

What Do We Know About Marriage From Scripture?

One of the important aspects of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus is His teaching on the subject of marriage. In fact, Jesus' first miracle was at a wedding celebration in Cana of Galilee. Therefore, it is helpful to have a proper understanding of what the Scripture has to say about the subject of marriage.

Prescriptive Versus Descriptive

In examining the Scriptural teaching on the subject of marriage, it is vital that we make the distinction between what was prescribed and what was merely described.

Simply stated, prescriptive means this was something that the Lord specifically commanded His people to do.

On the other hand, descriptive refers to the Bible simply recording what took place, regardless of whether the practice or custom was not directly commanded by God. It is important that we understand these distinctions.

With these things in mind, let us first consider what the Old Testament has to say about the subject of marriage. We can make the following observations:

Observation 1: Monogamy Was The Ideal

From the very beginning, monogamy, the joining together of one man and one woman, was God's prescribed ideal. Indeed, the pattern was set after the creation of Adam and Eve:

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion for him who corresponds to him... That is why a man leaves his father and mother and unites with his wife, and they become a new family" (Genesis 2:18,24 NET).

This ideal has been consistent throughout all of Scripture (We will look at the subject of polygamy, as well as marrying outside of the believing community in appendix 4).

Observation 2: There Was No Minimum Age Given

The Old Testament does not give any commandment about a minimum age for the bride or the groom. Generally speaking, husbands were older than their wives:

For example, we know that Isaac was forty when he married Rebekah while Joseph was about thirty years of age when he married his Egyptian wife:

Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife (Genesis 25:20 ESV)

And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt. Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Genesis 41:45–46 ESV).

The age of Rebekah, as well as that of Asenath, is not recorded.

Observation 3: Both Parents, Or Perhaps One Of Them, Would Arranged The Marriage

Marriages were arranged by the parents of the bride and groom. In the first recorded instance of a parent finding a wife for her son, we find Hagar finding a wife for her son Ishmael:

He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt (Genesis 21:21 NET).

After the death of his wife Sarah, Abraham himself arranged to find a bride for his son Isaac:

Abraham said to his servant, the senior one in his household who was in charge of everything he had, "Put your hand under my thigh so that I may make you solemnly promise by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of the earth: You must not acquire a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living. You must go instead to my country and to my relatives to find a wife for my son Isaac" (Genesis 24:2-4 NET).

We should note that Abraham gave a specific command to his servant: the wife must be from his relatives, not the daughters of the Canaanites.

In the case of Isaac and Rebekah, each had a say in the matter about the marriage of their son Jacob:

Then Rebekah said to Isaac, "I loathe my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women like these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?" (Genesis 27:46 ESV)

Isaac then spoke to Jacob:

So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him. Then he commanded him, "You must not marry a Canaanite woman! Leave immediately for Paddan Aram! Go to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and find yourself a wife there, among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother (Genesis 28:1-2 NET).

Again, we note the specific command of the parents: the bride must be from their relatives, not a Canaanite woman.

Observation 4: The Father Could Act Alone

However, it was also possible that a father could act alone apart from the mother. As we saw earlier, Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac. This took place after Sarah, his wife, had died (Genesis 24:1–4)

The same held true in the case of Judah. After his wife had died he arranged for his firstborn son to marry the woman Tamar:

In the course of time, Judah arranged for his firstborn son, Er, to marry a young woman named Tamar (Genesis 38:6 NLT).

Observation 5: At Times The Bride’s Consent Was Asked

Interestingly, though seemingly it was not essential in all cases, the bride’s consent was at times asked:

The servant asked him, “What if the woman is not willing to come back with me to this land? Must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?... So they called Rebekah and asked her, “Do you want to go with this man?” She replied, “I want to go” (Genesis 24:5, 58 NET).

Observation 6: Sometimes A Wife Was Chosen Without The Consent Of The Parents

Esau, the oldest son of Isaac and Rebekah, chose his own wife without his parents’ consent:

Esau knew that his father, Isaac, had blessed Jacob and sent him to Paddan-aram to find a wife, and that he had warned Jacob, “You must not marry a Canaanite woman.” He also knew that Jacob had obeyed his parents and gone to Paddan-aram. It was now very clear to Esau that his father did not like the local Canaanite women. So Esau visited his uncle Ishmael’s family and married one of Ishmael’s daughters, in addition to the wives he already had. His new wife’s name was Mahalath. She was the sister of Nebaioth and the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham’s son (Genesis 28:6–9 NLT).

There are other illustrations of this in Scripture. Judah, for example, took a wife from the Canaanites without the consent of his father Jacob:

About this time, Judah left home and moved to Adullam, where he stayed with a man named Hirah. There he saw a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua, and he married her (Genesis 38:1-2 NLT).

Observation 7: Betrothal Was The Same As Marriage

The marriage process started with a legally binding relationship known as betrothal. This was arranged by the fathers of the bride and groom. Once a couple was betrothed, it was the same as being married.

Consequently, before their marriage, Jacob could call Rachel “my wife” though the actual ceremony had not yet taken place:

Finally, the time came for him to marry her. “I have fulfilled my agreement,” Jacob said to Laban. “Now give me my wife so I can sleep with her” (Genesis 29:21 NLT).

Observation 8: Betrothal Was Taken Seriously

The betrothal was a legally binding and very serious matter. Indeed, the law of Moses stated that seduction of a betrothed virgin was punishable by death:

Suppose a man meets a young woman, a virgin who is engaged to be married, and he has sexual intercourse with her. If this happens within a town, you must take both of them to the gates of that town and stone them to death. The woman is guilty because she did not scream for help. The man must die because he violated another man’s wife. In this way, you will purge this evil from among you.

“But if the man meets the engaged woman out in the country, and he rapes her, then only the man must die. Do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no crime worthy of death. She is as innocent as a murder victim. Since the man raped her out in the country, it must be assumed that she screamed, but there was no one to rescue her (Deuteronomy 22:23–27 NLT).

The law of Moses prescribed death for both parties if the sexual act occurred in a town. However, only the man was to be executed if it occurred “out in the country.”

While betrothal was considered to be legally binding, there is no specific reference to a written marriage contract in the entire Old Testament!

Observation 9: Compensation Was Provided By The Groom’s Family To The Family Of The Bride

It was expected that the groom would make some type of payment to the family of the bride. This act would make the marriage legally binding.

The Bible says that Jacob worked for seven years for his first wife Leah, and then another seven for his beloved Rachel:

Since Jacob was in love with Rachel, he told her father, “I’ll work for you for seven years if you’ll give me Rachel, your younger daughter, as my wife.”

“Agreed!” Laban replied. “I’d rather give her to you than to anyone else. Stay and work with me.” So Jacob worked seven years to pay for Rachel. But his love for her was so strong that it seemed to him but a few days (Genesis 29:18–20 NLT).

Instead of Rachel, Laban gave the oldest daughter Leah to Jacob. This caused Jacob to work another seven years for Rachel:

So Jacob slept with Rachel, too, and he loved her much more than Leah. He then stayed and worked for Laban the additional seven years (Genesis 29:27–28 NLT).

The so-called “bride-price” represented compensation to the family of the bride for the loss of her services to his household. It did not reflect an actual purchase, since the wife was not bought as a slave was. Regrettably, this Hebrew word was mistranslated as “dowry” in its three occurrences in the King James Version. This gives the wrong idea that the bride was somehow purchased.

Shechem, after he raped Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, was willing to pay a bride price for her:

Demand of me ever so much bridal payment and gift, and I will give whatever you tell me; but give me the girl in marriage (Genesis 34:12 NASB 2020).

The family refused and the result became a distasteful incident in this history of Jacob’s family.

Observation 10: At Times, It Was Not Money That Was Paid To The Bride’s Father

Instead of money or goods, other deeds might qualify as the bride-price. This could include an act of valor or of service.

Abraham’s leading servant, Eleazar, bestowed “choice gifts,” not only on Rebekah but also on her mother and brother. This was done in the name of Isaac:

Then he brought out silver and gold jewelry and clothing and presented them to Rebekah. He also gave expensive presents to her brother and mother (Genesis 24:53 NLT).

The judge Othniel received Caleb’s daughter Acsah in marriage in exchange for capturing the town of Kiriath Sepher:

From there he went to fight against the people living in the town of Debir (formerly called Kiriath-sepher). Caleb said, “I will give my daughter Acsah in marriage to the one who attacks and captures Kiriath-sepher.” Othniel, the son of Caleb’s brother Kenaz, was the one who conquered it, so Acsah became Othniel’s wife (Joshua 15:15–17 NLT)

King Saul promised his daughter to the man who would be able to kill the giant Goliath:

“Have you seen the giant?” the men asked. “He comes out each day to defy Israel. The king has offered a huge reward to anyone who kills him. He will give that man one of his daughters for a wife, and the man’s entire family will be exempted from paying taxes!” (1 Samuel 17:25 NLT).

Saul prescribed an unusual request for a bride price:

When Saul’s men reported this back to the king, he told them, “Tell David that all I want for the bride price is 100 Philistine foreskins! Vengeance on my enemies is all I really want.” But what Saul had in mind was that David would be killed in the fight (1 Samuel 18:25 NLT)

David then sent this message to Ishbosheth, Saul’s son: “Give me back my wife Michal, for I bought her with the lives of 100 Philistines” (2 Samuel 3:14 NLT)

Observation 11: The Rights Of The Wife Were Looked After

Scripture also dealt with the rights of a wife. This included a servant girl who had been purchased by a man who then gave her as a wife to his son.

It prescribed that, if that son married another wife, he should not deprive the first wife of “her food, clothing and marital rights.”

If a man who has married a slave wife takes another wife for himself, he must not neglect the rights of the first wife to food, clothing, and sexual intimacy. If he fails in any of these three obligations, she may leave as a free woman without making any payment. (Exodus 21:10,11 NLT)

This particular text was later interpreted by the rabbis as definitive of the basic rights of a wife.

Observation 12: Romantic And Physical Attraction May Be Involved In Choosing A Mate

Romantic attraction was likely involved in some of the marriages. We are told that Isaac loved Rebekah deeply:

And Isaac brought Rebekah into his mother Sarah’s tent, and she became his wife. He loved her deeply, and she was a special comfort to him after the death of his mother(Genesis 24:67 NLT).

We also read of Jacob’s deep love for Rachel:

So Jacob worked for seven years to acquire Rachel. But they seemed like only a few days to him because his love for her was so great Genesis 29:20 NLT).

The rapist Shechem was strongly attracted to Jacob's daughter:

Then he became very attached to Dinah, Jacob's daughter. He fell in love with the young woman and spoke romantically to her. Shechem said to his father Hamor, "Acquire this young girl as my wife" (Genesis 34:3,4 NLT).

The judge Samson was also struck by the beauty of a Philistine girl:

Samson went down to Timnah, where a Philistine girl caught his eye. When he got home, he told his father and mother, "A Philistine girl in Timnah has caught my eye. Now get her for my wife." But his father and mother said to him, "Certainly you can find a wife among your relatives or among all our people! You should not have to go and get a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines." But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, because she is the right one for me" (Judges 14:1-3 NET)

Finally, the daughter of Saul was attracted to David:

Now Michal, Saul's daughter, loved David. When they told Saul about this, it pleased him (1 Samuel 18:20 NET).

Observation 13: The Groom Was Excused From Military Duty For A Period Of Time

The importance of marriage was stressed in the Law of Moses. Indeed, a newlywedded groom was excused from military duties for an entire year:

When a man is newly married, he need not go into the army nor be obligated in any way; he must be free to stay at home for a full year and bring joy to the wife he has married (Deuteronomy 24:5 NET).

Observation 14: The Prophets Used Marriage To Illustrate The Lord's Love For Israel

The Old Testament prophets used marriage as a metaphor to illustrate the love of the Lord for his faithless bride, Israel:

As a young man marries a young woman, so your sons will marry you. As a bridegroom rejoices over a bride, so your God will rejoice over you (Isaiah 62:5 NET).

Jeremiah wrote:

The LORD spoke to me. He said: "Go and declare in the hearing of the people of Jerusalem: "This is what the LORD says: "I have fond memories of you, how devoted you were to me in your early years. I remember how you loved me like a new bride; you followed me through the wilderness, through a land that had never been planted (Jeremiah 2:1-2 NET).

We read elsewhere in Jeremiah:

“If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and becomes another man’s wife, he may not take her back again. Doing that would utterly defile the land. But you, Israel, have given yourself as a prostitute to many gods. So what makes you think you can return to me?” says the LORD. “Look up at the hilltops and consider this. You have had sex with other gods on every one of them. You waited for those gods like a thief lying in wait in the desert. You defiled the land by your wicked prostitution to other gods.

That is why the rains have been withheld, and the spring rains have not come. Yet in spite of this you are obstinate as a prostitute. You refuse to be ashamed of what you have done” (Jeremiah 3:1–3 NET).

The Lord said the following to the prophet Ezekiel:

Then I passed by you and watched you, noticing that you had reached the age for love. I spread my cloak over you and covered your nakedness. I swore a solemn oath to you and entered into a marriage covenant with you, declares the sovereign LORD, and you became mine (Ezekiel 16:8 NET).

In one instance, the prophet Hosea was commanded to marry the unfaithful woman Gomer. This was to act as an object lesson of the relationship between the Lord and his people:

When the LORD first began speaking to Israel through Hosea, he said to him, “Go and marry a prostitute, so that some of her children will be conceived in prostitution. This will illustrate how Israel has acted like a prostitute by turning against the LORD and worshipping other gods” (Hosea 1:2 NLT).

Summary On The Old Testament Teaching On Marriage

We have briefly looked at what the Old Testament had to say about the subject of marriage. As noted, we made the distinction between what the Lord commanded to His people (prescribed) and the recording of certain events that happened (described).

In most instances, we merely have a description of what took place. In fact, apart from the Lord’s initial command of monogamy, we find only a few instances where anything specifically is ordered about marriage.

In sum, only basic information about marriages was recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Indeed, there are many things about it that we do not know.

The New Testament And Marriage

We have observed that there is a lack of detailed information about the subject of marriages in the Old Testament. The same holds true for the New Testament.

Observation 1: Mary's Pregnancy Caused A Problem For Her Marriage To Joseph

As we discovered in the Old Testament, there were serious legal implications if the betrothal was somehow compromised before the wedding took place. When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, he could have publicly denounced her as an adulteress. Instead, he decided to divorce her privately:

Because Joseph, her husband to be, was a righteous man, and because he did not want to disgrace her, he intended to divorce her privately. (Matthew 1:19 NET).

Observation 2: Jesus Recognized That God Commanded Monogamy In Genesis

In answering a question about divorce, Jesus made the following statements:

Haven't you read the Scriptures?" Jesus replied. "They record that from the beginning 'God made them male and female.'" And he said, "'This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.' Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together" (Matthew 19:4-6 NLT).

This is an important passage! Jesus Himself emphasized that God had established monogamy in the beginning.

Observation 3: Jesus Used The Groom Analogy To Refer To Himself

On one occasion, Jesus used the example of a groom with the wedding attendants to speak about Himself:

One day the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus and asked him, "Why don't your disciples fast like we do and the Pharisees do?" Jesus replied, "Do wedding guests mourn while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. But someday the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast (Matthew 9:14-15 NLT).

Observation 4: John The Baptist Was A Friend Of The Groom

John the Baptist, when asked if he were the Messiah, gave the following analogy:

You yourselves know how plainly I told you, 'I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.' It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the bridegroom's friend is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success (John 3:28-29 NLT).

Observation 5: John The Baptist Condemned The Marriage Of Herod Antipas To Herodias

John the Baptist condemned the marriage of Herodias, a granddaughter of Herod the Great. She had divorced one uncle, Herod Philip, to marry another uncle, Herod Antipas. All of this took place while her first husband was still alive. This caused Herodias to have a grudge against John:

For Herod himself had sent men, arrested John, and bound him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had repeatedly told Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." So Herodias nursed a grudge against him and wanted to kill him. But she could not (Mark 6:17-19 NET).

For marrying her first husband's brother, this particular act of Herodias and Herod Antipas was considered both adulterous and incestuous. On top of this, she had a child by her first husband, Philip.

The Mosaic Law made it clear that a man is not to have sex with the wife of his brother:

You must not have sexual intercourse with your brother's wife; she is your brother's nakedness (Leviticus 18:16 NET).

Observation 6: The Levirate Marriage Was Still Practiced

We have already observed the practice of levirate marriage in the case of Judah's two sons Er and Onan (Genesis 38:6-10).

Jesus was challenged by the Sadducees about what this would mean in the case of the resurrection of the dead. They presented a hypothetical story to Him of a woman who, after marrying seven brothers, died without having any children (Matthew 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-38).

They then quizzed Jesus about whose wife she would be in the resurrection. Jesus' reply revealed their ignorance:

Jesus replied, "Your mistake is that you don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God. For when the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. In this respect they will be like the angels in heaven (Matthew 22:29-30 NLT).

In other words, as far as the next life is concerned, it will not matter who was married to whom in this life.

Observation 7 There Were Some Who Did Not Marry

Jesus also spoke about those who would not marry:

Not everyone can accept this statement,” Jesus said. “Only those whom God helps. Some are born as eunuchs, some have been made eunuchs by others, and some choose not to marry for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let anyone accept this who can (Matthew 19:11-12 NET).

**Observation 8 Certain New Testament Characters
Were Unmarried**

Paul and Barnabas, like Jesus and John the Baptist, were exceptional in being unmarried.

Do we not have the right to the company of a believing wife, like the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas? Or do only Barnabas and I lack the right not to work? (1 Corinthians 9:5–6 NET)

There has been some speculation that Paul may have been a widower, but there is no evidence to support this thesis.

**Observation 9 The Remainder Of The New Testament Had
Things To Say About Marriage**

Apart from the ministry of Jesus as recorded in the four gospels, we find a few things mentioned about marriage from other New Testament passages.

Observation 10 Marriage Was Honorable

In contrast to the false teachers, the Apostle Paul recognized the legitimacy of marriage. In fact, he stressed that in the “last days” false teachers, who had deserted the faith, would prohibit marriage:

Now the Spirit explicitly says that in the later times some will desert the faith and occupy themselves with deceiving spirits and demonic teachings, influenced by the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared. They will prohibit marriage (1 Timothy 4:3–4 NET).

On another occasion, he wrote:

But because of immoralities, each man should have relations with his own wife and each woman with her own husband (1 Corinthians 7:2 NET).

Paul counseled younger women to marry:

So I want younger women to marry, raise children, and manage a household, in order to give the adversary no opportunity to vilify us. (1 Timothy 5:14 NET).

The writer to the Hebrews echoed this truth:

Marriage must be honored among all and the marriage bed kept undefiled, for God will judge sexually immoral people and adulterers (Hebrews 13:4 NET)

Observation 11 Paul Assumed Most Christians Would Marry

In a number of passages about Christian living, Paul assumed that most Christians, including the overseers, elders, and deacons, would be married (Ephesian 5:21–6:9; Colossians 3:18–4:1; Titus 2:1–10; 1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:6).

Observation 12 Christians Were Only To Marry Believers

Paul commanded Christians to marry fellow believers:

A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but only if he loves the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:39 NLT).

Later, Paul emphasized that believers should only “team up” with fellow believers:

Don’t team up with those who are unbelievers. How can righteousness be a partner with wickedness? How can light live with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14 NLT).

While this verse does not specifically address marriage, the concept is certainly found here.

Paul was horrified that the church at Corinth would tolerate a union between a man and his stepmother:

I can hardly believe the report about the sexual immorality going on among you—something that even pagans don’t do. I am told that a man in your church is living in sin with his stepmother. You are so proud of yourselves, but you should be mourning in sorrow and shame. And you should remove this man from your fellowship (1 Corinthians 5:1–2 NLT).

According to the Mosaic Law, such a relationship that would have been considered incestuous:

Do not have sexual relations with any of your father’s wives, for this would violate your father (Leviticus 18:8 NLT).

Observation 13: Paul's Personal Preference Was To Remain Unmarried

Interestingly, Paul's personal preference was to remain unmarried. He did this so that he could be "free from the concerns of life" while being devoted entirely to the Lord:

I want you to be free from the concerns of this life. An unmarried man can spend his time doing the Lord's work and thinking how to please him. But a married man has to think about his earthly responsibilities and how to please his wife. His interests are divided. In the same way, a woman who is no longer married or has never been married can be devoted to the Lord and holy in body and in spirit. But a married woman has to think about her earthly responsibilities and how to please her husband. (1 Corinthians 7:32-34 NLT).

Observation 14 The Relationship Of Christ And The Church Is Compared To Marriage

As in the Old Testament, the relationship between God and His people is sometimes understood in the New Testament to be like marriage. An example of this would be in the Song of Solomon.

Paul used marriage as a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and the church, for which Christ gave his life:

For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself. No one hates his own body but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church. And we are members of his body (Ephesians 5:23-27 NLT).

Observation 15 The Wedding Feast Of The Lamb

The climactic scene of the Book of Revelation is the wedding supper of the Lamb with his bride, the church, who is dressed in bright and clean, fine linen:

Let us be glad and rejoice, and let us give honor to him. For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb, and his bride has prepared herself. She has been given the finest of pure white linen to wear." For the fine linen represents the good deeds of God's holy people (Revelation 19:7-8 NLT).

Scripture speaks of a wonderful future wedding feast in which believers will experience.

Summary On Marriage From Both Testaments

From looking at the totality of Scripture, we can make a number of conclusions about the biblical teaching on marriage.

Conclusion 1: Monogamy Was The Rule From The Beginning

Monogamy was what the Lord set down in the beginning, marriage was to be an institution between one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24). Jesus acknowledged that this was God's design for marriage (Matthew 19:1-6). All other types of marriages were frowned upon.

Conclusion 2: There Were Some Who Did Not Marry

While marriage was the ideal, Scripture records that certain people did not marry. This includes Jesus Himself, John the Baptist, Paul, and Barnabas. There were also those who chose not to marry for the sake of the kingdom of God, such as the Apostle Paul.

Conclusion 3: The Old Testament Compared The Lord To Israel In Marriage Illustrations

The relationship of God to the nation of Israel was compared to a husband and an unfaithful wife.

Conclusion 4: The New Testament Compared Christ To The Church

Paul used the analogy of marriage to refer to Christ and the church.

Conclusion 5: The Climactic Scene Of Revelation Is A Wedding Feast

Finally, the Book of Revelation compares the gathering of believers with Christ as a great wedding feast.

In sum, we conclude that marriage is an honorable institution that was set down by the Lord in the beginning. This command has never been rescinded.

What Does The Scripture Say About Wedding Ceremonies?

While the Bible gives a number of commands about the institution of marriage, there are no direct commands with respect to conducting a wedding ceremony. In other words, everything that we read is a description of what took place. Again, it is crucial that we make the distinction between what is described and prescribed.

Furthermore, we must appreciate that detailed information on the subject from the Bible is lacking:

There is a disappointing uncertainty as to the exact ceremonies or proceedings connected with marriage in Bible times. We have to paint our picture from passing allusions or descriptions, and from what we know of Jewish and Arabic customs. In cases it would seem that there was nothing beyond betrothal, or the festivities following it ... (The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, E-text version Copyright 2002, HeavenWord, Inc.)

The writer goes on to say the following:

A general survey of ancient marriage laws and customs shows that those of the Hebrews are not a peculiar creation apart from those of other peoples. A remarkable affinity to those of other branches of the Semitic races especially, may be noted, and striking parallels are found in the Code of Hammurabi, with regard, e.g., to betrothal, dowry, adultery and divorce. But modern researches have emphasized the relative purity of OT sexual morality. In this, as in other respects, the Jews had a message for the world. Yet we should not expect to find among them the Christian standard. Under the new dispensation the keynote is struck by our Lord's action. The significance of His attending the marriage feast at Cana and performing His first miracle there can hardly be exaggerated. The act corresponds, too, with His teaching on the subject. He, no less than Paul, emphasizes both the honorableness of the estate and the heinousness of all sins against it (ISBE, Marriage).

Therefore, any conclusions that we may make have to be qualified because of our lack of information on the subject.

There are a few things that we learn in passing from Scripture about how it was carried out.

Observation 1 The Earliest Recorded Wedding: Jacob And Leah

The earliest information we have about a wedding ceremony was that of Jacob and Leah:

So Laban invited all the people of that place and prepared a feast. In the evening he brought his daughter Leah to Jacob, and Jacob had

marital relations with her. Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant (Genesis 29:22 NET).

From this passage we discover that there was a feast along with the wedding. After it was completed the father of the bride, Laban, brought his daughter Leah to Jacob where they consummated the marriage.

It seems obvious that Leah wore a veil. This would explain Jacob's shock when he married Leah, thinking that it was Rachel:

But when Jacob woke up in the morning—it was Leah! “What have you done to me?” Jacob raged at Laban. “I worked seven years for Rachel! Why have you tricked me?” (Genesis 29:25 NLT).

Laban's reply tells us something about the marriage customs of that day:

“It's not our custom here to marry off a younger daughter ahead of the firstborn,” Laban replied. “But wait until the bridal week is over; then we'll give you Rachel, too—provided you promise to work another seven years for me” (Genesis 29:26-27 NLT).

Therefore, we find that the entire marriage process was done according to custom, not anything that the Lord had directly commanded.

Observation 2 The Main Event Was The Sexual Union

The physical union between the groom and the bride was the high point of the wedding. This union which occurred on the first night of their marriage:

In the evening he brought his daughter Leah to Jacob, and Jacob had marital relations with her (Genesis 29:23 NET).

So Boaz married Ruth and had sexual relations with her (Ruth 4:13 NET).

Observation 3 The Wedding Festivities Could Last Up To Two Weeks

In another instance, after the wedding feast was served, it was followed by festivities lasting one or two weeks. In the Book of Judges, we read of the wedding of Samson:

Then Samson's father accompanied him to Timnah for the marriage. Samson hosted a party there, for this was customary for bridegrooms to do. When the Philistines saw he had no attendants, they gave him thirty groomsmen who kept him company. Samson said to them, “I will give you a riddle. If you really can solve it during the seven days the party lasts, I will give you thirty linen robes and thirty sets of clothes (Judges 14:10,12 NET).

There was a seven-day party at the marriage of Samson. We should also note that the Scripture mentions the “custom” of the groom to have attendants. In this instance, the Philistines provided thirty for Samson.

Again, this passage records what was customary at that time, not that the ceremony was done through any divine command.

Yet later in Israel’s history we find that the celebration’s may have lasted up to two weeks. In the apocryphal book of Tobit we read:

Now when the fourteen days of the wedding celebration had ended that Raguel had sworn to observe for his daughter (Tobit 10:7 NRSV).

In this passage we also read of a marriage contract:

Then he called her mother and told her to bring writing material; and he wrote out a copy of a marriage contract, to the effect that he gave her to him as wife according to the decree of the law of Moses (Tobit 7:13 NRSV).

Interestingly, in the law of Moses, there is no specific decree for a written contract for marriage.

As we mentioned, there is nothing specifically stated in either testament of the necessity of a written contract between the groom and bride. The marriage became legally binding when the betrothal process began where the family of the bride was paid the “bride-price.”

Observation 4 King Solomon Wore A Matrimonial Crown

Both the groom and the bride were adorned. The wedding ceremony of King Solomon began with him attired with some type of wreath or a matrimonial crown:

Come out, O maidens of Zion, and gaze upon King Solomon! He is wearing the crown with which his mother crowned him on his wedding day, on the most joyous day of his life! (Song of Solomon 3:11 NET).

In Isaiah, we read of a groom also wearing some type of fancy head covering:

I look like a bridegroom when he wears a turban as a priest would (Isaiah 61:10 NET).

Observation 5 The Bride Wore Jewelry

There are passages which specifically state that the bride wearing jewelry at her wedding ceremony:

Look all around you! All of them gather to you. As surely as I live,” says the LORD, “you will certainly wear all of them like jewelry; you will put them on as if you were a bride (Isaiah 49:18 NET)

I look like a bride when she puts on her jewelry (Isaiah 61:10 NRSV).

Observation 6 A Special Wedding Canopy Was Built

There was a special wedding canopy, *huppah* in Hebrew, that was prepared for the bride and groom:

Let the bridegroom come out from his bedroom and the bride from her private quarters (Joel 2:16 NET).

It was in this canopy that the marriage was consummated.

**Observation 7 Blessings For Descendants
Were Pronounced**

The ceremony also included blessings that were pronounced for any descendants that would come from the marriage union. This would include Lord's provision for victory over their enemies as well as many children. We read the following words of Abraham's servants:

So they sent their sister Rebekah on her way, accompanied by her female attendant, with Abraham's servant and his men. They blessed Rebekah with these words: "Our sister, may you become the mother of thousands of ten thousands! May your descendants possess the strongholds of their enemies" (Genesis 24:59,60 NET).

We also find that Rebekah had one female attendant with her.

When Boaz and Ruth were to be married, we also find blessings pronounced upon them as well as any offspring that comes from the relationship:

All the people who were at the gate and the elders replied, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is entering your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the house of Israel! May you prosper in Ephrathah and become famous in Bethlehem. May your family become like the family of Perez-whom Tamar bore to Judah-through the descendants the LORD gives you by this young woman" (Ruth 4:11,12 NET).

We also discover that the elders at the gate of the city were witnesses to this union. While nothing specific is said about a written contract, the public declaration was legally binding.

Summary On Wedding Ceremonies In The Old Testament

In sum, very little is given in the Old Testament with respect to wedding ceremonies. In addition, everything that is recorded about the wedding ceremonies were cultural or traditional customs.

In other words, there is nothing whatsoever commanded by the Lord as to how the ceremony and the festivities were to take place.

The Wedding Customs In The New Testament

The New Testament contains only a few windows for us into the customs that surrounded the wedding and its festivities. We can make the following observation from what we find in the text:

Observation 1 There Were No Specific Commands By The Lord About How To Conduct A Wedding

Precisely as we discovered in the Old Testament, there were no specific commands whatsoever as to how a wedding ceremony was to be conducted. In other words, everything that took place was done by tradition and custom, not by the direct command of the Lord.

Observation 2 Jesus' First Miracle Was At A Wedding

Jesus performed his first recorded miracle at a marriage feast that He attended with some of His disciples at Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11). In addition, we discover that His mother Mary was seemingly involved in serving at the festivities.

His attendance, as well as this being the occasion for His first miracle, was of the utmost importance. Indeed, by doing so, Jesus blessed the idea of marriage, between one man and one woman, that the Lord had set down as a precedent in the beginning (Genesis 2:24).

Observation 3 The Wedding Host Had Certain Obligations

In the account of the wedding in Cana, we find that there were certain obligations that were expected by those attending. In fact, when they ran out of wine, it was a seeming disaster for the host. However, Jesus' first public miracle saved the day:

When the master of ceremonies tasted the water that was now wine, not knowing where it had come from (though, of course, the servants knew), he called the bridegroom over. "A host always serves the best wine first," he said. "Then, when everyone has had a lot to drink, he brings out the less expensive wine. But you have kept the best until now!" (John 2:9-10 NLT).

We learn from this account that wine was expected to be served during the entire wedding festivities. However, nothing is said in this passage of the time of day or night when all of this took place or how long the festivities lasted.

**Observation 4 The Wedding Guests Wore
 A Special Garment**

In one of the parables Jesus gave, the Lord spoke of the guests celebrating a feast given by the family of a king. The attendees of the feast wore a special wedding garment (Matthew 22:2–12).

As to what it consisted of, we are not specifically told. When one man was found not to be wearing the proper clothes, he was condemned by the king:

‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how is it that you are here without wedding clothes?’ But the man had no reply. Then the king said to his aides, ‘Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (Matthew 22;12-13 NLT).

The man was punished for not wearing the proper attire.

**Observation 5 Two Wedding Ceremonies
 Took Place Late At Night**

On two separate occasions where the approximate time of the wedding is given, we find that the ceremonies took place late at night:

Be dressed for service and keep your lamps burning, as though you were waiting for your master to return from the wedding feast. Then you will be ready to open the door and let him in the moment he arrives and knocks. The servants who are ready and waiting for his return will be rewarded. I tell you the truth, he himself will seat them, put on an apron, and serve them as they sit and eat! He may come in the middle of the night or just before dawn. But whenever he comes, he will reward the servants who are ready (Luke 12:35–38 NLT).

We note that the return of the master would take place late in the night or early in the morning.

In Jesus’ parable of the ten maidens, we find that the festivities occurred during the middle of the night:

At midnight they [the bridesmaids] were roused by the shout, ‘Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and meet him!’ (Matthew 25:6 NLT).

This is consistent with the custom in the ancient Near East that marriages took place during the evening in the seven hot summer months.

Interestingly, as we mentioned, the passage that John records about Jesus attending a wedding in Cana of Galilee does give a time frame.

Conclusion

In sum, at the time of Christ, we know that there were certain traditions that were generally practiced at weddings. However, these customs and traditions had no basis in any of the commands of the Lord.

In fact, from an examination of the totality of Scripture, we discover that everything associated with the wedding ceremonies had to do with the customs and traditions of the times.

Therefore, any illustrations that the Bible gives about the ceremonies surrounding weddings needs to be considered in light of this.

What Do The Scriptures Teach About Polygamy?

Polygamy is the practice of having multiple wives. In Scripture, it was largely confined to those who were in rulership or those who were “well off.” The following biblical characters practiced polygamy.

Lamech

The first biblical figure who said to have multiple wives Lamech, a man living before the flood:

Lamech married two women. The first was named Adah, and the second was Zillah (Genesis 4:19 NLT).

Abraham

While married to Sarah, Abraham took her handmaid Hagar as a wife:

So Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian servant and gave her to Abram as a wife (Genesis 16:3 NLT).

Esau

Jacob’s older brother Esau had five wives (Genesis 26:34; 28:9; 36:1–5).

Jacob

Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rachel, as well as two secondary wives Bilhah, and Zilpah (Genesis 30:1-8).

Gideon

The judge Gideon fathered seventy sons from his “many wives:”

Then Gideon son of Joash returned home. He had seventy sons born to him, for he had many wives (Judges 8:30 NLT)

King David

David had at least ten wives who were named. They include Michal (1 Samuel 18:17–30), Ahinoam (1 Samuel 25:38–43), Abigail (2 Samuel 2:2), and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12), as well as many more unnamed wives and concubines (1 Samuel 25:39; 2 Samuel 3:2; 5:13).

King Solomon

Solomon was famous, or infamous, for having many wives. Scripture records that he had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines:

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women. Besides Pharaoh’s daughter, he married women from Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon, and

from among the Hittites. The LORD had clearly instructed the people of Israel, “You must not marry them, because they will turn your hearts to their gods.” Yet Solomon insisted on loving them anyway. He had 700 wives of royal birth and 300 concubines. And in fact, they did turn his heart away from the LORD (1 Kings 11:1-3 NET)

This included many foreign wives. Among them, the daughter of the pharaoh of Egypt (1 Kings 3:1; 9:16; 11:3; Song of Solomon 6:8).

King Rehoboam

Rehoboam followed in the footsteps of his father Solomon:

Rehoboam loved Maacah more than any of his other wives and concubines. In all, he had eighteen wives and sixty concubines, and they gave birth to twenty-eight sons and sixty daughters. (2 Chronicles 11:21 NLT).

Solomon’s son Rehoboam had eighteen wives and sixty concubines. The apple obviously did not fall far from the tree!

Elkanah

Elkanah was married to Peninnah and Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel:

There was a man named Elkanah who lived in Ramah in the region of Zuph in the hill country of Ephraim. He was the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, of Ephraim. Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah did not. (1 Samuel 1:2 NLT).

Monogamy Was The Ideal

As we previously mentioned, monogamy was established by the Lord in the very beginning. Furthermore, particularly in later Scriptures, it was taught as the ideal for marriage.

For example, the Lord used the analogy of the marriage covenant with respect to His relationship with Israel:

Then I passed by you and watched you, noticing that you had reached the age for love. I spread my cloak over you and covered your nakedness. I swore a solemn oath to you and entered into a marriage covenant with you, declares the sovereign LORD, and you became mine (Ezekiel 16:8 NET)

The Book of Proverbs has a number of things to say about marriage. It speaks of a “worthy wife:”

A worthy wife is a crown for her husband, but a disgraceful woman is like cancer in his bones (Proverbs 12:4 NLT).

This is referring to one wife.

In another instance, we read:

The man who finds a wife finds a treasure, and he receives favor from the LORD (Proverbs 18:22 NLT).

We should note that the writer uses the singular “wife” in this proverb.

We also read:

Fathers can give their sons an inheritance of houses and wealth, but only the LORD can give an understanding wife (Proverbs 19:14 NLT).

The writer emphasizes the importance of an “understanding wife.”

Finally, the book closes with the benefits of having a “good wife” (Proverbs 31:10–31).

The psalmist wrote of the blessings of a good wife:

Your wife will be like a fruitful grapevine, flourishing within your home. Your children will be like vigorous young olive trees as they sit around your table Psalm 128:3 NLT).

From these passages, we can confirm marriage between one man and one woman was seen as the ideal.

Polygamy Was Not Outlawed

However, polygamy was never made illegal and the legislation that was divinely revealed in the law of Moses assumed the possibility of a second wife:

If a man who has married a slave wife takes another wife for himself, he must not neglect the rights of the first wife to food, clothing, and sexual intimacy. If he fails in any of these three obligations, she may leave as a free woman without making any payment (Exodus 21:10 NLT).

We read:

Suppose a man has two wives, but he loves one and not the other, and both have given him sons. And suppose the firstborn son is the son of the wife he does not love. When the man divides his inheritance, he may not give the larger inheritance to his younger son, the son of the wife he loves, as if he were the firstborn son. He must recognize the rights of his oldest son, the son of the wife he does not love, by giving him a double portion. He is the first son of his father’s virility, and the rights of the firstborn belong to him (Deuteronomy 21:15–17 NLT).

Concubines

Along with monogamy and polygamy, we also find that certain men took concubines: basically, this was a legalized form of cohabitation with the opposite sex. While concubines had a lower status than wives their children could receive gifts a form of inheritance:

Abraham gave everything he owned to his son Isaac. But before he died, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them off to a land in the east, away from Isaac (Genesis 25:6 NLT).

Some concubines were known to rise to positions of power as in the case of Gideon (Judges 8:31-9:22). However their rights were less protected than those of children born to wives.

There Were Always Problems Associated With Multiple Wives

As can be imagined, those who had more than one wife had problems in their married lives. Interestingly, there were no exceptions! We will cite a few examples.

Abraham And Hagar Were Unhappy

We read of the unhappiness of both Abraham and Hagar when he, following his wife Sarah's advice, took her as a secondary wife (Genesis 21:8-16).

Leah Was Bitter

Leah, the first wife of Jacob was angry at her sister Rachel for becoming his second wife:

But Leah angrily replied, "Wasn't it enough that you stole my husband? Now will you steal my son's mandrakes, too?" (Genesis 30:15 NLT).

Hannah Was Taunted For Being Childless

Peninnah, the other wife of Elkanah, would taunt Hannah year after year for being childless:

So Peninnah would taunt Hannah and make fun of her because the LORD had kept her from having children. Year after year it was the same—Peninnah would taunt Hannah as they went to the Tabernacle. Each time, Hannah would be reduced to tears and would not even eat. (1 Samuel; 1:6-7 NLT).

The Lord eventually blessed her with a son. He grew up to be the prophet Samuel.

David Arranged The Death of Bathsheba's Husband Uriah

Although David was already married, he organized the death of Bathsheba's husband Uriah so that he could eventually marry her (2 Samuel 11).

Solomon Fell Into Idolatry With His Many Wives

In the case of Solomon, though he was given wisdom by the Lord, he foolishly married a number of women. This caused him to fall into idolatry (1 Kings 11:1-8).

The Warning To The Kings Of Israel

Before the nation entered into the Promised Land, the future Hebrew kings were warned against multiplying wives because their hearts might be turned away from God:

The king must not take many wives for himself, because they will turn his heart away from the LORD (Deuteronomy 17:17 NLT).

In sum, whenever we find an example in Scripture of a man who had multiple wives, there were always problems connected to the marriages! Furthermore, there is NO example in Scripture of the Lord ever encouraging any man to take to himself a second wife.

Why Did The Lord Allow Polygamy?

Since polygamy was practiced by some of the leading figures of the Old Testament, and it always seemed to cause trouble in the lives who took more than one wife, the obvious question is, "Why did the Lord allow it?"

The answer seems to lie in the patriarchal society that was practiced at that time. Indeed, as far back as Abraham, one of the main purposes of marriage was to produce a male heir to carry on the name of the family. As we had previously mentioned, the early Hebrews practiced levirate marriage. This name comes from the Latin word *levir*, and refers to "a husband's brother."

Simply put, if a man who married died without having children, his brother was to have sexual relations with his wife to make certain that his family line continued to exist.

In addition, this would prevent his widow from marrying someone from outside of the family. If that had occurred, it would have had repercussions with respect to the family's property. Accordingly, the levirate marriage allowed the firstborn son to be reckoned as the son of the deceased brother.

The Baker Illustrated Bible explained how day-to-day life was centered on the family unit:

Day-to-day life in ancient Israel centered on activities providing sustenance and security. The fundamental social institution was the family unit, which furnished food and shelter. All other communal endeavors served the needs of both individual families and broader society. Israel was patriarchal and tribal (Judg. 21:24). Family descent was based on the father's lineage (patrilineal). Land was inherited within the paternal clan (patrimony). The basic family unit was designated as a "father's family" (literally, "father's house"; Num. 1:2) or simply a "family" (literally, "house"; NRSV: "household"; Josh. 7:18). This structure included three or four generations, usually led by a grandfather with several sons, living in close proximity or even the same house. Two foundational kinship relations defined the household: sibling and parent-child relationships. The household also provided a pattern for the clan, tribe, and nation; at each of these levels the social organization was analogous to the family unit. A grandparent, stepparent, or elder could be called mother or father; a child's spouse, grandchild, or youth was called a daughter or son; and a cousin or fellow Israelite was a sister or brother (Baker Illustrated Bible Introduction)

What If The Brother Refused To Marry?

If the husband's brother refused to marry his sister-in-law, a particular ceremony of would then take place:

But if the man refuses to marry his brother's widow, she must go to the town gate and say to the elders assembled there, 'My husband's brother refuses to preserve his brother's name in Israel—he refuses to fulfill the duties of a brother-in-law by marrying me.' The elders of the town will then summon him and talk with him. If he still refuses and says, 'I don't want to marry her,' the widow must walk over to him in the presence of the elders, pull his sandal from his foot, and spit in his face. Then she must declare, 'This is what happens to a man who refuses to provide his brother with children.' Ever afterward in Israel his family will be referred to as 'the family of the man whose sandal was pulled off!' (Deuteronomy 25:7-10 NLT).

We Find Only Two Examples Of Levirate Marriage In The Old Testament

Apart from this passage in Deuteronomy, levirate marriage is mentioned only twice in the remainder of the Old Testament, the narratives of Tamar and Ruth.

Tamar

The situation with the Canaanite woman Tamar was one repulsive event after another (Genesis 38:6–30). She married the eldest son of Judah, Er. When her evil husband was killed by the Lord, she married his brother Onan. Onan, however, would not fulfill his responsibility:

But Onan was not willing to have a child who would not be his own heir. So whenever he had intercourse with his brother's wife, he spilled the semen on the ground (Genesis 38:9 NLT).

This caused the Lord to kill Onan.

Furthermore, Judah reneged on the promise to give Tamar his other son, Shelah. She then she disguised herself as a prostitute and tricked Judah into having sex with her. The result was she became pregnant and gave birth to the twins Zerah and Perez.

Ruth

In contrast to the disgusting events surrounding the marriages of Tamar there is the beautiful story of Ruth who was from Moab. Moab. Her late husband, Mahlon, closest kinsman, was an unnamed relative of her deceased father-in-law Elimelech. He publicly refused to fulfill his obligation to marry Ruth. He feared putting his own estate in danger. Ruth's father-in-law's next-closest relative was Boaz. He gladly took upon himself the role of kinsman-redeemer and married Ruth. We read about this delightful episode in Ruth 4.

We also should not miss the fact that both of these women who were involved in levirate marriages, Tamar and Ruth would become ancestors of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 1:3,5).

Marriage Between Close Relatives Was Forbidden

While polygamy was practiced in the ancient world, we find that the Old Testament condemned sexual relations between close relatives (Leviticus 18:6–18).

However, in the beginning, it did permit marriages between cousins. We have two examples of this. Isaac married his cousin Rebekah (Genesis 24:15) and Jacob married his cousin Rachel (Genesis 28:2).

Priest Were Given Special Restrictions

Special restrictions are placed upon priests, who are not to marry divorcees or prostitutes:

Don't marry a divorced woman or a woman who has served as a temple prostitute. You are holy (Leviticus 21:7 CEV).

The High Priests could marry only virgins:

If you are the high priest, you must marry only a virgin from your own tribe. Don't marry a divorced woman or any other woman who has already had sex, including a temple prostitute (Leviticus 21:13–14 CEV).

A priest must not marry a divorced woman; he can marry only a virgin from Israel or the widow of another priest (Ezekiel 44:22 CEV).

It Was Forbidden For Israelites To Intermarry With The Canaanites

The Lord also forbade His people from marrying people from Canaan. In fact, the Lord condemned any Israelite who intermarried with the seven peoples who lived in the land of Canaan:

You must 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 me to worship other gods. Then the anger of the LORD will erupt against you and he will quickly destroy you (Deuteronomy 7:3–4 NET).

Be careful not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone invites you, you will eat from his sacrifice; and you then take his daughters for your sons, and when his daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will make your sons prostitute themselves to their gods as well. (Exodus 34:15–16 NET).

However, Deuteronomy did allow a Hebrew to marry a captured woman from among “their enemies”

When you go out to do battle with your enemies and the LORD your God allows you to prevail and you take prisoners, if you should see among them an attractive woman whom you wish to take as a wife, you may bring her back to your house. She must shave her head, trim her nails, discard the clothing she was wearing when captured, and stay in your house, lamenting for her father and mother for a full month. After that you may have sexual relations with her and become her husband and she your wife. (Deuteronomy 21:10–13 NET).

Not Everyone Followed This

In contrast to these restrictions, Joseph married an Egyptian woman named Asenath (Genesis 41:45), and Moses married Zipporah, a Midianite (Exodus 2:21), as well as an unnamed Cushite (Numbers 12:1). Bathsheba, who would become David’s wife, was married to a Hittite man named Uriah (2 Samuel 11:3).

Solomon married numerous foreign wives. Some of his marriages were for diplomatic reasons, such as a pharaoh’s daughter. Scripture informs us that this led to his turning away from the Lord:

King Solomon fell in love with many foreign women (besides Pharaoh’s daughter), including Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites. They came from nations about which the LORD had warned the Israelites, “You must not establish friendly relations with them! If you do, they will surely shift your allegiance to their gods.” But Solomon was irresistibly attracted to them. He had

700 royal wives and 300 concubines; his wives had a powerful influence over him (1 Kings 11:1–3 NET).

Later, Nehemiah would remind the people about this unfortunate situation in the life of Solomon:

Was it not because of things like these that King Solomon of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. But the foreign wives made even him sin! Should we then in your case hear that you do all this great evil, thereby being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign wives?" (Nehemiah 13:26,27 NET).

The people were urged not to follow his example.

Ezra Condemned Mixed Marriages

After the return of the people from the Babylonian captivity mixed marriages were severely condemned by Ezra (9:12; 10:3, 17), Nehemiah (10:28–30; 13:23–27), and Malachi (2:11–12).

There was concern that such mixed marriages would taint “the holy race” of God’s chosen people. Ezra wrote:

Now when these things had been completed, the leaders approached me and said, “The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the local residents who practice detestable things similar to those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. Indeed, they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has become intermingled with the local residents. Worse still, the leaders and the officials have been at the forefront of all of this!” (Ezra 9:1–2 NET).

Unfortunately, the situation of believers marrying nonbelievers remains with us to this day.

Summary

As we saw in Appendix 2, marriage was to be between one man and one woman. Furthermore, God’s people were to marry fellow believers. Mixed marriages were condemned by the Lord.

While polygamy was allowed, it was never God’s ideal. As we also observed, there were always bad results when a man married more than one wife.

About The Author

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