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# 1: Customs on betrothal and marriage in the Old Testament

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## Introduction

The Bible is concerned to make known the truth about God and man and their relationship to one another. The central theme of the Old Testament is the revelation of God to a specially chosen people who had a unique origin and an unusual sense of destiny. God made a selective agreement with the founder of this race<sup>1</sup> the terms of which were repeated and explained from time to time as the nation developed.<sup>2</sup> It is significant that when the people of this covenant revolted against God the figure used to illustrate and to remind them of their relationship to Him is that of betrothal and marriage.<sup>3</sup> It is important, therefore, to understand the teaching and customs of Israel against this background of covenant relationship.

## Basic Principles

At creation one man and one woman together formed a whole human being<sup>4</sup> in which man was dominant, because he was the ruler, and woman was dependent, because she was created out of something taken from man. In this unity of relationship there was love, companionship and mutual help which led eventually to the founding of the family. In Israelite society the family was central and its character and maintenance was determined by marriage.

With the severing of the fellowship between man and God,<sup>5</sup> however, love became imperfect and marriage less than ideal. Relationships became sub-personal and led, for example, to the practice of polygamy, an unbalanced view of marriage in which the woman was regarded simply as a means of increasing the family. God in His wisdom did not rebuke this arrangement and His restraining grace permitted the practice even amongst some of the heroes of the faith.<sup>6</sup>

## Customs in Israel

In the normal marriage practice a man's wife was chosen from within the ranks of his own people, the parents generally making the choice.<sup>7</sup> A fine example of this is Abraham's choice for his son Isaac.<sup>8</sup> If Rebekah is an example of the norm, the bride-to-be was asked for her consent.<sup>9</sup> When the Israelites became established as a nation limits were laid down as to the closeness of the related group from which the wife might be chosen.<sup>10</sup> These rules, no doubt, arose from the intimate character of family relationship and marriage. The levirate law,<sup>11</sup> which may appear to be in conflict with the law

in Leviticus, was to enable a dead man's family name to be maintained. The brother had the option of refusing, but if he did, he risked the wrath of his sister-in-law.<sup>12</sup> Onan incurred the wrath of God.<sup>13</sup> The book of Ruth shows that the custom extended farther than the husband's brother.<sup>14</sup> The levirate law did not apply if daughters had been born.<sup>15</sup>

### *Betrothal*

Exchange of gifts took place on the occasion of the betrothal. The bridegroom or his family gave a compensation gift to the family of the bride.<sup>16</sup> This appeared to be more than a material compensation and might be considered as a kind of mental balancing of the relations. The bride's father gave a gift (dowry) either to his daughter or to her future husband.<sup>17</sup> The bridegroom also gave a gift to his bride.<sup>18</sup> On occasion the woman was covered by the skirt of the man's cloak as a sign of his care and protection over her.<sup>19</sup> In the interval between betrothal and marriage the bride was busy preparing herself for the great day.<sup>20</sup> Betrothal was a signed and witnessed legal contract and was as important as the marriage ceremony itself. Unfaithfulness during this period was described as adultery and punishable by death.<sup>21</sup> The story of Mary and Joseph<sup>22</sup> is instructive as revealing the covenant aspect of the committal to marriage. The marriage contract had been signed but the wedding had not yet taken place. It followed that if Mary was pregnant she must have given herself to someone other than Joseph. He had the right to dissolve the contract<sup>23</sup> but was unwilling for Mary to be exposed to the shame of public disclosure.<sup>24</sup> While he wondered how he could make a secret separation his problem was solved by the appearance of the angel who declared the truth of the matter to him.<sup>25</sup> The wedding took place but no act of sexual union occurred until after the birth of Jesus.<sup>26</sup> At this stage of their experience it was vital for Mary to have the pledged support of Joseph and equally important for him to know that she was in truth a virgin.

### *Marriage*

The public acknowledgement of the marital relationship was an important feature of the many ceremonies which surrounded the occasion of marriage. The wearing of distinctive clothes<sup>27</sup> and being accompanied by one or more companions and friends<sup>28</sup> added dignity to the occasion. The bridegroom and his friends went in procession to the bride's house and escorted her back to his own or his parent's home. The procession was usually accompanied by music, singing and dancing.<sup>29</sup> At the marriage feast which followed, relatives and friends attended wearing festive clothes.<sup>30</sup> It was an insult to refuse an invitation.<sup>31</sup> A friend of the bridegroom supervised the feast which could continue for several days. Parents and friends

blessed the couple and wished them well.<sup>32</sup> A covenant of faithfulness bound the pair<sup>33</sup> as they prepared to consummate their marriage<sup>34</sup> in a specially prepared bridechamber.<sup>35</sup> The verb "to know"<sup>36</sup> is used to describe this most intimate of relationships suggesting that sexual intercourse was viewed as primarily personal rather than purely sensual. Self-revelation on the one hand and appreciation of it on the other is implied. A blood-stained cloth was later exhibited as proof of the bride's virginity.<sup>37</sup> The Song of Solomon extols the preciousness of human love and the Proverbs of Solomon encourage a man to rejoice in the wife of his youth and to let her affection fill him at all times with delight.<sup>38</sup>

## **Christian Practice**

### *New Testament Standards*

To the Christian, as to the Israelite, right living cannot be dissociated from right thinking. Throughout the Bible men and women are represented as equal in their standing before God and Jesus Christ did not allow any departure from this truth.<sup>39</sup> In contrast to the generally accepted social pattern of His day, where women were treated as second class citizens, He maintained their rights and treated them accordingly. The New Testament writers endorsed the basic teaching of the Old Testament. The picture of the covenant relationship between God and Israel is paralleled with that of Christ and His Church.<sup>40</sup> Paul sets Christ's sacrificial love before husbands as an example for them to follow.<sup>41</sup> Wives, on the other hand, have to be in submission to their husbands,<sup>42</sup> a state which may be understood as the acceptance of an order of life in which one affords protection and support to the other, so that both together may find true development and purpose of being. The relationship is dynamic and is practical, functional, creative and mutually agreeable. In this partnership the husband accepts, and the wife acknowledges, his headship as in the order of authority and leadership laid down by God.<sup>43</sup>

Peter encouraged wives to cultivate a gentle and quiet spirit, and husbands to conduct their married lives with understanding and due respect for 'the weaker sex'. This exhortation had a spiritual purpose; together they were heirs of the grace of life and their prayers must not be hindered.<sup>44</sup> When people became Christians they were not to separate from their unbelieving marriage partners but to try and win them over to the Faith.<sup>45</sup>

### *Today's Pattern*

Marriage has been defined as the state in which men and women can live together with the approval of their social group. (Biblical teaching, of course, goes further than this). The basic physical and psychological make-up of men and women is fairly fixed and

unchanging, whereas the general run of beliefs regarding right and wrong forms of conduct between the sexes varies from one culture to another and from one generation to the next.

In the West today we live in a society where it is increasingly taken for granted that traditional standards (mainly of Biblical origin) about sex and marriage must be questioned and abandoned in favour of a 'liberated' outlook. The Christian thus finds himself as an alien in a hostile world where his avoidance of flirtation with the opposite sex, his practice of chastity before marriage, his dependence on a heavenly father for wisdom and guidance in the choice of a partner, his submission, perhaps, to the wisdom of parents and elders, his sensitive cultivation of a friendship leading to engagement, his taking of his marriage vows in the presence of Christian witnesses, and his determination to follow the example of Christ's love for the church, seems strange to those whose lives are ruled by human passions.<sup>46</sup>

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|----|---|-----------------|
| 1  | Gn. 12: 1-3; 15: 17; 1-8.                                     |                 |
| 2  | eg. Ex. 6: 4ff; Dt. 7: 6-8; 9:4-6; 14:2.                      |                 |
| 3  | Dt. 31; 16; Je. 2: 2; 3: 20f; Ezk. 16: 8,60; 23; Hos. 19: 20. |                 |
| 4  | Gn. 1: 27.  |                 |
| 5  | Gn. 3: 22-24.   |                 |
| 6  | eg. Abraham, Gn.25: 6; Gideon, Jdg.8:30; David, 2 Sa.5: 13.   |                 |
| 7  | Gn. 21: 21; 38: 6; Ru. 3: 1f; 1 Sa. 18: 21.                   |                 |
| 8  | Gn. 24: 3f.   |                 |
| 9  | Gn. 24: 58.   |                 |
| 10 | Lv. 18.   |                 |
| 11 | Dt. 25: 5f.   |                 |
| 12 | Dt. 25: 7-10.   |                 |
| 13 | Gn. 38: 8-10.   |                 |
| 14 | Ru. 3: 12.  |                 |
| 15 | Nu. 27: 1-11.   |                 |
| 16 | Gn. 34: 12; Ex. 22: 17; 1 Sa. 18: 25.                         |                 |
| 17 | Gn. 29: 24; Jdg. 1: 15; 1 Ki. 9: 16.                          |                 |
| 18 | Gn. 24: 53a.  |                 |
| 19 | Ru. 3: 9; Ezk. 16: 8, cf. Dt. 22: 30.                         |                 |
| 20 | Rev. 19: 7.   |                 |
| 21 | Dt. 25: 23f.  |                 |
| 22 | Mt. 1: 18-25.   |                 |
| 23 | Dt. 24: 1.  |                 |
| 24 | Mt. 1: 19.  |                 |
| 25 | Mt. 1: 20.  |                 |
| 26 | Mt. 1: 25.  |                 |
| 27 | Ps. 45: 13f; Je. 2: 32; Is. 61: 10.                           | 37              |
| 28 | Ps. 45: 14; Ju. 14: 11.                                       | 38              |
| 29 | Je. 7: 34; Ps. 78: 63.  | 39              |
| 30 | Mt. 22: 11f.  | 40              |
| 31 | Mt. 22: 3-7.  | 41              |
| 32 | Gn. 24: 60; Ru. 4: 11.  | 42              |
| 33 | Ezk. 16: 8; Mal. 2: 14.                                       | 43              |
| 34 | Gn. 29: 23.   | 44              |
| 35 | Joel 2: 16; Ps. 19: 5.  | 45              |
| 36 | Gn. 4: 1 et al.   | 46              |
|    |   | Dt. 22: 13-21.  |
|    |   | Pr. 5: 18f.     |
|    |   | Mt. 19: 3ff.    |
|    |   | Eph. 5: 23, 32. |
|    |   | Eph. 5: 25.     |
|    |   | Eph. 5: 24.     |
|    |   | 1 Cor. 11: 3.   |
|    |   | 1 Pet. 3: 1-7.  |
|    |   | 1 Pet. 3: 1.    |
|    |   | 1 Pet. 4: 4.    |