

The Jewish Wedding in Bible Times

by Don Ratcliff

The best booklet on subject is by Zola Levitt titled *A Christian Love Story*. But some of his comments may be influenced a bit by his theology; I didn't find all of his comments substantiated elsewhere. There *are* variations historically and cross-culturally, but this will emphasize the aspects most often cited by Bible scholars and others who have documented the various aspects of the Old and New Testament Jewish wedding.

Four Phases of Marriage (in Bible, condensed into one day by modern Jews)

1. matchmaking (or, less often, falling love)
2. betrothal
3. return of groom & time alone together
4. week of celebrating

1. Matchmaking (marriage brokering)

Still practiced by some Jews, even in USA (see movie "Crossing Delancey" where grandmother hires matchmaker for granddaughter in her 30's – she chooses a guy who sells pickles).

Servant is matchmaker for Isaac – Gen. 24:2-4. Matchmaker worked with parents to find eligibles. Considered "God's helpers" – often rabbi's and scholars did this.

Key issue was "bride price" – money paid by prospective husband. Reflected value of bride. Could be animals or unusual accomplishment (I Sam. 18:22-27 = 100 Philistines – David gave him 200!)

Father expected to keep money as sort of insurance, in case husband died or abandoned wife (also a sense of compensating father).

Common practice in many non-western cultures.

Drew up a contract – statement of marriage vows and bride price. Today called a ketubah. Today a ketubah is a piece of art (can cost hundreds of dollars) with the vows written in Aramaic or Hebrew (sometimes translated). Today it is signed just before wedding, but in Bible it was written before the engagement – brought by groom to engagement meal at bride's house.

Example of what a ketubah might say:

On the _____ day of the month of _____ in the year _____
corresponding to the

_____ day of _____ in the year _____ here in

and _____ entered into the holy covenant of marriage and made this pledge: We unite in love to comfort and to care for one another. We affirm our commitment to support each other as we meet the joys and challenges of life and we pledge to respect one another's strengths and abilities. We promise to establish a home, imbued with Jewish culture and tradition that embraces our love for the spirituality and beauty of our heritage. We will celebrate the cycle of the seasons and of life, with rich symbols of Judaism – with candles, wine and song. In our home, family and friends will find laughter and warmth. "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." Set me as a seal upon your heart. With these rings we consecrate our love for one another as husband and wife according to the laws of Moses and the Jewish people.

See other web page examples at www.ketubah.com

Ketubah was a legal contract. Not allowed to live together without a ketubah (if destroyed, had to get new one and have it witnessed).

Originally only stated the husband's obligations – the wife's obligations were considered automatic, not negotiated: to be (1) faithful (one of Ten Commandments), (2) provide children, and probably (3) obedience – it was a patriarchal society, so husband's father or grandfather probably ruled the household. An early variation – "beena" marriage, where husband lives with family & children are considered part of her tribe. (Jacob went to live with Uncle Laban and married Leah & Rachel; what is unusual is that Jacob left with his wives and children; perhaps that explains why Laban was so upset).

Christian Application

Our ketubah is the New Covenant ("New Testament"). Heb. 10:16 – the law written on our hearts – contrasts with the Old Covenant, written on stone (stone tablets were a spiritual ketubah – so when Moses broke them, had to make new ones).

Bride price = the highest possible price, the life of the husband (Jesus). I Cor. 6:20 The vows Jesus give us – that He will never leave or forsake us, to love us and care for us. Wife did not make vows – understood that she was giving herself totally.

Matchmaker for us – Holy Spirit draws us to God, but also person who leads us to Christ. Paul called himself a matchmaker (II Cor. 11:2)

2. Engagement

If man agreed to the match suggested by matchmaker or parents (or if fell in love), a dinner was arranged at prospective bride's house. (Probably all four parents had worked out details). Brought contract of marriage.

Man poured cup of wine and offered it to woman – symbolized his offer of marriage. If she drank it, she was accepting proposal (she & family read contract before deciding). After drinking, groom gave bride a coin. (During Middle Ages substituted a ring – the engagement ring).

This began a one-year engagement. Could be broken by bill of divorce (not just "sorry, changed my mind," or just giving back ring.) During the year (or so) the husband built a bridal chamber onto his father's house (a room – Vanderhaan).

If saw man working on bridal chamber, he couldn't tell you when wedding would be – his father made the decision of when bridal chamber was finished.

Christian Application

Man offering wine to prospective wife is seen in communion – Luke 22:20

When taking communion, you are reaffirming your engagement to Christ.

Coin, and later wedding ring, is the Holy Spirit – the seal that we are committed to Christ (Eph. 1:13, II Cor. 1:22, John 14:26-28)

Jesus preparing a place for us – John 14:2-3 (many rooms – many believers, many "brides").

Father decides when chamber is finished Matt. 24:36 – don't know day or hour, (but there are signs of second coming, just as could tell when the year was about finished and bridal chamber nearing completion).

3. The Return of Groom

When groom's father gave the nod, groom and groomsmen went to bride's house, usually unexpectedly at night. "Like a thief in the night". Called out and blew ram's horn before entering house to get bride and her bridesmaids. They would be watching and waiting for him – probably for several days, or even weeks, as they saw bridal chamber completed and year ended.

Groom took bride to chamber, with wedding party accompanying them through the streets. Group waited as bride and groom spent time alone together. ("yihud" – means "union" or "joined"). The "groom's friend" and other witnesses wait for a signal from the groom (one source says it takes 18 minutes to nearly an hour). Context of giving evidence of virginity in O. T. – Deut. 22. The couple doesn't necessarily consummate, just have

opportunity (first time alone). After signal, group begins celebrating. Zola says bride and groom come out of chamber seven days later for wedding supper.

Christian Application

Jesus returns with a shout – Matt. 25:6 and a blast of trumpet – Matt. 24:31, I Thes. 4:16-18.

Exact time not known, but can tell general season (Matt. 24:32-34)

Need to be ready (Matt. 24:44 and bridesmaids in Matt. 25)

Taken to bridal chamber – Matt. 25:10-13

John the Baptist said he was the groom's friend (John 3:28-29) as did Paul (II Cor. 11:2).

The testing of the Christian = is the bride a pure virgin (sins confessed and forgiven, genuine Christian, faithful to Him).

Bridal chamber also mentioned in Joel 2:16, Ps 19:5.

4. Week of Celebrating

John 2:1-11 (Wedding at Cana)

Seven days of celebrating – Zola Levitt

Describes this as the honeymoon – bride and groom in chamber, while others celebrated. (Actually he is only source I've found that says they were in chamber seven days). Then marriage supper on seventh day – huge celebration – then bride and groom go to their own home.

Christian Application

Seven days represent seven years of tribulation, Zola Levitt believes. Then wedding supper of lamb (Rev. 19:6-9) and eternity in heaven.

Eternal security is clearly taught in Bible, but big question is when does it begin? Could get a bill of divorce from engagement (a get), but the ketubah relates to marriage. If woman wasn't a virgin – if not faithful to betrothed – marriage could be annulled. Jesus forgives if we confess, but he wants a spotless bride – purity restored.

Jewish Wedding Today

Bride and groom meet with rabbi to sign the ketubah, then the service begins. Groom has processional up to the huppah (a tent-like covering, held up by poles, or a prayer shawl).

Eddie Chumney thinks the huppah represents the bridal chamber. When bride comes in, traditional for her to circle groom three times (Hosea 2:21-22 cited – the three betrothals). Then there is a sermon on the spiritual value of marriage, followed by drinking of cup of wine by bride and groom (symbolizes engagement phase of wedding – entering contract). Then blessing and exchange of vows and rings (traditionally only groom has to say vows and only bride gets ring). Rabbi declares they are husband and wife, but usually there is public reading of the ketubah, a second cup of wine is poured as seven blessings prayer is sung. Bride and groom drink second cup. Then a glass goblet is broken - symbolizes the destruction of temple, (more common to break light bulbs today – *The Jewish Book of Why*). People shout mazel tov ("congratulations"), they kiss and walk out together with joyous music. Lots of dancing for seven days traditionally (Gen. 29:27).

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