

CHAPTER 4: MARRIAGE: FROM THE INTERNATIONAL STANDARD BIBLE ENCYCLOPEDIA

INTRODUCTORY

It would be interesting to study marriage biologically and sociologically, to get the far and near historical and social background of it as an institution, especially as it existed among the ancient Jews, and as it figures in the teaching of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. For, like all social institutions, marriage, and the family which is the outcome of marriage, must be judged, not by its status at any particular time, but in the light of its history. Such a study of it would raise a host of related historic questions, e.g. What was its origin? What part has it played in the evolution and civilization of the race? What social functions has it performed? And then, as a sequel, Can the services it has rendered to civilization and progress be performed or secured in any other way? This, indeed, would call for us to go back even farther — to try to discover the psychology of the institution and its history, the beliefs from which it has [PAGE 629]sprung and by which it has survived so long. This were a task well worth while and amply justified by much of the thinking of our time; for, as one of the three social institutions that support the much challenged form and fabric of modern civilization, marriage, private property and the state, its continued existence, in present form at least, is a matter of serious discussion and its abolition, along with the other two, is confidently prophesied. “Marriage, as at present understood, is an arrangement most closely associated with the existing social status and stands or falls with it” (Bebel, *Socialism and Sex*, 199, Reeves, London; *The Cooperative Commonwealth in Its Outline*, Gronlund, 224). But such a task is entirely outside of and beyond the purpose of this article.

Neither the Bible in general, nor Jesus in particular, treats of the family from the point of view of the historian or the sociologist, but solely from that of the teacher of religion and morals. In short, their point of view is theological, rather than sociological. Moses and the prophets, no less than Jesus and His apostles, accepted marriage as an existing institution which gave rise to certain practical, ethical questions, and they dealt with it accordingly. There is nothing in the record of the teachings of Jesus and of His apostles to indicate that they gave to marriage any new social content, custom or sanction. They simply accepted it as it existed in the conventionalized civilization of the Jews of their day and used it and the customs connected with it for ethical or illustrative purposes. One exception is to be made to this general statement, namely, that Jesus granted that because of the exigencies of the social development Moses had modified it to the extent of permitting and regulating divorce, clearly indicating, however, at the same time, that He regarded such modification as out of harmony with the institution as at first given to mankind. According to the original Divine purpose it was monogamous, and any form of polygamy, and apparently of divorce, was excluded by the Divine idea and purpose. The treatment of the subject here, therefore, will be limited as follows: Marriage among the Ancient Hebrews and Other Semites; Betrothal as the First Formal Part of the Transaction; Wedding Ceremonies Connected with Marriage, especially as Reflected in the New Testament; and Jesus’ Sanction and Use of the Institution, Teaching concerning Divorce, etc. [PAGE 630]

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1. MARRIAGE AMONG THE HEBREWS:

With the Hebrews married life was the normal life. Any exception called for apology and explanation. “Any Jew who has not a wife is no man” (Talmud). It was regarded as awaiting everyone on reaching maturity; and sexual maturity comes much earlier indeed in the East than with us in the West — in what we call childhood. The ancient Hebrews, in common with all Orientals, regarded the family as the social unit. In this their view of it coincides with that, of modern sociologists. Of the three great events in the family life, birth, marriage and death, marriage was regarded as the most important. It was a step that led to the gravest tribal and family consequences. In case of a daughter, if she should prove unsatisfactory to her husband, she would likely be returned to the ancestral home, discarded and discredited, and there would be almost inevitably a feeling of injustice engendered on one side, and a sense of mutual irritation between the families (Judges 14:20; 1 Samuel 18:19). If she failed to pass muster with her mother-in-law she would just as certainly have to go, and the results would be much the same (compare customs in China). It was a matter affecting the whole circle of relatives, and possibly tribal amity as well. It was natural and deemed necessary, therefore, that the selection of the wife and the arrangement of all contractual and financial matters connected with it should be decided upon by the parents or guardians of the couple involved. Though the consent of the parties was sometimes sought (Genesis 24:8) and romantic attachments were not unknown (Genesis 29:20; 34:3; Judges 14:1; 1 Samuel 18:20), the gift or woman in the case was not currently thought of as having a personal existence at her own disposal. She was simply a passive unit in the family under the protection and supreme control of father or brothers. In marriage, she was practically the chattel, the purchased possession and personal property of her husband, who was her *ba`al* or master (Hos 2:16), she herself being *be`ulah* (Isaiah 62:4). The control, however, was not always absolute (Genesis 26:34; Exodus 2:21).

The bargaining instinct, so dominant among Orientals then as now, played a large part in the transaction. In idea the family was a little kingdom of which the father was the king, or absolute ruler. There are many indications, not only that the family was the unit from which national coherence was derived, but that this unit was perpetuated through the supremacy of the oldest male. Thus society became patriarchal, and this is the key of the ancient history of the family and the nation. Through the [PAGE 631] expansion of the family group was evolved in turn the clan, the tribe, the nation, and the authority of the father became in turn that of the chief, the ruler, and the king. The Oriental cannot conceive, indeed, of any band, or clan, or company without a “father,” even though there be no kith or kinship involved in the matter. The “father” in their thought, too, was God’s representative, and as such he was simply carrying out God’s purpose, for instance, in selecting a bride for his son, or giving the bride to be married to the son of another. This is as true of the far East as of the near East today. Accordingly, as a rule, the young people simply acquiesced, without question or complaint, in what was thus done for them, accepting it as though God had done it directly. Accordingly, too, the family and tribal loyalty overshadowed love-making and patriotism, in the larger sense. Out of this idea of the solidarity and selectness of the tribe and family springs the overmastering desire of the Oriental for progeny, and for the conservation of the family or the tribe

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at any cost. Hence, the feuds, bloody and bitter, that persist between this family or tribe and another that has in any way violated this sacred law.

Traces of what is known as beena marriage are found in the Old Testament, e.g. that of Jacob, where Laban claims Jacob's wives and children as his own (Genesis 31:31,43), and that of Moses (Exodus 2:21; 4:18). This is that form of marriage in which the husband is incorporated into the wife's tribe, the children belonging to her tribe and descent being reckoned on her side (compare W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, 94). In Samson's case we seem to have an instance of what is known among Arabs as tsadqat marriage (from tsadaq, "gift"), the kid here being the customary tsadaq (Judges 14; 15:1; 16:4). There is no hint that he meant to take his wife home. It is differentiated from prostitution in that no disgrace is attached to it and the children are recognized as legitimate by the tribe. Such marriages make it easier to understand the existence of the matriarchate, or the custom of reckoning the descent of children and property through the mothers. The influence of polygamy would work in the same direction, subdividing the family into smaller groups connected with the several wives. There is, however, no clear evidence in the Old Testament of polyandry (a plurality of husbands), though the Levirate marriage is regarded by some as a survival of it. In other words, polygamy among the Hebrews seems to have been confined to polygyny (a plurality of wives). It is easy to trace its chief causes: **(1)** desire for a numerous offspring ("May his tribe increase!"); **[PAGE 632] (2)** barrenness of first wife (as in Abraham's case); **(3)** advantages offered by marital alliances (e.g. Solomon); **(4)** the custom of making wives of captives taken in war (compare Psalm 45:3,9); **(5)** slavery, which as it existed in the Orient almost implied it.

2. BETROTHAL THE FIRST FORMAL PART:

Betrothal with the ancient Hebrews was of a more formal and far more binding nature than the "engagement" is with us. Indeed, it was esteemed a part of the transaction of marriage, and that the most binding part. Among the Arabs today it is the only legal ceremony connected with marriage. Genesis 24:58,60 seems to preserve for us an example of an ancient formula and blessing for such an occasion. Its central feature was the dowry ([mohar]), which was paid to the parents, not to the bride. It may take the form of service (Genesis 29; 1 Samuel 18:25). It is customary in Syria today, when the projected marriage is approved by both families, and all the financial preliminaries have been settled, to have this ceremony of betrothal. It consists in the acceptance before witnesses of the terms of the marriage as contracted for. Then God's blessing is solemnly asked on the union thus provided for, but to take place probably only after some months, or perhaps some years. The betrothal effected, all danger from any further financial fencing and bluffing now being at an end, happiness and harmony may preside over all the arrangements for the marriage day. Among the Jews the betrothal was so far regarded as binding that, if marriage should not take place, owing to the absconding of the bridegroom or the breach of contract on his part, the young woman could not be married to another man until she was liberated by a due process and a paper of divorce. A similar custom prevails in China and Japan, and in cases becomes very oppressive. The marriage may have been intended by the parents from the infancy of the parties, but this formality of betrothal is not

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entered on till the marriage is considered reasonably certain and measurably near. A prolonged interval between betrothal and marriage was deemed undesirable on many accounts, though often an interval was needed that the groom might render the stipulated service or pay the price — say a year or two, or, as in the case of Jacob, it might be seven years. The betrothed parties were legally in the position of a married couple, and unfaithfulness was “adultery” (Dt 22:23; Matthew 1:19).

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Polygamy is likely to become prevalent only where conditions are abnormal, as where there is a disproportionate number of females, as in tribal life in a state of war. In settled conditions it is possible only to those able to provide “dowry” and support for each and all of the wives. The fact of polygamy in Old Testament times is abundantly witnessed in the cases of Abraham, Jacob, the judges, David, Solomon, etc. It was prevalent in Issachar (1 Chronicles 7:4); among the middle class (1 Samuel 1:1 f). But it is treated, even in the Old Testament, as incompatible with the Divine ideal (Genesis 2:24), and its original is traced to deliberate departure from that ideal by Lamech, the Cainite (Genesis 4:19). Kings are warned against it (Dt 17:17; compare Genesis 29:31; 30). Noah, Isaac and Joseph had each only one wife, and Bible pictures of domestic happiness are always connected with monogamy (2 Kings 4; Psalm 128; Proverbs 31; compare Sirach 25:1; 26:1,13). Marriage is applied figuratively, too, to the union between God and Israel, implying monogamy as the ideal state. Nevertheless, having the advantage of precedent, it was long before polygamy fell into disuse in Hebrew society. Herod had nine wives at one time (Josephus, Ant, XVII, I, 2). Justin Martyr (Dial., 134, 141) reproaches Jews of his day with having “four or even five wives,” and for “marrying as many as they wish” (compare Talm). It was not definitely and formally forbidden among Jews until circa 1000 AD. It exists still among Jews in Moslem lands. Side by side with this practice all along has been the ideal principle (Genesis 2:18) rebuking and modifying it. The legal theory that made the man “lord” of the wife (Genesis 3:16; Tenth Commandment) was likewise modified in practice by the affection of the husband and the personality of the wife. The difference between a concubine and a wife was largely due to the wife’s birth and higher position and the fact that she was usually backed by relatives ready to defend her. A slave could not be made a concubine without the wife’s consent (Genesis 16:2).

3. WEDDING CEREMONIES:

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 (see Genesis 24:3 ff). **[PAGE 634]** Later, in the case of a virgin, an interval of not exceeding a year came to be observed.

The first ceremony, the wedding procession, apparently a relic of marriage by capture (compare Judges 5:30; Psalm 45:15), was the first part of the proceedings. The bridegroom’s “friends” (John 3:29) went, usually by night, to fetch the bride and her attendants to the home of the groom (Matthew 9:15; John 3:29). The joyousness of it all is witnessed by the proverbial “voice of

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the bridegroom” and the cry, “Behold the bridegroom cometh!” (Jeremiah 7:34; Revelation 18:23). The procession was preferably by night, chiefly, we may infer, that those busy in the day might attend, and that, in accordance with the oriental love of scenic effects, the weird panorama of lights and torches might play an engaging and kindling part.

The marriage supper then followed, generally in the home of the groom. Today in Syria, as Dr. Mackie, of Beirut, says, when both parties live in the same town, the reception may take place in either home; but the older tradition points to the house of the groom’s parents as the proper place. It is the bringing home of an already accredited bride to her covenanted husband. She is escorted by a company of attendants of her own sex and by male relatives and friends conveying on mules or by porters articles of furniture and decoration for the new home. As the marriage usually takes place in the evening, the house is given up for the day to the women who are busy robing the bride and making ready for the coming hospitality. The bridegroom is absent at the house of a relative or friend, where men congregate in the evening for the purpose of escorting him home. When he indicates that it is time to go, all rise up, and candles and torches are supplied to those who are to form the procession, and they move off. It is a very picturesque sight to see such a procession moving along the unlighted way in the stillness of the starry night, while, if it be in town or city, on each side of the narrow street, from the flat housetop or balcony, crowds look down, and the women take up the peculiar cry of wedding joy that tells those farther along that the pageant has started. This cry is taken up all along the route, and gives warning to those who are waiting with the bride that it is time to arise and light up the approach, and welcome the bridegroom with honor. As at the house where the bridegroom receives his friends before starting some come late, and speeches of congratulation have to be made, and poems have to be recited or sung in praise of the groom, and to the honor of his family, it is often near midnight when the **[PAGE 635]** procession begins. Meanwhile, as the night wears on, and the duties of robing the bride and adorning the house are all done, a period of relaxing and drowsy waiting sets in, as when, in the New Testament parable, both the wise and the foolish virgins were overcome with sleep. In their case the distant cry on the street brought the warning to prepare for the reception, and then came the discovery of the exhausted oil.

Of the bridegroom’s retinue only a limited number would enter, their chief duty being that of escort. They might call next day to offer congratulations. An Arabic wedding rhyme says:

*“To the bridegroom’s door went the torch-lit array,
And then like goats they scattered away.”*

With their dispersion, according to custom, the doors would be closed, leaving within the relatives and invited guests; and so, when the belated virgins of the parable hastened back, they too found themselves inexorably shut out by the etiquette of the occasion. The opportunity of service was past, and they were no longer needed.

At the home all things would be “made ready,” if possible on a liberal scale. John 2 gives a picture of a wedding feast where the resources were strained to the breaking point. Hospitality was here especially a sacred duty, and, of course, greatly ministered to the joy of the occasion. An oriental proverb is significant of the store set by it:

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*“He who does not invite me to his marriage
Will not have me to his funeral.”*

To decline the invitation to a marriage was a gross insult (Matthew 22).

It was unusual in Galilee to have a “ruler of the feast” as in Judea (John 2). There was no formal religious ceremony connected with the Hebrew marriage as with us — there is not a hint of such a thing in the Bible. The marriage was consummated by entrance into the “chamber,” i.e. the nuptial chamber (Hebrew [chedher]), in which stood the bridal bed with a canopy ([chuppah]), being originally the wife’s tent (Genesis 24:67; Judges 4:17). In all lands of the dispersion the name is still applied to the embroidered canopy under which the contracting parties stand or sit during the festivities. In Arabic, Syriac, and Hebrew the bridegroom is said to “go in” to the bride. [Page 636]

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 Old Testament 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.

4. JESUS’ SANCTION OF THE INSTITUTION:

The most characteristic use of marriage and the family by our Lord is that in which He describes the kingdom of God as a social order in which the relationship of men to God is like that of sons to a father, and their relation to each other like that between brothers. This social ideal, which presents itself vividly and continuously to His mind, is summed up in this phrase, “Kingdom of God,” which occurs more than a hundred times in the Synoptic Gospels. The passages in which it occurs form the interior climax of His message to men. It is no new and noble Judaism, taking the form of a political restoration, that He proclaims, and no “far-off Divine event” to be realized only in some glorious apocalyptic consummation; but a kingdom of God “within you,” the chief element of it communion with God, the loving relation of “children” to a “Father,” a present possession. Future in a sense it may be, as a result to be fully realized, and yet present; invisible, and yet becoming more and more visible as a new social order, a conscious brotherhood with one common, heavenly Father, proclaimed in every stage of His teaching in spite of opposition and varying fortunes with unwavering certainty of its completion — this is the “kingdom” that Jesus has made the inalienable possession of the Christian consciousness. His entire theology may be described as a transfiguration of the family (see Peabody, *Jesus Christ, and the Social Question*, 149 ff; Holtzmann, *New Testament Theology*, I, 200; Harnack, *History of Dogma*, I, 62; B. Weiss, *Biblical*

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Theol. of the New Testament, I, 72, English translation, 1882). **[Page 637]**

Beyond this Jesus frequently used figures drawn from marriage to illustrate His teaching concerning the coming of the kingdom, as Paul did concerning Christ and the church. There is no suggestion of reflection upon the Old Testament teaching about marriage in His teaching except at one point, the modification of it so as to allow polygamy and divorce. Everywhere He accepts and deals with it as sacred and of Divine origin (Matthew 19:9, etc.), but He treats it as transient, that is of the “flesh” and for this life only.

5. HIS TEACHING CONCERNING DIVORCE:

A question of profound interest remains to be treated: Did Jesus allow under any circumstances the remarriage of a divorced person during the lifetime of the partner to the marriage? Or did He allow absolute divorce for any cause whatsoever? Upon the answer to that question in every age depend momentous issues, social and civic, as well as religious. The facts bearing on the question are confessedly enshrined in the New Testament, and so the inquiry may be limited to its records. Accepting with the best scholarship the documents of the New Testament as emanating from the disciples of Jesus in the second half of the 1st century AD, the question is, what did these writers understand Jesus to teach on this subject? If we had only the Gospels of Mark and Luke and the Epistles of Paul, there could be but one answer given: Christ did not allow absolute divorce for any cause (see Mark 10:2 ff; Luke 16:18; Galatians 1:12; 1 Corinthians 7:10). The Old Testament permission was a concession, He teaches, to a low moral state and standard, and opposed to the ideal of marriage given in Genesis (2:23).

“The position of women in that day was far from enviable. They could be divorced on the slightest pretext, and had no recourse at law. Almost all the rights and privileges of men were withheld from them. What Jesus said in relation to divorce was more in defense of the rights of the women of His time than as a guide for the freer, fuller life of our day. Jesus certainly did not mean to recommend a hard and enslaving life for women. His whole life was one long expression of full understanding of them and sympathy for them” (Patterson, *The Measure of a Man*, 181 f).

Two sayings attributed to Christ and recorded by the writer or editor of the First Gospel (Matthew 5:32; 19:9) seem directly to contravene His teaching as recorded in Mark and Luke. Here he seems to allow divorce **[Page 638]** for “fornication” (*ei me epi porneia*, save for fornication”), an exception which finds no place in the parallels (compare Corinthians 7:15, which allows remarriage where a Christian partner is deserted by a heathen). The sense here demands that “fornication” be taken in its wider sense (Hos 2:5; Am 7:17; 1 Corinthians 5:1). Divorce to a Jew carried with it the right of remarriage, and the words ‘causeth her to commit adultery’ (Matthew 5:32) show that Jesus assumed that the divorced woman would marry again. Hence, if He allowed divorce, He also allowed remarriage. A critical examination of the whole passage in Matthew has led many scholars to conclude that the exceptive clause is an interpolation due to the Jewish-Christian compiler or editor through whose hands the materials passed. Others think it betrays traces of having been rewritten from Mark or from a source common to both Matthew and Mark, and combined with a semi-Jewish tradition, in short, that it is due to literary revision and compilation.

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The writer or compiler attempted to combine the original sayings of Jesus and His own interpretation. Believing that our Lord had not come to set aside the authority of Moses, but only certain Pharisaic exegesis, and supported, as doubtless he was, by a Jewish-Christian tradition of Palestine, he simply interpreted Mark's narrative by inserting what he regarded as the integral part of an eternal enactment of Yahweh. In doing this he was unconsciously inconsistent, not only with Mark and Luke, but also with the context of the First Gospel itself, owing to his sincere but mistaken belief that the Law of Moses must not be broken. The view implied by the exception, of course, is that adultery ipso facto dissolves the union, and so opens the way to remarriage. But remarriage closes the door to reconciliation, which on Christian principles ought always to be possible (compare Hosea; Jeremiah 3; Hermas, Mand iv.1). Certainly much is to be said for the view which is steadily gaining ground, that the exception in Matthew is an editorial addition made under the pressure of local conditions and practical necessity, the absolute rule being found too hard (see Hastings, Dictionary of the Bible (five volumes), extra vol, 27b, and The Teaching of our Lord as to the Indissolubility of Marriage, by Stuart Lawrence Tyson, M.A. Oxon., University of the South, 1912).

The general principle expanded in the New Testament and the ideal held up before the Christians is high and clear. How far that ideal can be embodied in legislation and applied to the community as a whole all are agreed must **[Page 639]** depend upon social conditions and the general moral development and environment.