

The Marriage Ceremony Explained

I. Historical Setting/Judaism- the goal of marriage is procreation (a sign of God's blessings)

"The Old Testament Judaic thought saw the essential meaning and goal of marriage in procreation. The most obvious and necessary sign of God's blessing was seen in the continuation of the race. . .Judaism did not have a clear notion of personal survival after death. . .however the promise to Abraham (Gen 22:17-18) implied that life could be perpetuated through posterity, hence the central importance of childbirth." (John Meyendorff, Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective, SVS Press, 1984, p. 12)

1. Monogamous, Polygamous, Concubinage, : all were necessary for the continuation of the race.
2. Institution of the "levirate" (Gen 38:8) it was the responsibility of a man to "raise the seed" of a dead brother by marrying his widow and securing him posterity and God's blessings. (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective p. 13)
3. Monogamy however existed as the "ideal" i.e. Adam & Eve, Song of Songs, Prophectic images of the love of God for His people.
4. Roman Law understood marriage as a legal contract or agreement.

"In the Roman world, marriage was not conceived primarily as a means to secure posterity but as an agreement between two freely-choosing parties. . .The essence of marriage lies in the consent which, in turn, gives meaning and legal substance to the marriage agreement, or contract." (Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective, p. 16)

II. New Testament Meaning of Marriage Departs Radically From the Old Testament & Roman Law

"Not a single New Testament text mentioning marriage points to procreation as its justification or goal." (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective, p. 13)

1. The "levirate" Question (Matt 22:23-32; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-37)

"There came to him some Sadducees, those who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the wife and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and died without children; and the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife." And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the

passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to him." (Luke 20:27-37)

"This text is often understood to imply that marriage is only an earthly institution and that its reality is dissolved by death. Such an understanding prevailed in the Western Church, which never discouraged remarriage of widowers. . . Jesus' answer is, therefore, nothing more than a denial of a naïve and materialistic understanding of the Resurrection, and it does not give any positive meaning to marriage. . .whose meaning is revealed-implicitly and explicitly - in other parts of the New Testament" (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective p. 13-14)

2. The Teaching Prohibiting Divorce

"The union between husband and wife is an end in itself; it is an eternal union between two unique and eternal personalities which cannot be broken. . . Indissolubility, however, is not a requirement which is legally absolute. The famous exception mentioned by Matthew ("save for the cause of adultery" -5:32) is there to remind us that the law of the kingdom of God is never legally compelling, that is presupposes free human response. . .the gift of Christian marriage needs to be accepted, freely lived, but can eventually be rejected by man . . . In the case of adultery, the gift is refused and marriage does not exist. What occurs then is not a legal "divorce," but a tragedy of misused freedom, i.e., of sin. (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective, p. 15)

3. On The Second Marriage of Widowers & Divorcees

" It is only tolerated as better than 'burning.' Until the tenth century, it was not blessed in Church and, even today, it remains an obstacle for entering the clergy. In any case, Scripture and Tradition agree that faithfulness (of a widower) . . . is more than an ideal; it is a Christian norm. Christian marriage is . . . an eternal bond which will continue when our bodies will be "spiritual" and when Christ will be 'all in all.' (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective, p. 15)

III. Marriage as a Sacrament or Mystery

"This is a great mystery; but I speak concerning Christ and the Church. (Eph 5:32) . .By calling marriage a 'mystery,' St. Paul affirms that marriage also has a place in the eternal Kingdom. The husband becomes one single being, one single 'flesh' with his wife. . ." (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective p. 19)

1. The Eucharist is what gave marriage its' Christian meaning.

"Every Christian couple desirous of marriage went through the formalities of civil registration, which gave it validity in secular society; and then through their joint participation in the regular Sunday Liturgy, in the presence of the entire local Christian community, they received the Bishop's blessing. It was then that their civil agreement became also a 'sacrament,' with eternal value." (Meyendorff)

2. In the Orthodox Church it is the Priest who is the "Minister" of Marriage not the couple.

Orthodoxy never adopted "Roman legalism" as the basis of Sacramental Theology because it was the Eucharist which brought God's kingdom to an otherwise "civil" marriage. (It is not "till death do you part" in Orthodoxy)

"Until the ninth century the Church did not know any rite of marriage separate from the eucharistic Liturgy." (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective p. 25)

"Since the fourth century a specific solemnization of the sacrament is mentioned by Eastern Christian writers: a rite of crowning, performed during the eucharistic Liturgy" (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective p. 25)

A Change which affected the meaning of Marriage as a sacrament:

1. Byzantine Emperor Leo VI (912) in his new law 89 declared that the two legal acts of adopting a child and marriage are to be sanctioned by a church ceremony. (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective, p. 26)

2. Consequences of this law

- a.) The Church has to determine the legal status of marriages which contradicted Christian norms i.e. second, third marriages and Christians with non-Christians.
- b.) It had to also to "dissolve" them as well - i.e., grant divorces
- c.) The idea that marriage was a unique eternal bond - reflecting the union of Christ and the Church- was . . . obliterated in the conscience of the faithful. (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective, p. 27)
- d.) The Church developed a rite of marriage separate from the Eucharist and was used for marriages of a non-Orthodox to an Orthodox and for those entering into second marriages. (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective, p. 27)
- e.) A marriage rite including communion with the reserved sacrament was used in the Church as late as the fifteenth century. (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective, p. 27)

IV. The Rite of Marriage Explained :

1. **The Rite of Betrothal** (done traditionally in the Narthex) was originally a 'civil' ceremony of entering into a marriage contract, however, the Church provided these 'legal' rites with new meaning biblical and spiritual meanings.

2. The Prayers mention the betrothal of Isaac & Rebecca (Gen 24)

"The Fathers of the Church saw in Isaac and Rebecca's betrothal a 'type' of the call of the Gentiles to Christ. The Fathers also saw a figure of baptism in the fact that Rebecca was identified by the servant Eliezar when she drew water out of the well (Gen 24:14) : so also baptism through water reconciles mankind with God. . .the ultimate goal is always the same: the restoration of lost unity with God, the reintegration of human life into its authentic wholeness. This is also the meaning of the Christian betrothal." (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective, p. 31)

3. The "Rings" as a sign of God's pledge to man – not only a mutual pledge of individuals to each other.

"None of the four Biblical references used in the 'prayer of the rings' interprets the rite (simply as a pledge of mutual faithfulness) . . . In all the references, the ring is a sign of God's pledge to man." (Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective, p.32)

4. Can this "betrothal" be broken because we just don't get along?

"God Himself pledges His blessing and support, and unfaithfulness to each other means, for Christians, a betrayal of God and a rejection of His promise to grant them a new integrated and wholesome life." (Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective, p.33)

"Thus . . . it represents a real bond of marriage, lacking only the ultimate sacramental fulfillment." (Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective, p.33)

V. The Rite Crowning:

1. Psalm 128

"The procession before the crowning signifies therefore, an entrance into the Kingdom of Christ: human love will acquire a totally new dimension by being identified with the love of Christ for His Church." (Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective, p.34)

2. Vows are not exchanged in the Orthodox Wedding Service

" . . . inspired by the Latin marriage rite, where the 'consent' of the bridal pair is seen as an essential 'formula' of marriage, whose 'ministers' are the bridegroom and bride themselves. . . In Orthodoxy, however, the meaning of the marriage crowning is to integrate the bridal pair into the mystery of Christ's love for the Church: their consent is unquestionably required as a condition, but it is not the very content of the sacrament." (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective p.35)

3. The Five Elements of the Crowning (Originally celebrated at Eucharist)

- a.) The Prayers
- b.) The Placing of the Crowns
- c.) The Scripture Readings
- d.) The Lord's Prayer & Common Cup
- e.) The "dance of Isaiah" around the table

1. The Prayers:

" . . . marriage implies faithfulness, and the biblical personalities and episodes enumerated in the prayers affirm the first and foremost truth: that God remains faithful to His people despite . . . human sins, as long as man has faith in God." (Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective, p. 36)

"The second prayer asks for God's blessings and points to the Cross (Constantine & Helen) as the way back to Kingship and salvation i.e. self-denying love.

2. The Crowns as a Sign of Victory over death

Biblical Symbol of Victory over death. (Also 2 Tim 4:7, 1 Peter 5:4)

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable." (1 Cor. 9:24-25)

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." (Rev 2:10)

The Martyrs Have Completed the Race

a.) The Forty Martyrs of Sabasteia, Procopius

"O Holy Martyrs, who fought the good fight and have received your crowns: entreat the Lord that He will have mercy on our souls" (Hymn for the Wedding)

3. The Scripture Readings

a.) Ephesians 5:20-33

"Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."

"The union of Christ with the Church, His Body, is seen as the model-the absolute model-of the relationship between husband and wife." (Marriage An Orthodox Perspective p. 39)

A readiness to renounce one's own will for the sake of the other and to give precedence to the other. i.e., 'be subject to one another'

A divine order that declares not superiority but roles

Mutual subjection: "Nevertheless, in the Lord women is not independent of man nor man of women; for as women was made from man, so now man is born of women. And all things are from God." (1 Cor. 11:11-12)

b.) John 2:1-12

"On the third day there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; Jesus also was invited to the marriage, with his disciples. When the wine failed, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now six stone jars were standing there, for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast." So they took it. When the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first; and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine; but you have kept the good wine until now." This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him."

"The change of water into wine in Cana points to a transfiguration of the old into the new, a passage from death to life." (Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective, p.40)

4. The Lord's Prayer & The Common Cup

- a.) The "Lord's Prayer" always was part of a Eucharist
- b.) Common cup was once Holy Communion

5. The Dance of Isaiah (a liturgical dance)

"Isaiah dance with joy, a Virgin is indeed with child and shall bear a son, Emmanuel. He is both God and man, and 'Day at the Dawn' is His Name. Magnifying Him we call the Virgin blessed."

"The troparia summarize the entire Biblical content of Christian marriage, which is called to be a 'witness' to the coming Kingdom of God, inaugurated by the birth of the Son of God from a Virgin." (Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective, p.41)

"Receive their crowns into Thy Kingdom, preserving them spotless, blameless and without reproach unto the ages of ages" (Closing prayer)