

MARRIAGE^{vs.} MAWWAIGE

by John Smith

WHAT THE BIBLE HAS TO SAY



"Mawwiage! That bwessed event, that dweam within a dweam..." Any one who has watched Rob Reiner's 1987 movie, *The Princess Bride*, will recognize the words of "the impressive clergyman" as he begins the wedding ceremony for Buttercup and Prince Humperdink. His speech impediment lightens the suspense by turning a serious moment into a joke. Buttercup, after all, was not supposed to marry the pretentious Humperdink, but her true love, Westley. Normally, of course, one should cringe at such mockery: weddings are to be solemnized, not made light of. On the other hand, the clergyman's mispronunciation is perhaps an apt metaphor for the way the institution has eroded in Western society: marriage has indeed become "mawwiage."

I've noticed that people have begun to use the expression "traditional marriage" to specify what they mean; evidently the simple term "marriage" is no longer specific enough. Churches, too, feel the need to spell out a definition for marriage in order to protect themselves from legal action. To give but one example, in 2007 the Canadian Reformed Churches added the following line to the article on marriage in their Church Order: "The Word of God teaches that marriage is a union between one man and one woman."

Some would argue that the Word of God is not as clear as that. I recently read a letter to the editor in my local paper arguing that the Bible itself allows for a plurality of marital arrangements. Besides monogamy, one finds polygamy and concubinage, not just among the villains, but among the heroes of holy writ. In short, Scripture allows for variety of practice.

What are we to make of such an argument? In this article I'd like to review what the Bible says about marriage, particularly in the Old Testament, since it's especially there that one finds multiple wives and concubines.

CUSTOMS

Marriage is a divine institution: God performed the first wedding by creating the woman and bringing her to the man. I find it interesting, then, that the LORD did not give Israel precise laws for how marriages were to be arranged. These were a matter of existing social customs and varied from one situation to another.

Usually it was the man who chose the wife rather than the other way around; we don't often read of women taking the initiative. On Naomi's prompting, Ruth went to Boaz and told him to spread the

there is no mention of a father, and it is the brothers who say, "What shall we do for our sister for the day she is spoken for?" (8:8).

Did the bride herself have any say in the matter? Sometimes not, for example, if she was a slave. Other times, yes – Rebekah's brother and father made the arrangements with Abraham's servant, but when it was time to go, her family asked her, "Will you go with this man?" and she replied, "I will go" (Genesis 24:58). Though the arrangements were often made for her, a woman could

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corner of his garment over her: this was a request for marriage. Yet Boaz had to make the legal arrangements.

Marriages were often arranged between the father and the groom, for example, between Laban and Jacob for the hand of Rachel. Sometimes the groom's father made the arrangements for him. For example, Abraham found a wife for Isaac through his servant (Gen. 24), and Judah took Tamar for his son Er. Occasionally it was the groom's mother: Hagar took a wife for Ishmael (Genesis 21:21). Samson asked both his parents to get a wife for him (Judges 14:2). Often the brothers of the bride-to-be were also involved in the arrangements. Think of Abram posing as Sarai's brother (Genesis 12:13-16), or of Laban's involvement in the arrangements for Rebekah (Genesis 24:29,50), or of Shechem's conversation with Dinah's father and brothers after he had raped her (Genesis 34:11-18). When the elders of Israel instructed the surviving Benjamites to catch wives from the dancing girls of Shiloh, they also promised to pacify their fathers and brothers (Judges 21:22). In Song of Songs,

presumably make her feelings known. In Song of Songs the woman says that her vineyard is hers to give (8:12). In our own society, women are much more actively involved in the choice of a life partner, so it's hard for us to imagine the customs of the Ancient Near East. Yet marital love could flourish there, too. Isaac loved Rebekah from the moment he took her to be his wife (Genesis 24:67), and Song of Songs speaks eloquently of the desires of a couple in love. More importantly, the Lord Jesus taught that behind all the arrangements, God was at work: "What God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:6). That principle is equally true for arranged marriages and marriages of choice.

LAWS

While the LORD did not legislate who made the arrangements, He did restrict whom one could marry. Marriages with the Canaanites were not permitted:

Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for

your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you (Deuteronomy 7:3-4; cf. Joshua 23:12-13).

God had a special warning for the king: "He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray." This happened to Solomon, who

loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter – Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods."... As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods (1 Kings 11:1-4).

...when another wife was added, the companionship was ruined, and the harmony replaced by bitterness and rivalry, and so the LORD showed his people that his original purpose for marriage was best, and that human solutions lead only to misery.

God also forbade marrying close relatives. A woman had to be at least two successive steps removed by blood, and one step removed by marriage, from her husband (Leviticus 18:6-18; 20:10-21). There were several other restrictions: a man could not marry two sisters, and a high priest could not marry a widow, a divorced woman, or a woman defiled by prostitution, but only a virgin from his own people, so that he would not defile his offspring (Leviticus 21:13-15). These

laws show God's concern for the spiritual well being of his people: one's choice of marriage partner deeply affects one's relationship with the LORD!

THE FORMALITIES

Marriage was a two-step affair in Bible times. The first step was the betrothal: if the girl's family agreed to the marriage, the man would give her father a *mohar*, or "bride price," in the form of a service or sum of money. Jacob obtained a wife with seven years of hard labor. David paid with Philistine foreskins. Othniel did it by capturing a town (Judges 1:13, Joshua 15:17). In the case of rape, a high price was set: "If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay the girl's father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the girl, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives" (Deut. 22:28-29). Notice,

by the way, that it does not say that *she* must marry him or that *she* cannot divorce him. This law was intended as a deterrent for the *man*: there would be a high price to pay and no opportunity for divorce.

In return for the bride price, the father-in-law would often give a dowry along with his daughter. For example, Rebekah could take her maids (Gen. 24:61); Othniel's wife asked her father for a field (Joshua 15:18); Pharaoh captured

the town of Gezer, killed its Canaanite inhabitants, and gave it as a wedding gift to his daughter, Solomon's wife (1 Kings 9:16). Betrothal in those days meant more than engagement does today: it was considered a binding agreement; for a man to sleep with a betrothed woman was adultery (Deut. 22:23-24), and to break off a betrothal required a divorce (Matthew 1:19).

The second step was the wedding feast where bride and groom would come together. The feast could last as long as a week (Gen. 29:27; Judg. 14:17); it included processions and music (Ps. 78:63; 1 Macc. 9:39), as well as the consummation of the marriage (Gen. 29:23).

Was there a written marriage contract? In some Ancient Near Eastern cultures there was: archaeologists have discovered a marriage contract in the Akkadian language. One of its clauses specified that if the woman were barren the husband would have to wait seven years before marrying a second wife. There are also Sumerian marriage records which show that a couple swore an oath before judges in the presence of witnesses. There is no evidence for the use of oaths in marriage ceremonies in Israel. The first mention of a marriage contract is found in the book of Tobit. There we read that the father of the bride "wrote out a contract, a scroll of marriage, that he gave her to him as wife according to the decree of the law of Moses. After that they began to eat and drink." (Tobit 7:13-14). A marriage contract has also been found from the Jewish community in Elephantine with the words, "She is my wife and I am her husband from this day forever." The Bible does not mention such contracts, however, and it is difficult to say how common they were.

POLYGAMY

"The Word of God teaches that marriage is a union between one man and one woman." But if that's so, what does one do with the many examples of polygamy in the Old Testament? Kings were forbidden to have many wives (Deut. 17:17), and Israelites were forbidden to marry two sisters (Lev. 18:18), but polygamy was not forbidden

outright. We read of men such as David and Solomon who had many wives. Especially striking is 2 Samuel 12:8, where God says to David, “I gave your master’s wives into your arms.” There “wives” (plural) are called a gift from God! All the same, polygamy often led to marital difficulty: think of the unhappiness between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, the rivalry between Rachel and Leah, the bitterness of Hannah, David’s greed for Uriah’s wife, and Solomon’s idolatry.

So why would a man want to marry more than one wife? In the case of a king, it was often a desire to cement alliances with surrounding kingdoms by marrying the daughters of their kings. This practice carried with it a grave temptation to syncretism and idolatry, and that’s why God told kings not to have many wives. In the case of regular Israelites, it was often the desire for a male heir. If his wife did not bear children, a man would marry another, and so the second purpose of marriage (procreation) came at the expense of the first (companionship). For when another wife was added, the companionship was ruined, and the harmony replaced by bitterness and rivalry, and so the LORD showed his people that his original purpose for marriage was best, and that human solutions lead only to misery.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

This survey of Israel’s customs and laws leads us to the following conclusions.

1. DESCRIPTIVE IS NOT PRESCRIPTIVE

God designed marriage as part of his perfect creation. Yet this institution has been marred by the brokenness of sin. Not all marriages in the Old Testament were monogamous, so one might be tempted to give a descriptive definition that includes, for example, polygamy and concubinage.

Disciples of Jesus Christ, however, must read the Old Testament as he did: Christ defined marriage prescriptively by pointing his disciples back to the beginning (Matt 19:4) (cont’d)

WEDDING WORDS

by John Smith

The Bible uses a wide assortment of words to talk about marriage. If we want to know what God has to say about marriage in the Bible, it helps to understand some of the related words He uses.

NO NOUN, BUT VERBS APLENTY

The Hebrew of the Old Testament does not have a noun for “marriage,” but it does have a number of verbs for “getting married.” A man “takes someone as wife” (*laqach le-ishah*). A woman “becomes someone’s wife” (*hayethah le-ishah*). A father gives his daughter in marriage (*nathan le-ishah*).

The word *baal* means husband, but because it was also the name of the god Baal, the LORD told his people that they were no longer to use this word for him: “In that day,” declares the LORD, “you will call me ‘my husband’ (*ishi*); you will no longer call me ‘my master’ (*baali*). I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked” (Hosea 2:16-17).

Another verb for marriage means “to become someone’s son-in-law” (*chathan*), an expression often used for making political alliances. Hence *chathan* can mean either “son-in-law” or “groom,” and its counterpart *kalah* can mean either “daughter-in-law” or “bride.”

In short, the vocabulary for marriage refers consistently to the husband-wife relationship.

HAVING SEX DOES NOT SOLEMNIZE A MARRIAGE

Someone once said to me that in Bible times weddings were not “solemnized” or “officiated” – that it was simply the

act of sexual intercourse that sealed the relationship. However, that’s simply not true, as the Hebrew terminology above makes clear. Furthermore, in Bible times there was a very clear, two-step procedure for formalizing the marriage relationship: the first step was the betrothal, and the second was the marriage feast.

In addition, besides the words mentioned earlier, the Hebrew language has another set of words for sexual relations. The four main expressions are *bo’* (“to go into”), *shakav* (“to lie with”), *galah ‘erwah* (“to uncover nakedness”), and *yada’* (“to know”). The first is used of a man having sexual relations with a woman, either within or outside of marriage. The second word is more general: it, too, refers to sexual relations within or outside of marriage, either of a woman with a man, or a man with a woman. It is also used for the forbidden acts of homosexuality, bestiality, and rape. The third is likewise used for shameful sexual activity, for example with a close relative or with a woman having her period. The fourth expression, “to know,” is used of sexual intimacy, usually (though not always) between husband and wife. A virgin is a woman “who has not known a man.”

The use of these expressions shows that Scripture does not simply equate “getting married” with “having sex.”

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Indeed, the first marriage, which served as a pattern for subsequent marriages, was monogamous and heterosexual, while the first man said to have had more than one wife was the arrogant Lamech of Cain's line.

2. GOD AS A HUSBAND IS A PRESCRIPTIVE EXAMPLE

In the Old Testament the LORD often portrayed himself as a husband to Israel: Israel was not only his servant and his son, but also his wife. This image portrays God as faithful – the perfect, caring husband for a wife who had nothing to attract her to him, and a jealous husband to a wife who often strayed after idols. This image of the Lord as a husband continues in the New Testament. Think of Ephesians 5, where the relationship between a husband and wife is compared to that between Christ and his church.

3. POLYGAMY IS NOT WORSE THAN GAY MARRIAGE

In Canada the institution of marriage has deteriorated: not only is the divorce rate high, but gay marriage has been legalized. Many fear that polygamy will be next. It is indeed conceivable that laws which forbid polygamy will be declared unconstitutional.

Yet Scripture does not teach us that permitting homosexual marriage will lead to permitting polygamy; that is not a Scriptural slippery slope. Quite to the contrary, Scripture places these in completely different categories. Polygamy was a form of marriage that led to misery, but was tolerated and restricted by the law. Homosexual rela-

tionships, on the other hand, were never permitted, but condemned as an abomination. As Christians we should resist both, but we should not connect them.

4. WE ARE ALREADY BETROTHED

Christ purchased the church for himself by dying on the cross. His blood was the bride price that secured our betrothal. As church we live in the stage between the betrothal and the marriage feast, and therefore the church can already be called the bride of Christ, even though the marriage feast has not yet come.

5. WE ARE ALREADY UNITED

The Lord gave his church the sacrament of holy supper as a foretaste of the marriage feast. At this supper the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ so that we experience what it means to be his bride. Therefore Lord's Day 28 of the Heidelberg Catechism rightly uses the marriage language of Genesis 2 to explain what happens in this sacrament: "Although Christ is in heaven and we are on earth, yet we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones, and we forever live and are governed by one Spirit as the members of our body are by one soul."

6. OUR WEDDING IS CERTAIN

The Old Testament institution of marriage helps us to believe that Christ really will return. After all, a bridegroom who has already paid the bride-price will certainly come back for the marriage feast. **RP**

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