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#61 Could Jesus have been female? What about polygamy?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom tackles questions on whether Jesus could have been incarnated as a woman instead of a man, how you explain polygamy in scripture, and the question of Biblical commands about men and women speaking in church.

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Transcript

(upbeat music) - The Ask Nty Anything podcast. - Hello and welcome along to today's edition of the Show I'm Justin Briley, sitting down once more with Tom Wright to look at the questions that you've sent in. Today, on Men Women Marriage Could Jesus, have been female in polygamy.

It's gonna be an interesting one, as we look at some of the questions you've been sending in. The show is ever brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online. And Tom, of course, a renowned Bible scholar, senior research fellow at Whitcliffe Hall, Oxford.

You can find out more about him and about the show at our webpage, askNTWright.com, which also includes the link to this year's Unbelievable Conference, only a month away now on Saturday, the 15th of May. Are you going to be there with us? It's all online from the comfort of your own home, but loads of speakers, seminars that you can read about. Check out the ticketing options.

It's gonna be a great day, including a live edition of this very show, The Ask Nty Wright Anything show. So just go to unbelievable.live to book your place, Versailles the 15th of May, but the link's there as well on our show page at askNT Wright.com. And if you register, you'll get access to the regular newsletter, a ways to get in touch as well, so that you can ask the question yourself and are other resources and ways to support us too. Thanks to John Delaney, who got in touch with some feedback to say the podcast has been incredibly helpful to me ever since it started.

I appreciate the intelligent and thoughtful discussion. It's helped me reach a place of peace regarding the many questions I have about God and faith. It's also helped me feel more comfortable at times when I see things differently to other Christians.

Justin, thanks for doing this podcast, being a gracious host and Tom, thank you for your willingness to share with us in this way. Great to know that the podcast has helped you in that way. John, bless you for getting in touch and taking the time to leave a review and a rating on the podcast that where you listen from.

And if you'd like to help others to continue to grow in their faith in the way that John has, then, if you're able to give towards the show, the running costs and so on, that makes a huge difference and helps us to get the message out to more people. Again, you can find the links to get a free ebook when you do that from AskNTUrite.com or go to our US site if you're listening from the US to help support the show. That's premierinsight.org and click on the Ask NTUrite Anything show.

For now, let's get into your questions on today's edition of the podcast.

(upbeat music) Welcome back to today's edition of the Ask NTUrite Anything podcast. And today on the programme, we're looking at issues again that come out around men, women, marriage in the Bible.

It's got all kinds of interesting questions that come in every week on this, Tom. Let's start with this one, though, from Matt in Petaluma, I think it is, in California. And he asked simply, do you think Jesus could have been a woman? I know that he would not get as much attention and he wouldn't have been taken as seriously at the time.

But is there a biblical or theological reason? He had to be a man. And is it at all connected to the fact that we do, of course, use male pronouns relating to God and call him father rather than mother generally in scripture? Thanks, love, all the work you do. This is a fascinating question, you know, when God became incarnate, could God have become a woman just as much as he became a man in Jesus Christ? Yes, and it's interesting to me that Matt begins by saying that this teacher he had said didn't matter that Jesus was a Jewish man from the first century.

And people have said, you know, supposing he'd been born in, I don't know, Saudi Arabia

or Timbuktu or whatever, would it have mattered? And in a way, asking the question, could it have been dot dot dot? It's rather like asking the question, could you have had different parents? And immediately you think, well, of course I could. And then you say, no, well, it wouldn't have been me. And how would that have been? And you get into a kind of an infinite regress of unlikely possibilities, as it were.

And most of us live most of our lives on the basis that, well, here I am, this is today, this is what we have to do. And in all sorts of ways, the givenness of the whole Christian revelation is that this is what happened, guys. And if you pull back and say, well, did it have to be like that, there is a question there about whether God is constrained by factors working on him or whether God is free to do whatever God wants.

And those are big and likewise quite difficult questions. I think the thing to say is that the entire biblical story is about God the Creator, making a world within which humans have a vital role to play in taking his purpose forward. And as theologians look back at that, in the light of Jesus, they say, ah, it looks as though God made a world with humans to play the vital role so that he could himself come and take that vital role himself by being human.

However, then, after humans rebel, God calls one particular human Abraham and his wife, Sarah, ah, to start the process of rescuing that project. And Jesus comes as the fulfillment of that purpose. So that again, we have to say it looks as though God called Abraham to be his covenant partner so that God himself could become the covenant partner by becoming human and by taking the end tale of that wickedness, human wickedness onto himself.

And then you're right in the middle of the gospel story and you say, well, no, Jesus had to be Jewish. And did he have to be male? Well, it looks as though in the strange economy of God, God has created us male and female with different complementary roles. And I'm not saying that to boost the so-called complementary views because there's a lot of other things going on there.

But then the roles aren't identical. And that God himself becomes human as a male, as Jesus of Nazareth. And that we who follow Jesus are described in the New Testament, like Israel has described in the Old Testament as Yahweh's bride.

And we are the bride of Christ. So there is a sense of completion there. And we are that because of the work of the Holy Spirit.

I'm not saying the Holy Spirit is the female member of the Godhead, but there is that about the Spirit, which some of the great teachers have seen as bringing the whole thing together. So that saying, could Jesus have been a woman, could he have been non-Jewish, kind of operates at a rather shallow level? And when you get down to the bigger issues of what's actually going on in this whole story, there is a completeness, I think a

satisfying wholeness to the whole story. So the question of would he have been taken seriously is neither here nor there.

And I don't think that's directly related to the question about male pronouns for God. The Bible does use some female imagery for God as well. God as a mother, though normally God is portrayed as father, both in the Hebrew Scriptures and of course, particularly in the New Testament, probably as far as we can go on that one.

Probably as far as we can go, but a really interesting question and response. Thank you, Tom. I'm going to come in a moment to a question on the issue of polygamy in the Bible, but sticking with the New Testament.

This has come up in various ways and I will again encourage people to go back to some of the podcast episodes where we've dealt with the issue of gender, women in the church, leadership and so on. Again, with the caveat that this is just a show where Tom and I sit down to talk about these things. There are many great female scholars that you could equally listen to on some of these questions around female leadership and so on.

But Sean in Omaha, Nebraska has a question on first Corinthians and says, "Among the many facets of Scripture and its practical application that is in conversation that as such forces us as pastors to address still in the US is gender roles within the church." One particular question that I've never heard anyone address and I'm wondering if you might shed some light on it is what law Paul might be referring to in first Corinthians 14, verse 34. And he quotes here from the KNT, "The women should keep silent in the assemblies. They are not permitted to speak.

They should remain in submission just as the law declares." And Sean goes on to say, "I'm not familiar with any Old Testament law that spoke to women's participation in assemblies." Is he referring to a rabbinical law, local Roman law? I find it interesting that in all of the opinions swirling around that and other similar passages, no one addresses the point that Paul seems to be anchoring his thought with any insight you may lend would be welcome. So yes, any thoughts on this particular contested passage in the first Corinthians? Yes, one of the reasons I'm glad I'm not writing a commentary on 1 Corinthians just now is that there are lots of passages like this where you have to say, "Well, it might be this, it could be that, possibly the other." And I did check one or two commentaries on 1 Corinthians when I saw this question was coming up. And there are two things to say before we even get to the specifics of the end of verse 34.

The first is that there's something very odd about the text of the New Testament at this point that some manuscripts don't have this particular passage from verses 34 and 35 about the women keeping silence and so on. And one of the great commentators of recent days, Gordon Fi, a wonderful commentator on the New Testament who's a great Pentecostal preacher as well. Gordon reckoned as a text critic that this was not actually written by Paul and somebody had stuck it into the letter later on.

It's fair to say that plenty of other biblical commentators disagree with that, but that is possible granted the textual evidence. The second thing to say, and I heard this from Ken Bailey who'd been a missionary in the Middle East for many years, is that if you assume in a Christian assembly that men would sit on one side and women would sit on the other side as happens in many churches in the Middle East to this day, then if the service is being conducted in Kinegreek, many of the women might not know Kinegreek because they would only speak the local dialect, the local patwa. And he said in churches that he knew this would be the service would be taken in Arabic and the women who only spoke a local dialect wouldn't know what was going on.

So on the women's side, they would get bored and start to chatter or to gossip. And that noise levels would rise and eventually somebody in charge would say, "Please will the women be quiet? If you want to know what the sermon was about, you'll have to ask your husbands when you get home." And Ken Bailey said he'd seen this happen in churches. It was a light bulb moment for me.

Maybe that's what was going on. I do not know. We can be quite clear that Paul doesn't mean that women must keep silence during worship, because in 1 Corinthians 11 he envisages women praying and prophesying.

And in Romans 16 he talks about women as apostles as well as deacons and so on. And Phoebe is the one delivering the letter to Rome. And clearly she's not going to be silent when she does that.

And so on and so forth. So it looks as though this is not an absolute pro, even if it is by Paul. It looks so it isn't an absolute prohibition on all women talking in worship times.

Having said all of that, the specific question that was asked was about the last phrase of verse 34, namely even as the law itself says, they should be in submission as the law itself says. Some people have said this is an oblique reference to Genesis 3.16. We don't have the same word in the Septuagint for submission, but in Genesis 3.16 it's the warning to Eve that she will want to turn towards her husband, but he will rule over you. What exactly that ruling over her means is a whole question about Genesis.

It's possible that Paul is referring to that. But some commentators, including the great Terry Thistleton, who's commentary I've got behind me as I'm sitting here, he says it's a more general reference to the ordering of creation. That throughout creation there is a wise ordering by God and that it looks as though within marriage or within the male-female relationship.

There is a kind of mutuality, but it involves the women in some position which can be said to be in submission even though clearly from the women we see in the New Testament. They are hardly submissive in the sense of shrinking violence. It's some very active and outgoing women.

I think we have to be very careful not to over interpret here. I think it's likely that Paul is referring to the Old Testament in general. He may have Genesis 3 in mind.

He's about to discuss Genesis 1, 2, and 3 in the next chapter, so it's possible that his brain is already going there. That's I think about as far as we can reasonably go. Just one final one, which is another fascinating one, but perhaps we don't think about so much because it's more about the Old Testament.

Matt in Vancouver, Washington says, "I have a question that's been bothering both my wife and I. How do you explain polygamy in the Bible? I've heard many apologists and pastors say that it is a sin, but never point out where it says that. I know the little bitical law says kings cannot have multiple wives, but what about Abraham or Jacob? Were they sinning? Furthermore, why was David or Solomon never reprimanded for having many wives? It was a sin for kings to have multiple wives. It seems as if not all sin is created equal.

It bothers me because it makes it look like women seem like property rather than beloved by God. Thanks for all your work. Greatly appreciate the podcast.

Okay. Great question. I'm not quite sure about the Levitical law saying kings can't have multiple wives, and certainly in the rest of the New Testament it doesn't seem that David and Solomon to look no further are castigated for having more than one wife.

David is castigated for having stolen somebody else's wife and having then bumped off the husband in order to try to make it legit. And Solomon is castigated because among his many wives he has foreign women and the foreign women bring their gods with them and want to set up means of worshiping their gods and they invite Solomon to join them and he does. And so that's the beginning of the end of the good times for the Davidic monarchy.

Those two things, David's adultery and then Solomon's apostasy. And it's after that that the kingdom is divided and so on. Although God's God keeps faith with David and the Davidic line goes on and ends up of course with Jesus himself.

But here's the really interesting thing and I have a chapter on this whole question in my book scripture in the authority of God because actually polygamy and monogamy is a very interesting test case in how the authority of scripture actually works. Scripture is a narrative. It's a story with a beginning, a continuation, a middle, a climax and an end.

And when people say they believe in the authority of scripture sometimes they want just to be able to find an example of somebody somewhere in the Bible who does something and say there you are it's in the Bible that's all right. Well there's a whole lot of things which are in the Bible which are not all right. And if you read the story wisely you will see that the authors of the story know that it's not all right.

And there are many cases where the authors of the story don't say by the way this is a bad example to follow you shouldn't be doing it. What they do is they let the story play out and then we see what actually happens. Like Abraham taking Hagar as well as Sarah at Sarah's behest we're not told oh what a wicked thing it was to do.

But we watch as the Isaac and Ishmael story plays out and we are left to draw our own conclusions. Ditto with with Jacob's two wives, Leah and Rachel right away we know this is not a good idea the sibling rivalry that comes in which bursts out in different ways. We are left to draw our own conclusions.

So with the stories of David and Solomon although long before David's adultery with Bathsheba he already has it seems three wives because Saul gives him Meekal his daughter as his wife. David has to leave in a hurry and Meekal is given to somebody else. David then acquires two other wives while he's still running away from Saul and nobody says that's a bad thing at the time anyway.

But then in the New Testament fascinatingly Jesus has asked the question about divorce in Mark 10 and Jesus response goes like this. Yes Moses gave you the command that you could divorce your wife but from the beginning it was not so. In the beginning God made the male and female and said so a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh and what God has joined don't you go and separate.

In other words Jesus is saying all along throughout the Old Testament you have been allowed to do various things because you were hard hearted and this was inevitable and it was going to be but we are now getting the real creation project back on track. This by the way is part of the answer when people say oh Jesus never spoke about this or that or the other. Well Jesus did say we are now people through whom and in whom the original creational purpose is to be realized and that means one man one woman for life.

So that whereas people have often said well the Old Testament was rather strict in its laws but then Jesus comes along and says it's all a matter of grace so you don't need to worry say about the Sabbath or whatever it might be that's a whole other question. Here we have the Old Testament being well okay this is okay for the moment but then in the New Testament wow we get to be people in whom God's creation is being worked out. So don't go to the Old Testament looking for examples of polygamists as though that might now be all right.

Go to what Jesus says which is that now the original creational intention is to be followed. I think that's probably as far as we can take them. It's a great place to take it and thank you very much for your thoughts on that.

It's given me plenty to think about as well actually. I really enjoyed the explanation of the way we understand the the sweep and the progression and what Jesus does is he brings you know marriage between one man and one woman. There are other

polygamists.

I mean the start of first Samuel is this chap who has two wives and his favorite doesn't have any children and the other one has lots and there's this tension. Nobody says he shouldn't have had two wives. It's kind of and Deuteronomy legislates for it.

If you have two wives you've got to call them properly but Jesus says no in the beginning that was not the intention. Thank you so much for your time again. Thank you.

I'll let you get back to your one wife and we look forward to connecting again for some more questions in the future but for now we'll bless you. Thank you for being with us for today's edition. Now is actually a good time to send in questions for future editions of the podcast.

You can do that by simply getting registered at askentiright.com. That way you receive the link to be able to submit a question. If you sign up through our US site premierinsight.org and the [askentiright](http://askentiright.com) site there you'll also get the link to be able to ask a question as well. Just a reminder as well that one of our show partners, NT Right Online, have a free ebook from Tom on the book of Acts available to podcast listeners.

Check out links from today's show if you'd like access to that. More about this show at our own website askentiright.com also in the notes and the link to our unbelievable conference 2021. You can attend live wherever you are in the world and be part of a live edition of this very show on Saturday the 15th of May.

The place to head is [unbelievable dot live](http://unbelievable.live). For now have a good week and we'll see you next time.

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