How many wives did Jacob have? Is polygamy really Biblical?

(Note: Yes, I do understand that it is actually called polygyny when a man has multiple wives, and polygamy can be either male or female but for purposes of using a familiar term to everyone I am simplifying this by calling it polygamy)

To the modern proponents of polygamy (as opposed to Biblical polygamy, which was entirely different), our forefather Jacob is the shining example – after all, he had four wives right? Well, that’s what I thought for many years as well and it was no wonder – I was looking through a lens colored by modern movies, television shows, and ten years spent living in uber-Mormon southern Idaho. One of the hardest things there is, is to contemplate the possibility that our point of view has been utterly contaminated – after all, they never taught ancient Near Eastern context in any of the churches I attended. I had no idea about what dyadic social identity was all about, or concubinage, and although I did understand the importance of political marriages (Solomon did NOT need that many alliances, just sayin’) I was way too caught up in idea that “black Mormons” (not meaning color, but it was just what they were called in my neck of the woods) represented a sort of an ideal Biblical model for what was going on in ancient times. Even though I never watched either “Big Love” or “Sister Wives,” I knew about people who lived like this and I will bet that anyone who lives in certain parts of certain western states can tell you the same thing. But like everything else, modern context is not Biblical context – we don’t think the same way
or have the same needs and therefore we don’t live the same way; we certainly don’t have the same expectations.

So Genesis 30 is what I was teaching my boys yesterday morning. I put up the white board and I was marking out the family tree of the patriarchs. Every time a son was born I asked my boys to tell me who the sons belonged to and it worked fine until we got to Dan. “Who is Dan’s mom?” I asked. “Bilhah,” they replied. I smiled, and told them to listen again.

“Rachel is his mom,” one of them gasped. I smiled. We passed on to Zilpah, and they noticed it again — “Gad is Leah’s son!”

“Very good,” I smiled. “Now why? The text says that they are Jacob’s wives, and yet wives would retain ownership over their own children, so how can they be actual wives?”

The problem lies in the fact that the Hebrew word for wife, ‘isha,’ is also the generic word for woman (we see this same phenomenon in Greek), and so Bilhah and Zilpah were given to Jacob as women who were there for the express purpose of bearing children — otherwise known as concubines. In the ancient Near East, according to the laws of many of the surrounding nations, a woman had two years to bear a child to her husband and if she didn’t, she could legally be divorced. Families desperately needed heirs, and the dyadic social identity of a woman depended on her being not only a wife, but also a mother — it simply didn’t matter if your husband loved you best, if you had no children — Rachel knew that (so did Sarah, Rebekah, Hannah and Elizabeth). What Leah knew was that her husband, although she had given him many sons, had no regard for her — Jewish tradition even states that Jacob moved to Bilhah’s tent after the death of Rachel (I don’t think he ever got over that anger from the morning after the wedding). Both women had a crisis of identity — Rachel wasn’t a mother and Leah wasn’t really a wife in her own eyes. Rachel had the perfectly acceptable legal recourse in those days to provide
her husband with a surrogate, and according to the laws of the surrounding nations, any child borne by the concubine would be counted as coming from her – which is exactly why Rachel, and not Bilhah, named the boys.

When Rachel had successfully provided Jacob with an heir, Leah felt her position was tenuous. She was no longer the mother of all of Jacob’s children – Rachel had a child now and she was the one who was truly regarded, by Jacob, as his wife. On top of all this, Leah had stopped bearing children – perhaps because Jacob was no longer performing his legal obligations to continue to provide her with marital relations (at one point, she actually had to buy a night with him from her sister). Because she was now barren (for whatever reason), she was in the legal position to give her own maidservant to Jacob as another woman, concubine. As with Bilhah’s offspring, Zilpah’s children are claimed and named by Leah as her own. This was the legal world and social context of the time of the Patriarchs. Although Bilhah’s and Zilpah’s children ranked lower than Leah’s biological children (as Joseph will prove with his behavior later on) and Rachel’s future children, they were officially counted as the sons of the wives, not as the sons of the concubines. We think of it differently, because we simply cannot imagine a maidservant being willing or even eager to consent to such an arrangement but when we look at it in terms of the times you will see a poor woman who was a servant, probably sold by her impoverished father to Laban’s family because he had no money to get her married off – not out of coldness but because if he died without seeing her provided for her only options were starvation or prostitution; she was resigned to perhaps never marrying, or if she did it would be to another servant, to give birth to servants. Really Bilhah’s and Zilpah’s lives would have looked bleak but they would have accepted it as their lot in life – in ancient times people firmly believed that their conditions and station in life were pre-determined by the gods and hardly worth complaining about or trying to get out of. They were survival
oriented, and so when greeted with the opportunity to be something greater in the family, not wives but the mothers of some of the heirs of the House, that was a chance to have a much better life and better prospects for the future.

So, did Jacob have four legally wedded wives? No, he had two (and not by his choosing) wives and two concubines – four women to whom he was connected through children. As we progress through the stories about Jacob and his family, you will notice that his wives are respectfully addressed by name while Bilhah and Zilpah are repeatedly called, ‘the maidservants.’ Culturally, they were never elevated to the level of either Leah or Rachel – and they probably never expected to be. When Jacob calls his wives to him in Gen thirty-one – only Leah and Rachel are named. When they flee Laban in chapter thirty-two, verse twenty-two specifically mentions two wives and two female servants, and again in thirty-three verse one, Leah and Rachel are named, along with the ‘two female servants.’ In chapter thirty-five, after Rachel’s death, Reuben is specifically stated to have had sexual relations with his father’s concubine.

To add to the distinction within the family, in chapter thirty-seven, when Joseph goes tattling on his brothers, it specifically mentions that they are the sons of the ‘neshe’ Bilhah and Zilpah. That’s an interesting word, because although the lemma is the same isha as I discussed above – neshe is tied in to the idea of a debt. As Bilhah and Zilpah were almost undoubtedly purchased by Laban as young girls from fathers who either needed to pay debts or who could not afford to provide dowries, this term does make sense – again, these were women of a special class.

Although this very well may offend our modern sensibilities, Zilpah and Bilhah had a better life than they had hoped for, in the end. And as for Jacob, he never intended to have any other wife but Rachel and only ended up in this polygamous situation because of trickery – he chose to be a polygamist.
because it would seem that a man who was willing to work a grand total of fourteen years for a woman evidently could not imagine living without her. Abraham had one wife, and then only took a concubine when she was still barren at 80; he took a second wife only after the death of his first. Isaac had one wife. Elkannah had two women but again, one of them was barren so I suspect that Peninah was a concubine. As for kings – marriages were largely about political alliances (especially with David who was shoring up support with the various tribes as well as maintaining his connection with Saul’s royal line), except for Solomon, who was…. well, that did go well. The other polygamists in Scripture were Lamech (a descendant of Cain who killed a guy) and Esau (who… well he was Esau, nuff said) – we don’t see any of the twelve sons of Jacob having multiple wives, Moses, Joshua, Caleb, the Judges (not even Sampson) or the prophets. It simply was a rarity.

To sum up, true Biblical (as well as ancient Near Eastern) polygamy (having more than one wife on purpose) was really limited to Kings, and that was historically for the purpose of creating alliances and safety for the kingdom. It served a specific societal function within a context that no longer exists (much like the need for Levirate marriage). Paul even specifically said that male leadership within the Body was to be limited to those men who only had one wife (I Tim 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). So if someone is pushing polygamy, know that according to Paul (an expert in the Law and in the Scriptures) they have disqualified themselves for leadership – rendering their opinion merely an opinion.

Edit: I have been getting some great questions so I will share my answers.

What happens when a man is required to take his dead brother’s wife, if he is already married Deut 25:5?

The levirate marriage was for the purpose of providing a woman with offspring and so if a man was already married, he could
still perform the levirate function and she would be provided for with her dead husband’s share of the inheritance, which then belongs to her son (or daughter, because the Torah also says that if a man dies and has only daughters they can inherit so that his name and inheritance will not pass from Israel). Levirate marriage served two functions – that a man’s name would not cease to go forward and that a woman would not be bereft of support. This would not be a true case of polygamy, because his intention was not to have two wives, but to provide for his sister-in-law – it was considered a mitzvah towards the dead brother as well as to the woman – to refuse to do this for her at her request would be to deprive her of her rights within the family. Her father contracted with her husband’s father that she would be a wife in that house, that she would provide heirs to the house who would have rights to his share of the inheritance. His death does not change the family’s obligation towards her. Hope that makes sense.

Deut 21:15 says that if a man has two wives, one loved and one unloved that he cannot disinherit the child of the unloved wife – doesn’t this say that men can have two wives?

Part of the problem with that verse is that it is almost always separated from the context of the verses before it – the case of the woman taken as a prisoner of war, brought into a man’s home and taken as a wife. If later he is disgusted with her (after all, she was from a pagan nation), he cannot treat her as a slave and simply sell her away but must treat her as he would treat a divorced wife. He has humbled her (had sexual relations with her) and cannot sell her to another man, he must allow her to go out for nothing (she came in with no dowry). Now we get to your verse – if he sends her away and she has provided him with children – despite the fact that he hates her he cannot treat her sons with contempt when it comes time to give the inheritance. The first born of this union is still his firstborn even after he marries another woman, loves her, and has children with her. I think some
translators/editors have erred when they separate the two sections.

Could Paul have been saying that the husband and wife need to be one (Hebrew echad) instead of limiting a man to one wife?

The word used by for echad in the LXX (Septuagint, the authorized Greek translation of the Tanach – OT) and the NT (ie. John 10:30) is ‘hen’ and the word used by Paul in those instances is mia. The words do not share the same lemma and so are unrelated.

What about the “Ethiopian” woman that Moses took as a wife in Numbers 12:1?

There is much confusion about the word ‘Cush’ in Scripture – the first being that it does not actually refer to Ethiopia at all but instead a region more in the Sudan. However there are two separate lands related to the epithet ‘Cush.’ Kusite and Kusan are both used and they are spelled almost exactly the same – the only difference being a tav vs a nun at the end of the word. Habakkuk 3:7, in a paralellism (a literary device where something is said twice, slightly differently, in such a way as to equate two concepts), says this of Cushan

I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.

Cushan and Midian are equated with each other, as are tents and curtains and affliction and trembling. As Zipporah was a Midianite, calling her a Kusite makes absolute sense.

Sources:

Laws of Hammurabi:
[144] If a man take a wife and this woman give her husband a maid-servant, and she bear him children, but this man wishes to take another wife, this shall not be permitted to him; he shall not take a second wife. (clearly, the reference to a
second wife shows that the concubine is not a wife)

[145] If a man take a wife, and she bear him no children, and he intend to take another wife: if he take this second wife, and bring her into the house, this second wife shall not be allowed equality with his wife. (note that the second wife is only permissibly taken in response to barrenness)

[146] If a man take a wife and she give this man a maid-servant as wife and she bear him children, and then this maid assume equality with the wife: because she has borne him children her master shall not sell her for money, but he may keep her as a slave, reckoning her among the maid-servants. (notice that she is given the same treatment as a wife but is not a wife)

[147] If she have not borne him children, then her mistress may sell her for money. (obviously would not happen to a wife)

For an excellent read on many matters pertaining to women in the Bible (not all of which I agree with, of course), see Matthews, Victor H., Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East (1998) p 229 is directly relevant to this discussion.