

Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by
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CHAPTER FOURTEEN - Marriage Customs

POLYGAMY IN OLD TESTAMENT TIMES

THE MOSAIC LAW allowed polygamy among the Hebrew people. Wives were given certain protections against abuses and there were various regulations regarding such marriages. There was, however, among the Israelites, a marked tendency toward monogamy. No doubt the main reason for this was that the custom of more than one wife was too expensive for most of the people.¹

The law did forbid the multiplication of wives by the kings of Israel (Deuteronomy 17:17). The cause of much of the trouble, in the lives of David and Solomon, as well as Ahab, was because of their following the example of the kings of their day in taking many, and especially heathen wives, rather than obeying GOD's law.

Old Testament influence in favor of monogamy is seen in two ways. First, pictures are painted of unhappy homes because of more than one wife in them. Trouble between rival wives, as in the case of Leah and Rachel (Genesis 30) and also Hannah and Peninnah (I Samuel 1:1-6) argues strongly in favor of monogamy. Second, monogamy among religious leaders and certain outstanding characters, sets the right example for the masses. Men like Adam, Noah, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, and Job, had but one wife. Also the high priest (Leviticus 21:14), and the prophets were, as far as we know, monogamous.²

DIVORCE IN OLD TESTAMENT TIMES

For centuries it has been possible for a husband in Arab lands, to divorce his wife by a spoken word. The wife thus divorced is entitled to all her wearing apparel, and the husband cannot take from her anything she has upon her own person. For this reason, coins on the headgear, and rings and necklaces, become important wealth in the hour of the divorced woman's great need. This is one reason why there is so much interest in the bride's personal adornment in Eastern countries. Such customs of divorce were no doubt prevalent in Gentile lands in Old Testament times. It was for this reason that the Law of Moses limited the power of the husband to divorce his wife, by requiring that he must give her a written bill of divorcement (Deuteronomy 24:1). Thus the Jewish custom of divorce was superior to the Arabic.³

It is important to remember that the sin of adultery did not have anything to do with the matter of divorce under the Jewish law. That sin was punishable by death (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22), and that by stoning. If a husband found any unseemly thing in his wife, he could give her a written bill of divorcement, which made it possible for her to marry another man (Deuteronomy 24:2).

A man guilty of unfaithfulness was considered to be a criminal only in that he had invaded the rights of another man. A woman was not allowed to divorce her husband. The prophet Malachi taught that GOD hated "**putting away**" and condemned severely any man who dealt treacherously with the wife of his covenant (Malachi 2:14-16). Such was the attitude of the Hebrew people on the subject of divorce.⁴

The LORD JESUS swept away all grounds for divorce under the Law, and made unfaithfulness the lone grounds for divorce under the Christian dispensation (Matthew 5:31, 32).

CHOICE OF A WIFE THE PARENTS' PREROGATIVE

It is well known that in the East the parents of a young man select a bride for him. This custom goes back to early Old Testament times. When Esau married against the wishes of his parents, he caused ill-favor (Genesis 26:34, 35).

Reason for this parental privilege. Why did parents usually insist on their right to select a bride for their son? The new bride was to become a member of the bridegroom's clan, and therefore, the whole family was interested in knowing if she would be suitable. There is evidence that at least sometimes the son or daughter was consulted. Rebekah was asked if she was willing to go and become the wife of Isaac (Genesis 24:58). But the parents felt they had a right to make the choice.⁵

Love after marriage. Oriental look at the love between husband and wife very much as Occidentals would look at love between a brother and a sister. It is indicated that the former should love each other because GOD chose them for each other. Orientals would say that husband and wife love each other, because GOD through the parents, selected them for each other. In other words, the usual Oriental idea is that love comes after marriage.⁶

When Isaac and Rebekah were married, they had never seen each other before. Yet the Sacred Record says, "**Isaac brought her into his mother's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her**" (Genesis 24:67).

Love before marriage. Although it is true that most Oriental couples have no opportunity for love before marriage, yet the Bible gives some examples of that sort of love, that are worthy of note. The case of Jacob and Rachel is the most noted illustration of this. With him it was love at first sight (Genesis 29:10-18). Genesis describes his love for her with these memorable words: "**And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her**" (verse 20). Other examples of love before marriage would include Samson who loved "**a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines**" (Judges 14:2), and "**Michal, Saul's daughter, who loved David,**" and afterwards became his wife (I Samuel 18:20).

CONDUCTING NEGOTIATIONS TO SECURE A WIFE

The customs of the Arabs in certain sections of Bible lands when they negotiate to secure a bride for their son, illustrate in many respects Biblical practices. If a young man has acquired

sufficient means to make it possible for him to provide a marriage dowry, then his parents select the girl and the negotiations begin.⁷

The father calls in a man who acts as a deputy for him and the son. This deputy is called, "the friend of the bridegroom" by John the Baptist (John 3:29). This man is fully informed as to the dowry the young man is willing to pay for his bride. Then, together with the young man's father, or some other male relative, or both, he goes to the home of the young woman. The father announces that the deputy will speak for the party, and then the bride's father will appoint a deputy to represent him.

Before the negotiations begin, a drink of coffee is offered the visiting group, but they refuse to drink until the mission is completed. Thus Abraham's servant, when offered food by the parents of Rebekah, said, "**I will not eat, until I have told mine errand**" (Genesis 24:33).

When the two deputies face each other, then the negotiations begin in earnest. There must be consent for the hand of the young woman and agreement on the amount of dowry to be paid for her. When these are agreed upon, the deputies rise and their congratulations are exchanged, and then coffee is brought in, and they all drink of it as a seal of the covenant thus entered into.⁸

THE MARRIAGE DOWRY

Reason for dowry for bride's family. In the Orient, when the bride's parents give their daughter in marriage, they are actually diminishing the efficiency of their family. Often unmarried daughters would tend the flock of their father (Exodus 2:16), or they would work in the field, or render help in other ways. Thus upon her marriage, a young woman would be thought of as increasing the efficiency of her husband's family and diminishing that of her parents. Therefore, a young man who expects to get possession of their daughter must be able to offer some sort of adequate compensation. This compensation was the marriage "dowry."⁹

It was not always required that the dowry be paid in cash, it could be paid in service. Because Jacob could not pay cash, he said, "**I will serve thee seven years for Rachel**" (Genesis 29:18). King Saul required the lives of one hundred of the enemy Philistines as dowry for David to secure Michal as his wife (I Samuel 18:25).

Reason for dowry for the bride herself. It was usually customary for at least some of the price of the dowry to be given to the bride. This would be in addition to any personal gift from the bride's parents. Leah and Rachel complained about the stinginess of their father Laban. Concerning him they said, "**He hath sold us, and hath quite devoured also our money**" (Genesis 31:15). Laban had had the benefit of Jacob's fourteen years of service, without making the equivalent of at least part of it as a gift to Leah and Rachel.¹⁰

Since a divorced wife in the Orient is entitled to all her wearing apparel, for this reason much of her personal dowry consists of coins on her headgear, or jewelry on her person. This becomes wealth to her in case her marriage ends in failure. This is why the dowry is so important to the bride, and such emphasis is placed upon it in the negotiations that precede marriage.¹¹

The woman who had ten pieces of silver and lost one was greatly concerned over the loss,

because it was doubtless a part of her marriage dowry (Luke 15:8,9).

Special dowry from the bride's father. It was customary for fathers who could afford to do so to give their daughters a special marriage dowry. When Rebekah left her father's house to be the bride of Isaac, her father gave her a nurse and also damsels who were to be her attendants (Genesis 24:59, 61).

And Caleb gave to his daughter a dowry of a field with springs of water (Judges 1:15). Such was sometimes the custom in olden times.¹²

THE BETROTHAL

Difference between a promise and a betrothal. A promise of marriage among the Jews of Bible times might mean an engagement without anything definite. There could be a number of engagements broken off. It was the betrothal that was binding, rather than a mere promise of marriage. The promise might be set aside, but a betrothal entered into was considered as final.¹³

The betrothal a covenant. Among the ancient Hebrews the betrothal was a spoken covenant. Ezekiel pictures GOD as marrying Jerusalem, and the following words are used of her: "**I swear unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the LORD GOD, and thou becamest mine**" (Ezekiel 16:8). After the exile, the betrothal included signing a written document of marriage.¹⁴

The ceremony of betrothal. The Jewish betrothal in CHRIST's time was conducted thus: The families of the bride and groom met, with some others present to serve as witnesses. The young man would give the young woman either a gold ring, or some article of value, or simply a document in which he promised to marry her. Then he would say to her: "See by this ring [or this token] thou art set apart for me, according to the law of Moses and of Israel."¹⁵

Difference between betrothal and marriage. The betrothal was not the same as the wedding. At least a whole year elapsed between the betrothal and the actual wedding. These two events must not be confused.¹⁶

The Law said, "**What man is there that hath betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her?**" (Deuteronomy 20:7). Two events are differentiated here: betrothing a wife, and taking a wife, i.e., in actual marriage. It was during this period of about a year, between the betrothal and the wedding, that Mary was found to be with child of the HOLY SPIRIT (Matthew 7:18).

THE APPAREL OF GROOM AND BRIDE

When the night arrived for the wedding festivities to begin, and it was time to go for the bride, the groom was dressed as much like a king as possible. If he were rich enough to afford it, he wore a gold crown. Otherwise it would be a garland of fresh flowers. His garments would be scented with frankincense and myrrh, his girdle would be a silken one brilliantly colored, his sandals would be figured and carefully laced, and all of this would give effect to the "flowing drapery of the loose robes and to the graceful bearing peculiar to the lands of the East. For the time, the peasant seemed a prince among his fellows) and all paid him the deference due to

exalted rank."¹⁷

This preparation of the groom for the wedding has been aptly described in the prophecy of Isaiah, "**He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments**" (Isaiah 61:10).

The adorning of the bride, was a very costly and elaborate affair. Much time was given to the preparation of her person. Every effort was put forth to make her complexion glossy and shining with a luster like unto marble. The words of David must have been their ideal for her: "**that our daughters may be as corner stones, polished after the similitude of a palace**" (Psalm 144:12). Her dark locks of hair were often braided with gold and pearls. She was decked with all the precious stones and jewels that the family had inherited from previous generations. Those who were too poor to afford much themselves would borrow what they could from their friends.¹⁸

The wedding festivities, and especially the bride's adornment, would always be remembered by her. The prophet Jeremiah made reference to this thought, "**Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire?**" (Jeremiah 2:32). The Apostle John saw New Jerusalem "**prepared as a bride adorned for her husband**" (Revelation 21:2).

GOING OF THE GROOM TO GET THE BRIDE

Sometimes the bride's relations would conduct her from her father's house to the house of her fiancée, where her new home was to be. But more often, as was the case of the Ten Virgins in CHRIST's parable, the bridegroom himself went in person to bring her to his home for the wedding festivities to take place there.

Before leaving the house that had been her home, she would receive the blessing of her relatives. Thus Rebekah's relatives sent her away with a typical Oriental marriage blessing, "**Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them**" (Genesis 24:60). The bride left her father's house adorned and perfumed, and with a crown on her head.¹⁹

Ezekiel's description of the bride is very appropriate) "**I decked thee also with ornaments, and I put bracelets upon thy hands, and a chain on thy neck. And I put a jewel on thy forehead, and earrings in thine ears, and a beautiful crown upon thine head**" (Ezekiel 16:11, 12).

THE WEDDING PROCESSION

The bridegroom set out with the bride from the house of her parents, and there followed a grand procession all the way to his house. The streets of Asiatic cities were dark, and it was necessary that anybody venturing forth at night should carry a lamp or torch (cf. Psalm 119:105). Those invited guests, who did not go to the bride's home were allowed to join the procession along the way, and go with the whole group to the marriage feast. Without a torch or lamp they couldn't join the procession, or enter the bridegroom's house.²⁰

The Ten Virgins waited for the procession to arrive at the point where they were waiting; and

five wise ones were able to proceed because they had a reserve supply of oil for their lamps; but the foolish virgins lacked that oil and so, not being ready, they were barred from the wedding feast (Matthew 25:1-13).

The lamps carried by these virgins have been described by Dr. Edersheim:

"The lamps consisted of a round receptacle for pitch or oil for the wick. This was placed in a hollow cup or deep saucer, . . . which was fastened by a pointed end into a long wooden pole, on which it was borne aloft.²¹

In going from the bride's house to the groom's house, the bride allowed her hair to be loose and flowing, and she had her face veiled. Some of her own relations preceded her in the procession, and scattered ears of parched grain to the children along the way. There were demonstrations of joy all along the road to the destination. Part of the procession included men who played on drums or other musical instruments. And there was dancing along the way.²²

One of the punishments Jeremiah predicted for the Jews, because of their sins, was the taking away of wedding joys. **"Then will I cause to cease from the cities of Judah, and from the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride"** (Jeremiah 7:34).

ARRIVAL AT THE HOUSE OF THE BRIDEGROOM

The most important moment of the entire marriage festivity was that in which the bride entered her new home.²³

And as both groom and bride usually wore crowns, the Psalmist must have pictured this important moment in the marriage of the king:

"She shall be brought unto the king in raiment of needlework: the virgins her companions that follow her shall be brought unto thee. With gladness and rejoicing shall they be brought: they shall enter into the king's palace" (Psalm 45:14-15).

After arriving at the bridegroom's house, some of the older women had the task of arranging the bride's hair. Her flowing locks were hidden beneath a thick veil. From this time on, the custom would dictate that her face was not to be unveiled in public. She was led to her place under a canopy, which was located either inside the house, or if the weather permitted, in the open air. Her place was beside her husband, where both would hear new words of benediction given by one of the fathers, or by some important person who might be present.²⁴

In the wedding at Cana of Galilee, JESUS was the most prominent guest present, and doubtless He was asked to pronounce His benediction upon the newlyweds (John 2:1-11).

THE WEDDING FEAST

Every guest that attended the feast was required to wear a wedding garment (Matthew 22:12). The wedding banquet was presided over by the ruler of the feast (John 2:8,9). It was his duty to

take care of the preparations, and during the feast he would get around among the guests, and see to it that they lacked nothing. He instructed servants in carrying out all the necessary details.²⁵

The expression, "children of the bridechamber", (Matthew 9:15), used by JESUS, simply means the guests at the wedding. The governor or ruler of the feast returned thanks at the dinner and pronounced benedictions at appointed times. He also blessed the wine. It was customary to tell riddles at these feasts like Samson did at his wedding (Judges 14:12-18). During the meal mirthfulness prevailed. and the guests were expected to exalt the bride.²⁶

There was no religious ceremony at the feast. In place of this were the benedictions of relatives and friends. The benediction of those who witnessed wedding arrangements for Ruth and Boaz is a good example of what would be included in such a benediction (Ruth 4:11). It corresponds to the well wishing of Western wedding guests. After the wedding feast was over the husband was escorted by his friends into the apartment where his wife had previously been conducted. These wedding festivities with relatives and friends lasted for a whole week (cf. Judges 14:17), but the entire number of what was called "the days of the marriage" was thirty.²⁷

1. Theodore S. Soares, *The Social Institutions and Ideals of the Bible*, pp. 42,43.
2. Ibid., pp. 43, 44.
3. H. Clay Trumbull, *Studies in Oriental Social Life*, pp. 37, 38.
4. Soares, op. cit., pp. 44, 45.
5. Khodadad E. Keith, *The Social Life of a Jew in the Time of CHRIST*, p.55.
6. Trumbull, op. cit., pp. 9, 10.
7. Ibid., p. 14.
8. Ibid., pp. 17-20.
9. Keith, op. cit., p. 58.
10. Loc. cit.
11. H. Clay Trumbull, *Studies in Oriental Social Life*, pp. 37, 38.
12. Keith, op. cit., pp. 58, 59.
13. Edmond Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of CHRIST*, pp. 159, 160.
14. Ibid., p. 161. 15. Ibid., p. 162. 16. Ibid., p. 160.
17. Rev. Daniel March, *Home Life in the Bible*, p. 465.
18. Ibid., pp. 465, 466.
19. Stapfer, op. cit., p. 163.
20. John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Vol. I, *An American Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 498. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886.)
21. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of JESUS the Messiah, Vol. II*, p. 455.
22. Stapfer, op. cit., p. 164.
23. Ibid., p. 163. 24. Ibid., p. 164.
25. Thomas Hartwell Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study of the Holy Scriptures*, Vol. II, p. 162.
26. Stapfer, op. cit., pp. 164, 165.
27. Ibid., p. 165.

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