

# Voices: The Bible and interracial marriage

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Many people wonder what the Bible says about interracial marriage. There were the days when many here in America would have been convinced they would be doing God's will were they to kill interracial couples. Thankfully, those days are behind us. But what does the Bible say about interracial marriage?

## Old Testament prohibition

A key passage to consider is Deuteronomy 7:2-4. As the Israelites were poised to take over the Promised Land militarily, God commanded them not to intermarry with the inhabitants of the land of Canaan.

"And when the Lord your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. *For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods*" (emphasis added).

This prohibition is what often is misinterpreted to mean the Bible condemns interracial marriage.

That interpretation ignores verse 4, which clearly gives the reason for the prohibition: "for they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods." God prohibited the Israelites from intermarrying with the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, not to preserve the purity of their race, but to preserve the purity of their faith.

The inhabitants of the land of Canaan were idol worshipers, and God did not want them to contaminate the faith of the Israelites. It would be easier for the idol worshipers to pull the Israelites down to their false worship as opposed to the Israelites pulling them up to worship the Almighty God.

## **New Testament prohibition**

The prohibition, therefore, can be described more aptly as the prohibition of interfaith marriage. It was no different from what later would be Paul's admonition to the Corinthians. The passage is worth quoting at length:

*"Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:*

*'I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'*

Therefore, 'Come out from among them and be separate,' says the Lord. 'Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters,' says the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:14-18, emphasis added).

## **A cautionary example**

Solomon was the prime example of someone who paid no regard to this warning. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, for a total of 1,000 women. The height of the foolishness of this proverbially wise man was not simply the fact he married a ridiculous number of wives—as bad as that was—nor was it simply because they were mostly foreign women, but

because they were mostly idol-worshipping women. The Bible makes that clear:

“But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites—from the nations of whom the Lord had said to the children of Israel, ‘You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. *Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods.*’ Solomon clung to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; *and his wives turned away his heart*” (1 Kings 11:1-3, emphases added).

## What of Rahab and Ruth?

The fact God placed Rahab and Ruth in the ancestral line of our Lord should be instructive (see Matthew 1:5). Rahab was a prostitute from Jericho, where they worshiped idols. But she could declare to the Israelite spies Joshua sent to Jericho, “The Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (Joshua 2:11).

Similarly, Ruth was from Moab, where they worshiped idols (Naomi did urge Ruth and Orpah to go back to their people and their gods.). But she came to the point of realization that the God of Israel was the only true God. She therefore could promise Naomi, “Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God” (Ruth 1:16).

The fact Rahab and Ruth were foreign women did not make God frown on their marriages to Israelite men. In a dramatic way, God placed his stamp of approval on their marriages by putting them in the ancestral line of our Lord, for each of them had placed her faith in the Almighty God.

# Nehemiah's mistake

The misinterpretation of God's prohibition of interfaith marriage as the prohibition of interracial marriage goes back to biblical times. In Nehemiah's reform, he did not distinguish clearly between marrying foreign women and marrying pagan women. He appeared to lump the two together and, therefore, condemn both of them (see Nehemiah 13:23-31). That was a mistake by a sincere and zealous man.

Nehemiah reacted strongly, even violently, to the fact many children of interracial marriages were unable to speak Hebrew, while they could speak the language of Ashdod (see Nehemiah 13:24).

Nehemiah said in his memoirs: "So, I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God" (Nehemiah 13:25). Like Nehemiah, many people have made mistakes while sincerely "fighting for God."

We, therefore, can say categorically that the Bible does not condemn interracial marriage.

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