

Weddings of Ancient Israel

A Picture of the Messiah

By Return To God



What does Scripture mean when it refers to the church as a bride and Jesus as a bridegroom? Is this just flowery language? Is it merely indicating God's love for His people? Understanding ancient Jewish wedding practices makes the meaning of Scripture clear. The wedding is a picture of the covenant Jesus made and reveals His plans to return for His bride, the church. The people of ancient Israel understood what Jesus was going to do because they understood the model of the wedding.

The analogy between a wedding and Christ and the Church is described in Ephesians 5:31-32 *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery -- but I am talking about Christ and the church.*

This article overviews the practices of an ancient Jewish betrothal and wedding. In parallel, it shows how Jesus has fulfilled the betrothal portion of the wedding and how He may fulfill the remainder when He comes again for His bride, the church.

Ancient Wedding Practices

Marriage Covenant and Bride Price

When a young man desired to marry a young woman in ancient Israel, he would prepare a contract or covenant to present to the young woman and her father at the young woman's home. The contract showed his willingness to provide for the young woman and described the terms under which he would propose marriage. The most important part of the contract was the bride price, the price that the young man was willing to pay to marry the young woman. This payment was to be made to the young woman's father in exchange for his permission to marry. The bride price was generally quite high. Sons were considered to be more valuable than daughters since they were physically

Jesus' Fulfillment

Marriage Covenant and Bride Price

Jesus came to the home of His bride (earth) to present His marriage contract. The marriage contract provided by Jesus is the new covenant, which provides for the forgiveness of sins of God's people. Jesus paid the bride price with His life. At the last supper, when breaking bread, He spoke of the price He was paying: *"...This is my body given for you..." --Luke 22:20.* Hebrews 8:15 makes it clear that Jesus died as the price for the new covenant: *"...Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance -- now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.* Other

more able to share in the work of farming and other heavy labor. The bride price compensated the young woman's family for the cost to raise a daughter and also indicated the love that the young man had for the young woman -- the young woman was very valuable to the young man! The young man would go to the young woman's house with the contract and present his offer to the young woman and her father.

Scripture references include 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, 1 Peter 1:18-19, Acts 20:28 and John 3:29.

The marriage contract, the new covenant, is described throughout Scripture: *"...This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." -- Jeremiah 31:31-34.*

The Cup

If the bride price was agreeable to the young woman's father, the young man would pour a glass of wine for the young woman. If the young woman drank the wine, it would indicate her acceptance of the proposal. At this point, the young man and young woman would be betrothed. Betrothal was legally binding, just like a marriage. The only difference was that the marriage was not yet consummated. A typical betrothal period was 1-2 years. During this time the bride and bridegroom each would be preparing for the marriage and wouldn't see each other.

The Cup

Just as the bridegroom would pour a cup of wine for the bride to drink to seal the marriage contract, so Jesus poured wine for His disciples. His words described the significance of the cup in representing the bride price for the marriage contract: *Then He took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom." -- Matt. 26:28-29* The disciples drank of the cup, thus accepting the contract.

Gifts for the Bride

Next, the bridegroom would present the bride with special gifts. The purpose of these gifts was to show the bridegroom's appreciation of the bride. They were also intended to help her to remember him during the long betrothal period.

Gifts for the Bride

The gifts that Jesus gave us are the gifts of the Holy Spirit: *We know that we live in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit -- 1 John 4:13.*

Jesus described this gift in John 14:26: *But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

Mikveh

The bride would next partake of a Mikveh, or cleansing bath. Mikveh is the same word used for baptism. To this day in conservative Judaism a bride cannot marry without a Mikveh.

Mikveh

The Mikveh, or baptism that Jesus provided for His bride was baptism in the Holy Spirit. *On one occasion, while He was eating with them, He gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." -- Acts 1:4.*

Preparing a Place

During the betrothal period, the bridegroom would prepare a wedding chamber for the honeymoon. This chamber was typically built in the bridegroom's father's house. The wedding chamber had to be a beautiful place to bring the bride. The bride and groom were to spend seven days there. The wedding chamber had to be built to the groom's father's specifications.

Preparing a Place

Just as a bridegroom would have told his bride that he would go to prepare a place for her, so Jesus told His disciples: *"...In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. -- John 13:1-3.*

The young man could go for his bride only when his father approved. If the bridegroom was asked when the wedding was to be, he might well say "it is not for me to know, only my father knows".

Just as in ancient Israel, the bridegroom could go for his bride only after his father approved, so Jesus said: *"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come -- Mark 13:32-33"*

A Waiting Bride Consecrated

While the bridegroom was preparing the wedding chamber, the bride was considered to be consecrated, set apart or "bought with a price". If she went out, she would wear a veil so others would know she was betrothed. During this time she prepared herself for the marriage. She likely had saved money all her life for this time. She would purchase expensive cosmetics and learn to apply them to make herself more beautiful for the bridegroom. She wouldn't know when her groom would come for her, so she always had to be ready. Since bridegrooms typically came for their brides in the middle of the night, to "steal them away", the bride would have to have her lamp and her belongings ready at all times. Her sisters or bridesmaids would also be waiting, keeping their lamps trimmed in anticipation of the late night festivities.

A Waiting Bride Consecrated

We, God's people, are now consecrated, or set apart, waiting for the return of our bridegroom. We should be spending this time preparing ourselves for Jesus' return. Jesus used a parable of ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom to describe the need to be alert for His return. *"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom...The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' "No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."*

Bridegroom Comes for His Bride

When the bridegroom's father deemed the wedding chamber ready, the father would tell the bridegroom that all was ready and to get His bride. The bridegroom would abduct his bride secretly, like a thief at night and take her to the wedding chamber. As the bridegroom approached the bride's home, he would shout and blow the shofar (ram's horn trumpet) so that she had some warning to gather her belongings to take into the wedding chamber. The bridegroom and his friends would come into the bride's house and get the bride and her bridesmaids.

Bridegroom Comes for His Bride

Just as the bridegroom would come for the bride in the middle of the night, with a shout and the sound of a shofar, so the Lord will come for us. *For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words. Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. -- 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.*

Seven Days in Wedding Chamber

The bridegroom would take his bride to the wedding chamber where they would spend seven days. The bridegroom's friend would wait outside the door of the wedding chamber. When the marriage was consummated, the bridegroom would tell his friend through the door, and the friend would announce it to the assembled guests. The guests would celebrate for seven days until the bride and bridegroom emerged from the wedding chamber.

Seven Days in Wedding Chamber

Ancient Jewish eschatology taught that a seven year "time of trouble" would come upon the earth before the coming of the Messiah. During that time of trouble, the righteous would be resurrected and would enter the wedding chamber where they would be protected from the time of trouble. Today that seven year period is referred to as the tribulation.

Marriage Supper

After seven days in the wedding chamber, the bride and bridegroom would emerge and participate in a feast with friends and family. There would be joyous celebrating during this feast. The feast would conclude the wedding celebration.

Marriage Supper

Just as the bride and bridegroom celebrated with a joyous wedding supper, so Jesus and His bride, the church will celebrate the marriage. *Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" -- Revelation 19:6-9.*

Depart for Home

After the marriage supper, the bride and bridegroom would leave the groom's father's house where the groom had built the wedding chamber. They would go to their own home, which the bridegroom had prepared.

Depart for Home

Just as the bride and bridegroom left the marriage supper to go to the home that the bridegroom had prepared, so Jesus and His bride will depart for their new home. *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes... One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. -- Revelation 21:1-4.*

From the pattern of the ancient wedding practices, we see that, like the bridegroom of ancient times, Jesus came to the home of His bride for the betrothal, made a covenant with His bride and sealed it with a glass of wine, paid the bride price with His life and sent His bride gifts of the Holy Spirit. We, the betrothed (the Church) currently await the return of our Bridegroom to take us to the wedding chamber (the rapture) to spend seven years (while the tribulation occurs on Earth). We will then celebrate the Marriage Supper of the Lamb and depart with our Bridegroom for our new home, the new Jerusalem.

Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

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