen. 30.4 and 30.9 (cf. 30.15). There are tensions between Leah and Rachel as rival wives but the slave-women have no voice.[13] Declaring only Rachel as Jacob's wife (Gen. 46.19) leads eventually to the choice of Ephraim as Joseph's successor (Gen. 48.20). The 'Blessings of Jacob' in Gen. 49, is particularly favourable to Joseph (vv.22-26). The political purpose of pre-exilic proto-Genesis is revealed as the legitimisation of the northern kingdom. [14]

The Priestly Writer later editing proto-Genesis included Ishmael in the covenant with God by circumcision (Gen. 17.20-23), and recorded his *toledot*, his genealogy, in Gen. 25.12-18. However in the underlying story, Ishmaelites reappear two generations later with Midianites[15] to take Joseph into Egyptian slavery (Gen. 37.27-28). In other words, the descendants of Hagar and Keturah together enslave Joseph, Jacob's favoured heir, delivered to them by Leah's sons (Gen 37.18-28). This dysfunctional family mirrors Hebrew tribal tensions, described from the point of view of the Joseph tribes. Polygyny, the Genesis narrative declares here and elsewhere, brought problems. Esau, the Edomite ancestor (hence polygynous), married two Hittite[16] women (Gen. 26.34-5): his mother Rebecca's complaints (Gen. 27.46) leads to Jacob being sent away to make an endogamous marriage in Haran. Esau, to curry favour, married a daughter of Ishmael (Gen. 28.9) which he clearly regarded as in-marriage. Rebecca's own view is more narrowly focused on her own 'chosen' line. The stories also reveal the separation of Hebrew tribes from their distantly related Edomite/Canaanite/Ishmaelite neighbours. [17] These political aetiological stories cannot be assumed to describe everyday family life: they have political points to score.

The *pîlegeš* ('concubine')

The term *pîlegeš*[18] can be male or female, so meaning 'lover' or 'bed partner'. In only one text (Ezek. 23.20), the *pîlegeš* is male[19]; but usually, *pîlegeš* refers to female sexual partners.[20] As a

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[13] Samuel's mother Hannah with her 'rival' Peninnah (1 Sam. 1), and, in the Hellenistic period, Sir. 26.6 and 37.11 describing polygynous marriages negatively.

[14] The Priestly Writer (P) is generally credited with later editing of this earlier justification of the northern kingdom. On the genealogies, see Thomas (2011).

[15] Since Yahwism was adopted historically from Midian (Exodus 2.11-25; 18; Blenkinsopp, 2008; Sperling (1998): 131-4, this storyline represents a substantial change of esteem for Midianites.

[16] Gen. 36:2-3 calls the two 'Canaanite', the first 'Hittite' and the second 'Hivite'.

[17] This recalls the Ezra-Nehemiah ban on intermarriage with local women.

[18] The i is long, usually spelt with yod except in manuscripts of Samuel, Kings and Ezekiel. The lamad is occasionally doubled with a *dagheš* (Rabin, 1974: 353f).

quadriliteral (four-letter) root, the word, *pîlegeš* is non-Semitic and therefore unusual in the OT. Chaim Rabin's (1974) detailed manuscript study of the word concluded that *pîlegeš* had an Indo-European root meaning 'lie with', not in his view borrowed from Greek *pallakis* but from the original Philistine language (of which unfortunately we have no information beyond a few place-names). His tentative conclusion was based on the assumption that *pîlegeš* stories were not anachronisms and revealed ancient social practice close to the Philistine cities. Such assumptions of historicity are treated with caution today. Rabin listed Indo-European parallels in early Roman (perhaps Etruscan) *paelex*, 'concubine' and Old Iranian *pairika*[21] (Rabin 1974: 355). Herodotus used the Greek term *pallakē* for Persian concubines (the same word as used by the Septuagint for *pîlegeš*). Ancient Persian language was Indo-European (Kuhrt 1995: 649; Renfrew 1987), but their word for concubine has not survived. Homer[22] used the earlier (or maybe poetic) form *pallakis*, which mirrors *pîlegeš* (and also *paelex*) more than the later term *pallakē*.[23] In later Latin, *concubina* took over. The Greek *pallake* is likely to be related to *pallax*, 'youth', so meaning simply 'girl'. The long *î* of *pîlegeš* resembles the early Roman *paelex* rather than the Greek *pallakis*; also the lamed of *pîlegeš* is not normally doubled. This suggests that the Indo-European word for concubine has some antiquity, and *pîlegeš* should not be considered as a borrowing of the superficially similar Greek *pallakis/pallake*.

In this section I explore how the word *pîlegeš* is used in Biblical books. Some references in Genesis include concubines in genealogical lists, listing the sons they produced. Genealogies within the *toledot* structure are not generally considered to be early in date (Thomas, 2011: 25-31), so genealogical details are likely to be features of a later, even exilic, edition of Genesis. Abraham's brother Nahor is credited with four sons by his concubine, Reumah (Gen. 22.24). Of the sons attributed to his 'wife' Milcah, Kemuel, became father of Aram (v.21), putative ancestor of the Arameans, so a political aetiology; and Bethuel became father-in-law of Isaac (v.23), a putative ancestor therefore of the Hebrews. The sons of Reumah the concubine are not similarly recognizable as prestige ancestors. In the Edomite genealogy, Amalek son of Eliphaz (Esau's son), is said to have had a concubine mother, Timna (Gen. 36.12) whereas Eliphaz's other sons are just listed. The Amalekites were a hated tribe (Exod. 17.8-13, Deut 25.17-19) and this genealogical detail may have been intended to de-legitimise the tribe as the narrative attempts a reconciliation between Jacob and Esau, representing reconciliation between Hebrews and Edomites (Gen 33:1-4).

Concubines appear also in narratives. Abraham 'sent away' his concubines' sons 'eastwards to the east country' away from Isaac with presents (Gen. 25.5-6) instead of inheritance. This is strange as we are told nothing else about any concubines. Keturah has just been mentioned as 'wife' after Sarah's death[24]; Hagar is never called a concubine, and her son Ishmael helps to bury Abraham in the following verses, showing that he had not been sent away (Gen 25:9-10). The

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[19] Variously translated in English versions 'lover', 'paramour' or 'male prostitute'. The Septuagint, clearly puzzled translated it 'Chaldeans', parallel to Egypt in the verse. In a similar passage in Hosea (8.9), an earlier text, *ᵃhābîm*, 'lovers', is used (Hos. 8.9).
[20] It has a masculine plural *pilagshim* much like *nasim*, 'women'.
[21] But without the meaning 'concubine'.
[22] Iliad ix 449-452; Odyssey xiv, 203. See Rabin (1974) n.11.
[23] The internet claim (without referencing) for an Aramaic etymology, *palga isha*, 'half-wife', is not supported by Rabin. Biblical Aramaic for concubine in Daniel 5.2 is *lechenah*.
[24] Keturah is called 'concubine' in 1 Chron. 1.32; one of her named offspring was Midian.

detail makes clear that any eastern (desert Arab) tribe who claimed descent from Abraham has no legitimate claim for inheritance. It is a catch-all, no names mentioned. This clearly establishes the legitimacy of Isaac's line over others who claim Abraham as ancestor, their 'great father' ('ab ram).

Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant who bore children to Jacob on Rachel's knees, is termed 'concubine' only after Rachel's death, in a story in which Reuben, Isaac's firstborn son, has sex with her (Gen. 35.22; 49.4); the term 'concubine' is not used elsewhere in *Genesis*, even in the genealogy of Genesis 46[25]. It is true that Bilhah's status as Rachel's slave-woman would have changed with Rachel's death so some alternative status might have been felt necessary by the writer. Whether this changed the status of her sons is a moot point. There is however another consideration. Reuben's adultery with his father's 'wife' is a prohibited relationship in Lev. 18.8 and 20.11, punishable by death. Calling Bilhah 'concubine' softens this by declaring her 'not wife', as in the similar story of King David's son Absolom having sexual relations with his father's concubines (2 Sam. 16.21-2, see below). Reuben's hubris was punished in the 'blessings' of Jacob by removal of pre-eminence (Gen 49.4), explicitly referring to the sexual offence but without using the term *pîlegeš*. The story may be structural, but the single use of the word *pîlegeš* in it may represent a later sensibility. Thus use of the term *pîlegeš* in Genesis strips the woman and her descendants of status. Like the interest in genealogy generally, this is a late political tendency and not evidence for early family practice.

The word *pîlegeš* is found in other OT books. In Judges, Abimelech, son of quasi-king Gideon/Jerubbaal and leader of a *coup* against his half-brothers,, is said to be son of a Shechemite 'concubine' (Judg. 8.31) who is called *amah*, 'slave-woman' in 9.18. Abimelech is thus declared not a legitimate heir of Gideon: the story condemns the *coup* and Shechemite behaviour. In Judg. 19.1-20.6,[26] a Levite's 'concubine' from Bethlehem in Judah became estranged and returned to her father. Having been persuaded to return to her 'husband' (Hebrew 'her man') they became guests in Gibeah[27] (a Benjaminite town): when a mob attacked, the woman was put out and gang-raped, during which she died. This breach of hospitality (but not of her human rights) caused offence which was remedied by war, during which the tribe of Benjamin was almost wiped out. By calling the woman a 'concubine', the gang-rape is not deemed adulterous. The use of terms such as 'husband' and 'father-in-law' (Hebrew *hoten*) hint that she may have been a wife rebranded as concubine by the author/editor to evade the charge of adultery. The story has an anti-Benjaminite stance: Benjaminites, the tribe of the first king, Saul, were guilty of rape and owed their very existence to the charity of the other tribes. Had they raped the Levite's *wife* this charitable action may have been criticised in law.

The early kings were said to have multiple wives and concubines. Whatever the pre-history of stories of monarchy, they were shaped in the exile not as accurate history but to influence politics (Davies, 1998, 112-115). Royal succession is described as chaotic. Abner was accused of

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[25] There is a further twist here as only Rachel is deemed 'wife' (Gen 46:19), whereas Leah and the slave women simply 'bore children' for him (v.15, 18, 25). This pretence of monogamy establishes the supremacy of the favoured sons and therefore the tribes that claimed them as ancestors.

[26] Klaas Spronk, 'The Book of Judges as a Late Construct', in Jonker (2010) questions the antiquity of the book of *Judges*. We should certainly be cautious of attributing to it a historicity that it may not have.

[27] Hosea 10.9f may be a reference to this.

having sex with Rizpah, Saul's concubine, after Saul's death[28]. David's son Absalom used sex with David's concubines as a declaration of *coup d'état* (2 Sam. 16.21-2 – these concubines were servant housekeepers). Though these actions apparently did not constitute adultery or incest, David did not sleep with his violated concubines thereafter, but they were required to live as though widows (2 Sam. 20.3). Adonijah's request for Abishag (1 Kgs 2.22-25) cost him his life as it was assumed to be an attempt at power (though she was not described as *pîlegeš* the story hints that she was intended to be David's sexual partner, whether as wife or concubine (1 Kgs 1.1-4). King Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kgs 11.1-6; Song 6.8 gives smaller numbers) are clearly exaggerated; wife and concubine numbers are not given for later kings in the Deuteronomic History. Emphasising royal harems at this crucial time needs to be viewed as a narrative device rather than social history: this is discussed below.

The Chronicler, late in the OT period, adds to our examples.Abraham's wife Keturah mother of Midian is styled 'concubine' (1 Chron. 1.32). In 1 Chron. 2.18-50, the Caleb clan is complex. After his father's death, Caleb marries his father's surviving wife Ephrathah (v.24). Caleb has children by his wife Azubah 'and by Jerioth' (v.18), presumably a slave or concubine but no further details are given: a single list of sons is offered. He also has two concubines, Ephah and Maacah (vv.46,48). Details of Ephah in this passage (v.46) are curious: she had three named sons, Haran, Moza and Gazez, but in the same verse Haran is named as father of Gazez, seemingly by his own mother. The Caleb list interrelates the clans of Machir, Gilead and Caleb, not drawing on earlier biblical lists. Later, the Chronicler credits Solomon's son Rehoboam with 18 wives, 60 concubines, 28 sons and 60 daughters, alongside Maacah daughter of Absolom, described as his main and loved wife (2 Chron. 11.21), details not given in *Kings*. The Chronicler further details in Manasseh's household an unnamed Aramaean concubine who bore Asriel and Gilead's father Machir (1 Chron. 7.14), thus diminishing the clans of Gilead and Machir by claiming a foreign concubine ancestress. These late texts, half genealogy and half narrative, are political in nature, declaring clan status. The verses describe family history from many centuries earlier, so historicity is unlikely; reducing clan history to an ancestral families is as simplistic here as it was with the eponymous Israelite brothers of *Genesis*. The *pîlegeš* concubine is a genealogical device to downgrade particular social groups.

The exile and post-exilic period have long been viewed as the time when biblical books were written down and promulgated, although much is uncertain[29]. The Babylonian and Persian empires may shed some light on descriptions of polygyny. We have seen descriptions of Hebrew royal harems around the time of the undivided monarchy.[30] We know about the Persian royal family through Herodotus and Thucydides, who described large royal ménages, with Persian wives and numerous non-Persian concubines married to foster political alliances. Greek writers delighted in these tales of their old enemy, of protected enclosures for women run by eunuchs, and of debauched monarchs, although they were mistaken since wives and concubines travelled openly with their menfolk, even into battle, as a public display of status. Maria Brosius (1996),

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[28] 2 Sam. 3.7; see especially Branch, 2009: 33-61. Her footnote 12 (p.194) describes the difference between wife and concubine as fluid, but doubts whether there were concubines in normal families. She locates concubine stories, as Rabin does, in Judah and Benjaminite territories, but without commenting on his Philistine hypothesis (see above).

[29] See especially Grabbe (2004) ; Davies, (1998); Kuhrt, (1995: 648); for the Cyrus Cylinder see ANET. Isa. 45.1 refers to Cyrus.

[30] 2 Sam 5:13-14; 2 Sam 16:22; I Kings 11.1-6; cf. Song 6.8; II Chron 11.21.

writing about ancient Persian women, describes marriage as alliance and concludes that concubines had a good status, with possessions, economic interests, and even servants; these women were serious businesswomen, well-regarded in the community. The concubines differed from wives only in that they were foreign-born, i.e. non-Persians but high status (Brosius, 1996: 31-34). She describes Persian, and earlier Babylonian, women thus:

> Royal women enjoyed a position which allowed them free disposition of the produce of their estates reflected in their ability to give their own orders, to use their own seal and to employ their own bureaucratic staff to execute their affairs. These women also had their own centres of manufacture and their own workforce (Brosius 1996: 199-200).

There was thus no shame in being a concubine. The Hellenistic Greek *pallake* concubine in contrast was lowly, a girl with little esteem and few rights, a sexually available servant. *Pallake* was the Greek translation for Persian 'concubine' and the Greek writers' ribald comments viewed concubines in the Greek mode rather than Persian. A Hellenistic depiction of Persian kings' self-indulgent ménages is described in Esth. 2.14, with eunuchs and sexually available girls (*pîlagšim*) given lavish beauty treatments. Esther, a Hebrew harem-woman of ambiguous status, became a literary heroine by showing strength of character and presence of mind, serving Hebrew citizens well. Another late text, Daniel, revealed similar attitudes, using the word *lechenah* for concubine in an Aramaic portion (Dan. 5.2).

To summarise, the non-Semitic loan word *pîlegeš*, 'concubine', is a literary and genealogical device dating no earlier than the 6th century BCE. *Pîlegeš* was a gender-neutral word for 'lover, bed-mate' which became mostly attached to women who were formal sexual partners but not wives. It was an Indo-European word separate from its later Greek translation *pallake* meaning 'girl, young woman'. Ezekiel, using the term provocatively for males, perhaps encountered it through early Roman and Greek traders aroundthe sixth century BCE. The male reference is easier to explain if in Ezekiel's time *pîlegeš* was not a common term for women. We may regard examples of the word *pîlegeš* describing concubines in Genesis and the history books as anachronisms. The term was used to reshape material in line with political agendas at that time, lowering the status of ancestresses in genealogy and story to deny their offspring legitimacy, and increasing the status of esteemed monarchs. Despite the earlier history of the Indo-European word (as Rabin has charted it), it cannot be safely used as a description of early Hebrew sexual relationships and does not occur in Hebrew law.

Reassessing Polygyny

In this section I explore how the detail of this paper might affect our view of polygyny in the OT. Polygyny was generally accepted as legal into post-biblical times (Mishnah Yebamoth 1.1; 2.1f; Ketuboth 10.1). Elsewhere in the ancient Near East, polygyny existed but was controlled by law and contract[31], and we find this also in the marriage contracts of the 'Jewish'[32] community in Elephantine (Egypt) in the fourth century BCE (Porten, 1968). To the west, Greeks and Romans were monogamous (Finley,1954:148; Harrison, 1968; Carcopino, 1991/1941:96.). The New

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[31] See note 7 above.

[32] The term is technically an anachronism

Testament (Mark 10:2-12) depicts Jesus requiring monogamy and condemning divorce, using proof-texts from Genesis 1-3[33].

Multiple sexual relationships are not uncommon in human society, as anthropological literature reveals[34], polygyny (plural wives) being more common than polyandry (plural husbands). Anthropological studies[35] show polygyny generally as a marker of status and a mechanism to encourage motherhood where war has depleted male numbers. Monogamy restricts sexual freedom, usually to protect paternity: however monogamy may be viewed positively as love, loyalty and faithfulness. Marriage was generally a family affair; individual choice of partner is relatively recent. In the ancient world, we cannot assume the consent of participants – women might even be captured in war to become wives, a situation that we find with approval in *Judges* (21.11,21). An earlier generation of theologians took one of two general approaches to polygyny: that monogamy is the ideal and polygyny the human weakness or aberration[36]; or, following Victorian evolutionist assumptions that human society evolved from primitive promiscuity, through polygyny to monogamy[37]. This social evolutionary hypothesis persisted uncritically for decades in OT studies long after its rejection by anthropologists by the 1920s in favour of functionalism.

Hebrew society came to prize legitimate paternity. Childbearing had a part to play in nation-building. With the uncertainties of war and disease, women needed to be childbearing[38], no matter what the male-female ratio, and polygyny is often depicted as a consequence of this if a first wife is barren. The story motif of special child born to a barren mother (Isaac to Sarah, Joseph to Rachel, Samuel to Hannah, and in the New Testament John [the Baptist] to Elizabeth) plays further on this[39]. Robert Alter (1978) calls this 'an annunciation type-scene'. There clearly were childbearing women with secondary status. The Hebrew slave wife in Exod. 21.7-11 fares better – she has rights that if not honoured requires her release. Foreign women like Hagar fared less well. *Pîlegeš* was a foreign term of later date used as an anachronism for these sexually available servant women. Apart from status concubines (such as in the royal family), the term downgrades non-esteemed 'others'.

Marriage and sexuality in the OT is often dysfunctional and out of control. This deserves careful discussion and explanation. Genesis is a sampler of sex and marriage problems. It emphasized the importance of childbearing, fulfilling the commandment 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the

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[33] Also I Timothy 3:2, a bishop must be husband of (only) one wife.

[34] On the use of anthropology for OT study, see Bernhard Lang (ed.), 1985, *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament*, London: SPCK; Thomas W. Overholt, 1996, *Cultural Anthropology and the OT*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press. My own PhD thesis (Bigger, 1974) used anthropological accounts to compare and clarify details of marriage and family life.

[35] Two classic studies are: Roberton Smith, W. 1907 *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* New Edition, London: A&C Black; Westermarck, Edward 1922 *The History of Human Marriage*, vols I-III, New York: The Allerton Book Company. More recent general surveys are: Mair, Lucy 1971 *Marriage* Harmondsworth: Penguin; Fox, Robin (1977). *Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective*. Harmondsworth: Penguin; Needham, Rodney (ed.) 2004 *Rethinking Marriage and Kinship* (Routledge Library Editions: Anthropology & Ethnography).

[36] Mace, 1953, Davidson, 2008 and many other popular conservative books.

[37] Epstein, 1927, 1942; Burrows, 1938; Neufeld, 1944; de Vaux, 1961; Plautz, 1962.

[38] A new husband was given the first year of marriage at home, presumably to encourage pregnancy, Deut.24.5.

[39] Gen 21.1-7; Gen. 30.22-4; I Sam 1.1-21; Luke 1.11-25

earth' (Gen. 1.26). God created males and females (Gen. 1.26) Eve in the garden being an intimate helper (Gen 2.20). They are 'one flesh' striving to reunite (Gen. 2.24). The Hebrew redactional ideal was monogamy[40]; the reality was otherwise making this ideal somewhat forced. Thereafter in Genesis, human folly and disobedience made everything go wrong. Patriarchal authority and pain in childbirth are described as immediate consequences (Gen. 3.16). Male authority underpins much of the injustice and violence which follows, including women's need for motherhood, despite its risks and pain, for status and economic security. The stories themselves show that for women, sex and marriage could be challenging, and dangerous.

Ancient texts, including the Bible, were productions of their times, and include assumptions that may be unpalatable. As interpreters, we seek only to understand, not to use ancient texts to justify contemporary attitudes and practices. The stories do not present biographical or historical fact but theology and, I argue, politics. Claiming a pure bloodline requires a removal of doubt. The legitimacy of opponents can be denied by careful use of story and genealogy. Declaring a wife (with inheritance rights) as 'only' a concubine (without inheritance rights) is political sleight of hand. Of course, a book with a political agenda can still be a 'good read' – Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* on the politics of race in America is a popular example. Some OT narratives have the characters plotting, scheming and murdering. Enjoyment brings persuasiveness. The stories of the patriarchs, judges, and kings achieve political aims by being popular and frequently told. Stories that become well known and esteemed assume authority. People believed them, and still do. The OT's message was that Hebrew nationhood involved a covenant with their God Yahweh, which gave them title to territory, entitling them to wipe out the existing occupants as ideological dangers (Deut. 7.1-5). We need to view this however as a statement of political ambition which used scriptural writings to underpin claims for national legitimacy.

This discussion highlights the need for caution when attempting to reconstruct Hebrew history – the legends have political agendas and historical or sociological substance cannot be assumed. The question 'Who Do You Think You Are?' was an urgent agenda Hebrews eager for land and religio-political power two to two-and-a-half thousand years ago. Yet there are some unintended modern consequences. I have written elsewhere about the unfortunate effects of missionary activity in Africa (Bigger, 2009): native gods were identified with the devil (and therefore acknowledged to have real power) and the Christian God identified with The Ancestor, which put polygynous Abraham and David into everyone's family tree, validating polygyny as acceptable. Since polygyny was practised in Africa before missionary activity, education is less likely to change a custom which appeared to receive further divine approval through biblical examples. The fictional stories of patriarchs and kings, written for their own political and oppressive purposes, thus have consequences for Christian women in polygynous relationships today. Biblical scholarship needs to clarify how OT authors treat polygyny as a problem, not as a model of family life to be recommended. This may help to prevent texts deemed sacred from falsely validating oppression against women.

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[40] Jesus extended this ideal to a rejection of divorce (Mark 10.2-9).

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