



What are Concubines in the Bible? Were They Wives or Unmarried Mistresses?

Description



There is some confusion about biblical concubines because (

to our Western minds) they often summon images of a harem from the east where a sultan had many mistresses kept for his pleasure. (*The image for this post depicts such a scene.*) However, biblical concubines weren't like those concubines, which we'll see in a minute.

Spoiler (supported Biblically below). Concubines are wives, but a specific type of wife. Thus, all biblical concubines are wives, but not all wives are concubines.

We'll get into the specific type of wife later in the article. For now, we'll establish that biblical concubines are indeed wives. Outside of the Bible and in other cultures perhaps not, but they are wives in the Bible.

(Part of the reason I'm writing this article is because I've had commenters say that God is fine with sex outside of marriage, arguing that concubines were unmarried mistresses. This article will answer that, and I have an article entitled [Yes, The Bible CLEARLY Says Sex Outside of Marriage is Wrong](#) to prove that sex outside of marriage is wrong.)

The Concubine in Judges 19

One of the more disturbing stories in the Bible begins in Judges chapter 19. It serves as an excellent

warning of how depraved man can become when he ignores God, but we'll leave the story before we get that far since it's only the intro that's relevant to the topic today. (*Plus the story goes until the end of Judges, so it's quite long.*)

Judges 19:1-10

1 Now it came about in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that **there was a certain Levite** staying in the remote part of the hill country of Ephraim, **who took a concubine for himself** from Bethlehem in Judah.

2 But **his concubine played the harlot against him, and she went away from him to her father's** house in Bethlehem in Judah, and was there for a period of four months.

3 Then **her husband** arose and went after her to speak tenderly to her in order to bring her back, taking with him his servant and a pair of donkeys. So she brought him into her father's house, and when the girl's father saw him, he was glad to meet him.

4 **His father-in-law, the girl's father, detained him**; and he remained with him three days. So they ate and drank and lodged there.

5 Now on the fourth day they got up early in the morning, and he prepared to go; and **the girl's father said to his son-in-law**, "Sustain yourself with a piece of bread, and afterward you may go."

6 So both of them sat down and ate and drank together; and the girl's father said to the man, "Please be willing to spend the night, and let your heart be merry."

7 Then **the man arose to go, but his father-in-law urged him** so that he spent the night there again.

8 On the fifth day he arose to go early in the morning, and the girl's father said, "Please sustain yourself, and wait until afternoon"; so both of them ate.

9 **When the man arose to go along with his concubine and servant, his father-in-law, the girl's father**, said to him, "Behold now, the day has drawn to a close; please spend the night. Lo, the day is coming to an end; spend the night here that your heart may be merry. Then tomorrow you may arise early for your journey so that you may go home."

10 But the man was not willing to spend the night, so he arose and departed and came to a place opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). And there were with him a pair of saddled donkeys; his concubine also was with him.

Hopefully, that passage cleared it up for you that concubines are wives. If not, We'll look at the original words to make the case ironclad for the skeptics

The word translated “husband”

Now, the word translated “husband” in verse 3 is “?????” ([ish](#), pronounced “eesh”). It’s also used in Genesis 3:16:

Genesis 3:16

To the woman He said, “I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, In pain you will bring forth children; Yet your desire will be for your **husband (ish)**, And he will rule over you.”

It’s used over 2000 times in the Old Testament and most of the time, it’s translated “man/men”. However, it can also mean “husband” as you just saw, and there are plenty of other examples. One clear example is Leah saying various forms of “*now my **husband (ish)** will love me*” after she had given birth to her various children in Genesis 29:32, Genesis 29:34, Genesis 30:18, and Genesis 30:20.

The word simply means a man, married or not.

The context tells you if “husband” was intended, and here it clearly seems to be. Some skeptics might not accept this as evidence, and that’s fine because there’s plenty more evidence.

The words translated “son-in-law” and “father-in-law”

Now, the word translated “son-in-law” is very telling. It’s the word “?????” ([chathan](#)), and here’s the definition #1 in the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon:

1 in relation to a father, daughter’s husband, or bridegroom

2 in relation to the bride, bridegroom

That the word means “son-in-law” is crystal clear, and being a son-in-law obviously requires marriage. Thus, the concubine was the man’s wife.

The word translated “father-in-law” is equally clear. It’s the word “?????” ([chathan](#)), which confusingly *seems* like it’s the exact same word as above. However, this one is #2859 and a verb (*usually used as a noun*), whereas the previous one is #2860 and is an actual noun. They are different in use because of the way Hebrew works, but I won’t explain because you’re not here for a Hebrew lesson. (*You can follow the links to verify definitions.*)

Anyway, the definition is:

1. **masculine** wife's father

2. **feminine** wife's mother

So when it's inflected as a masculine word, it means the "wife's father", when inflected as feminine it means "wife's mother". It's masculine in this verse, hence the translation of "father-in-law".

Thus, since the concubine's husband was her father's son-in-law, and since the concubine's father was her husband's father-in-law, then the concubine was obviously married to her husband. I know this seems painfully obvious, but I often get pushback from those who want to say that the existence of concubines in the Bible indicates that God approves of sex outside of marriage.

He doesn't.

Again, I have [a whole article devoted to that topic](#) which you can read if you are in doubt.

Keturah, Abraham's Third wife

We know almost nothing about her other than the two verses below, but Abraham did get married again after Sarah died in Genesis 23. The woman's name was Keturah and here's what scripture says:

Genesis 25:1-5

1 Now Abraham took another **wife**, whose name was Keturah.

2 She bore to him Zimran and Jokshan and Medan and Midian and Ishbak and Shuah.

3 Jokshan became the father of Sheba and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim and Letushim and Leummim.

4 The sons of Midian were Ephah and Epher and Hanoch and Abida and Eldaah. All these were the sons of Keturah.

5 Now Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac;

6 but **to the sons of his concubines**, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east.

Notice that in verse 6, Abraham had "concubines". Plural. Remember that because we'll come back to it in a moment.

Now, everything we saw about the word translated "husband" in Judges 19 also applies to the word translated "wife" in verse 1 above. The word is "???????" ([ishshah](#), pronounced "ish-shaw"). Pretty much every lexicon had the exact same basic definition:

woman, wife, female

It means a woman, married or unmarried, but context determines the intent. To “take in marriage” is a common phrase in the Old Testament, and it’s used in the New Testament as well. The definition for the word translated “take” here — “?????” ([laqach](#)) — recognizes this:

e. **especially take in marriage**: (l) for another, especially a son, with ??, ?????????????? ??????? ????????, Genesis 24:4 and **thou shalt take a wife or my son**, so Genesis 24:7; Genesis 24:38; Genesis 24:40; Genesis 24:48 (all J), Genesis 21:21 (E), Jeremiah 29:6b; (2) **more often for oneself**, usually with ?? reflexive (sometimes + ???????????), Genesis 4:19; Genesis 6:2; Genesis 11:29; Genesis 12:19 (all J), + often; without ?? Genesis 20:2,3(E), etc.

So Keturah was definitely Abraham’s wife. She is mentioned in only one other place, and importantly she’s called a wife in Genesis but a concubine in this next passage.

1 Chronicles 1:28-33

28 The sons of Abraham were Isaac and Ishmael.

29 These are their genealogies: the firstborn of Ishmael was Nebaioth, then Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam,

30 Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema,

31 Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah; these were the sons of Ishmael.

32 The sons of **Keturah, Abraham’s concubine, whom she bore**, were Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah. And the sons of Jokshan were Sheba and Dedan.

33 The sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abida and Eldaah. All these were the sons of Keturah

Again, Keturah is called a wife in Genesis and a concubine in 1 Chronicles. This should make it fairly obvious that she was indeed Abraham’s wife, and also his concubine.

Thus, concubines are indeed wives.

Remember that Genesis 25:6 talks about Abraham’s “concubines”, and notice that it’s plural. Thus, Abraham had (*at least*) two concubines. The obvious candidates are Hagar and Keturah. I’m glad we have the Chronicles passage to make things crystal clear, but even without it, it seems like Genesis 25 calls Keturah both a wife and concubine in the same chapter.

This clarifies that Hagar was indeed a concubine. This is actually an important point for several reasons unrelated to our topic. However, I want to keep this article short and focused so we won’t go into it more today. (*I hope to write a follow-up article about biblical betrothal vs modern engagement because the two are nothing alike. Hagar will be somewhat important there.*)

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“So what type of wife is a concubine?”

The short answer is, usually a wife who was also a slave. From encyclopedia.com:

The Biblical references to concubines are confined to the Old Testament and connote an institution that was an offshoot of polygamy. **The English word concubine may give a false connotation, suggesting a kept mistress. In reality, a concubine was a genuine wife. She was not a woman who cohabited with a man while unmarried to him.** In the family the concubine held an intermediate place between the wife of first rank and an ordinary slave. **In most cases she was a slave raised to a higher dignity by marriage to the master** (Gn 16.3). The concubine held position as a wife of inferior or secondary rank.

[Source.](#)

Now, as is always the case when slavery in the Bible comes up, I want to make it clear that “slavery” in the Bible isn’t what most Westerners think of these days. It would be more accurately called “indentured servitude” and was for a limited period of time and **the “slave” went free after that limited time and God commanded that he be released with a bunch of valuable “stuff”**. It effectively functioned as the Hebrew “bankruptcy system” so someone who was destitute wouldn’t die of starvation or exposure.

(And yes, I realize I’m skipping all kinds of nuance and some exceptions, mostly because that’s not this article’s topic.)

If you want more information on that, [Mike Winger has a video on YouTube](#) that does a pretty good job of giving an overview. I keep wanting to write an article on the topic that would go into more detail than he does, but my time is quite limited right now.

Now, swinging back to the topic of concubines, they are indeed wives.

I hope this is obvious from what we’ve covered.

An Addendum (or three)

Now, I probably should just leave this article here. However, people will probably ask about a few topics in the comments, so let me preemptively answer a few questions that will probably come up.

Some people will say that it’s still wrong because concubines didn’t have equal legal protections as “normal” wives. Actually, despite a concubine being a lower-status wife, they were given full legal protection under the Mosaic Law. *(You could even argue that they had more legal protection.)* I go into a bit of detail on this in [my monster-length article on divorce](#), at least as it concerns a concubine’s ability to get a divorce if she was mistreated. Please see that article for details.

Additionally, someone will likely say that a man marrying a concubine in addition to an existing wife/concubine means that the man is committing adultery, so it's still wrong. However, there are two problems with that argument. First, nothing stopped a man in biblical times from having a concubine as his only wife. The (*horribly wicked*) man in Judges 19 appeared to only have one wife, the concubine in the story, so that's certainly possible.

The second problem is one of definition. I have an article entitled: [What Jesus Meant by Adultery in Matthew Chapters 5 and 19](#) that goes into detail, so I'll just give the highlights here and you can check the article for the evidence.

Biblical adultery only occurs when a man (*married or unmarried*) has sex with another man's wife. If a married man has sex with an unmarried woman, that's the (*deadly serious*) sin of fornication, not adultery. **God promises to judge both adulterers and fornicators in Hebrews 13:4. Just like rape and murder are both deadly serious sins but not the same sin, likewise adultery and fornication are both serious sins but not always the same sin.**

(*Technically, all adultery is fornication, but not all fornication is adultery. Both are extremely serious sins.*)

Lastly, someone will probably bring up the topic of polygamy and ask how concubines figure in. I'll direct you to [my article on polygamy](#) if you have questions about that.

Conclusion

Concubines were wives. Any attempt to say that they weren't fails rather spectacularly given the passages above. Thus, the men who had them weren't having sex outside of marriage. Concubines had a lower social status than "normal" wives and most often were slaves, but they had full legal protection under the Mosaic Law.