

# Hebrew Weddings and Joseph's Silent Divorce

When [Jesus'] mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child ... Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly.

--Matthew 1:18-19

I have heard much wonder from people of all faiths concerning why there is not much mentioned on Saint Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. It's an easy argument to suggest that he is the most important person in the Bible who never said a word. To begin with, except for the genealogies, exceptionally few people are mentioned by name and yet don't speak. We even have an unnamed donkey speaking (Numbers 22:22-35)! Among the genealogies, we do see the fathers of King Saul, King David and (of course) King Solomon speaking, and they are clearly the three most important kings of Hebrew history.

But Jesus is a greater king still, so why was Saint Joseph not allowed to speak? And unlike the fathers of the kings Saul and David, who only made cameo appearances, Joseph played an active part in the story of Jesus. Besides raising a child who was not his own, he gave up his business to take his wife and adopted son to safety, he paid the ransom of Jesus (*pidyon haben*, Luke 2:22-24), and he fretted over Jesus when He became lost (finding in the temple, Luke 2:41-52, most notably verse 48). So why not even a peep out of him?

My humble answer is that it is not needed. The Bible is, among other things, a collection of things we ought to know. We may not find everything we ought to know agreeable to us, but we need to know it nonetheless. And if not everything we need to know is agreeable, then why assume that how we learn it must always be agreeable? If we truly believe that the Bible tells us what we need to know, then we won't let something as trivial as dialogue get in our way. So, let us look at the fathers of the kings. All, excepting Joseph, have spoken parts.

The father of David thought little of the future king, at least compared to David's older brothers. Joseph, however, shaped his whole life around a child that was not his, beginning at the child's conception! The father of King Solomon (King David) is infamous for the disobedience and rebellion among his children, which includes one son raping his half-sister (2 Samuel 13:1-22) and another having sexual intercourse in public with his father's whole harem (2 Samuel 16:22). In contrast, we are told that Jesus was obedient to his parents, his mother Mary and Saint Joseph (Luke 2:51). We can learn from this that Saint Joseph was loving, responsible, and a disciplinarian (not that Jesus would have willfully disobeyed Saint Joseph, but there is more to discipline than mere punishment). Saint Joseph does not have to answer for his actions; his actions have spoken for him. And this is just the "tip of the iceberg."

There is another man in the Bible named Joseph, to whom God spoke through dreams, who moved his family to Egypt to save them from death, and who is known for his chastity (this will come up again). By using contemporary ideas of "proof," one cannot prove the earthly father of Jesus had anything else in common with Joseph, the son of Israel. But the early Christians would have made the connection, and associated many other things with the father of Jesus by name alone. Belonging to a large family, being the favorite of his own father (Genesis 37:3), and tormented by his siblings for his righteous attitudes are fair assumptions one can make here. Indeed, we see strong parallels between

Joseph's brothers in Genesis and the accusations the former neighbors of Jesus made in Luke 4:22, 28-30.

But I want to get back to the titular matter of Hebrew weddings, and what they can tell us about this silent man. What the ancient Hebrews considered a wedding is *very* different than what we call a wedding today. So different that we really don't have the words to convey it, and so the Bible translations often give us a distorted meaning. We are forced to use words that are bad translations, yet are still the best our language has to offer. And while most Jews today have weddings similar to Christians, there are still nomadic tribes in the Middle East who maintain their ancient traditions. Unfortunately, what this wedding looks like is not spelled out in the Bible. Just like an author today will not spell out how someone got in their car, put the key in the ignition, turned the key, and operated the foot pedals and gear selection, the ancients didn't see the purpose in spelling out something as commonplace as a wedding. What they *do* spell out is when something unusual happens in a wedding, just like a modern-day author would explain what happens when a car in her story runs out of gas.

And the idea of a wedding is perhaps the most common theme the Bible uses, at least when describing man's relationship with God. Besides recording the abnormal aspects of the weddings actually mentioned in the Bible, many references to marriage are given. While the more subtle references would have been clearly understood by the early Church, they are not so obvious today. So, what is it that the Jews and early Christians saw that we don't easily recognize?

Perhaps the biggest difference is that a Jewish wedding consisted of two parts, the *kiddushin* (what is often translated as "betrothal") and the *nisu'in* (what is often translated as "wedding"). Again, these translations are not good translations, but they are the best we have. Today the *kiddushin* and *nisu'in* are usually done together, but in ancient times they were widely separated. Back then, a groom would go to the family of a young woman and make an arrangement to marry her. If an agreement was made, then the *kiddushin* took place. But unlike a contemporary "betrothal," the two were actually married. It was considered uncouth to have sexual relations at this time, but it was only a minor social *faux pax*. There was nothing illegal or immoral about having sexual relations at this time, only a sense that the couple could not control their sex drives. More normally, it was expected that the man would leave for a time, usually a year, so he could prepare a place for his bride (consider Jesus' words in John 14:2) and she could likewise prepare to leave her family. When this time was over, he would return to get his bride. The groom normally arrived at night, and that would be when the couple would have sex together for the first time. Consider the parable of the ten virgins, Matthew 25:1-13. This is the *nisu'in*, a time of living together. The *nisu'in* was celebrated with an extended party when the couple returned from the bridal chamber that night. The party would last seven days if the bride was a virgin (representing seven blessings on the couple), or three days if she had already been married to another man. The demands on the family to host such a party were great, and running out of food and wine was a pitiful event, as it suggested the family was not well off financially (consider the Wedding at Cana, John 2:1-11).

Again, the details of a wedding are not spelled out in the Bible, but these three examples show how important a wedding was to the ancient Hebrew culture and the teachings of Jesus. But I want to go through the Bible and show other examples of how a traditional wedding influenced scripture. The first example of a wedding we see in the Bible is that of Isaac and Rebecca. A servant goes to Summaria to find a wife for Isaac, makes the *kiddushin* on Isaac's behalf, and returns with her. Now, this is supposition on my part, but I think it reasonable nonetheless. The servant clearly did not go alone. It was a long and dangerous journey, and he was carrying a large treasury. It seems reasonable that at least some of those who went with him to find her would have then been sent ahead with news

of the marriage. This would have given Isaac time to prepare a place for his new bride. And as Abraham was a wealthy man, no doubt a massive party for his son took place upon her arrival. Indeed, as no details of the preparation period and party are given, we can assume that they took place, as only the unusual events would have been worth recording, and such was the *kiddushin* by proxy. If the Bible verses simply said something along the lines of "and there came a day when Isaac took a wife from his father's land, Rebecca," then there would have been no doubt in the ancient Jew's mind that the *kiddushin* and the *nisu'in* took place as with any other wedding.

The next marriage we come across is that of Jacob, and he had two marriages. In this case, Jacob actually goes and finds his future wife at a well (a recurring theme in the Bible, but I won't address that in this paper). He makes the *kiddushin* with her father (Genesis 29:18-20), but with a twist. As he has no wealth to give his father-in-law, he offers a time of service. So we see the time between the *kiddushin* and the *nisu'in* taking place, but for an unusual reason and for an unusual length of time. And if one pays attention, we also see Jacob preparing his home for his wife. He slowly builds up his own wealth as he serves (Genesis 30:25 - 31:18). But when the *nisu'in* finally takes place, we have to wonder if the party started *before* their first night in the bridal chamber, as he failed to recognize that he was not married to the woman he thought he was until the morning (Genesis 29:23-25)! And note that the week-long festivity after consummation is actually mentioned in this narrative: Genesis 29:27.

The next wedding I want to address is that of Ruth. It can be hard to see the traditional pattern because there are so many unique situations involved, and much of it has been turned upside down. But with a little imagination we still can see the parallels. Boaz directed his servants to ensure plenty of sheaves were available for Ruth to glean (Ruth 2:8-16). In doing so, he sought her out and set the stage for their ultimate marriage. When Ruth lay at his feet as he slept (Ruth 3:1-9), we do see that the traditional chastity during the *kiddushin* was being met, although this was still not a legal marriage at this point. Had they had sex at that time, then it could have been considered a legally binding marriage, but it wouldn't have been proper. Ruth was not free to marry him, as there was a relative who had a stronger claim to her (Ruth 3:12). So while Boaz was already an established man who had no reason to get his literal house in order, he still needed to get his legal matters organized by ensuring his relative would not accept her as a wife. And, as usual, the lack of detail concerning the *nisu'in* suggests it would have followed traditional practices, with a night of sharing a bed together for the first time, followed by a three-day party.

Next, I want to bring up the Book of Tobit, which is not included in Protestant Bibles. Once again, we see the future groom going to the bride's home and making arrangements to wed the bride. Once Tobias agreed to marry Sarah despite her father's warning that a demon (Asmodeus) had already killed seven of her husbands before they could have sexual relations with her, then they were officially married. Because of the extreme nature of the events taking place in the story, we actually see a biblical example of the *kiddushin* and the *nisu'in* taking place together. Understandably, the bride's father did not want Tobias to think about this too much. But we also get to see the finer points of the *nisu'in* in this story. Tobias and Sarah enter the bridal chamber, and say a prayer before they lay together, a prayer I think is worthwhile enough for Protestants to borrow a Catholic Bible to read. For those who have not read it, Tobias' angelic guide, the angel Raphael in disguise, subdued the demon while they prayed for God's will to be fulfilled. We also get to appreciate the excitement of the party that followed, especially since the father of the bride was already digging a grave for Tobias! Just as Sarah was cursed with being widowed seven times, the postcoital party finally brings the seven blessings to her life.

The final Old Testament wedding I want to address is the Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon. Although the wedding elements are buried deep in the poetry and are not always in chronological order, we actually see all the elements of a traditional Jewish wedding in it. As with Jacob's weddings, we have to understand what a Jewish wedding was before we can see it in the narrative. In the Song of Songs, the narrative acts in a manner not much different than a magician drawing the attention of the audience away from what is really happening. The poetry, imagery and changes of perspective makes it easy to assume the couple are already married, as opposed to going through the wedding process. The fact that it is extremely unlikely that the couple were chaste before the wedding doesn't help either. Nonetheless, we see early on that it is the groom who comes to the bride, and the arrangements necessary for the *kiddushin* are expressed in their promises of devotion.

Then the groom leaves, much to the dismay and worry of the bride. But just in time, the groom returns to her and they remain together for the remainder of the story. And the erotic descriptions they give of each other as the book concludes makes it easy to interpret it as the consummation of the marriage.

In the New Testament, we see all aspects of the Jewish marriage present in the life of Jesus. We also see parts of the marriage being used for other teachings as well. Perhaps the most obvious was the aforementioned Wedding at Cana, which was, not coincidentally, the first miracle (or "sign" as Saint John tells us) Jesus performed. The family always was the first and central aspect of God's plan for us, beginning with the Garden of Eden before the Fall (Genesis 1:27-28, 2:18-24). And the family begins with a marriage. We also have several parables that involve weddings, of which the Ten Virgins has already been mentioned. Others include "The Wedding Guest" (Luke 14:7-11), "The Great Feast" (Luke 14:15-24), and "The Wedding Feast" (Matthew 22:1-14). Granted, "The Great Feast" is not explicitly mentioned as a wedding feast, but there is no reason to assume it must not be one either.

Jesus often framed His rebukes based on wedding traditions. Arguably the most famous would be, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?" (Matthew 9:15), and following it is the key to the next part of the discussion. "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." Taken in context of what is going on, Jesus is explicitly calling Himself the groom and His listeners that He will leave the bride behind for a time, as per their marriage custom.

The idea of Jesus being the groom and the Church being the bride is well accepted in Christian culture. It is explicitly mentioned in the epistles, such as Ephesians 5:23, "For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church." But we really don't need this endorsement from Saint Paul to know this. If we understand what a Jewish wedding is, we see that a marriage between God and Church was taken for granted even while Jesus walked the Earth. Unlike the Old Testament, where details were only given to explain a variation of the traditional wedding, in the New Testament references are a map so one can know what stage of the wedding is being talked about. Once Jesus introduced Himself as the groom, the early Church (which was made up primarily of Jews) didn't need to be told it was a wedding, they saw all the key aspects of a wedding in the teachings.

The only aspect of our wedding to God that may need explaining is the acceptance of the proposal, the beginning of the *kiddushin*. The arrangement was made all the way back to the time of Abraham (Genesis 17:7). But the bride was not yet ready; she had to spend a millennia and a half preparing herself to leave her old home (Earth). We see in the prophets of old the familiar imagery of Israel or Jerusalem being the bride of God (Isaiah 54:5-10 and Hosea 2:18 are just two examples). Israel and God were in the *kiddushin*, but the *nisu'in* was a very long time in coming. As long as the bride prostituted herself or committed adultery (common descriptions of her fascination with

paganism), she was not ready to leave her old life behind. While Moses took the Hebrews out of the pagan land of Egypt, the Hebrews were not ready to leave the paganism behind.

But there is another problem here as well. While the marriage between Israel and God was legitimate, it still wasn't fulfilled. At least not "[as] it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:15). While this last quote was applied specifically to Baptism, we nonetheless see that, with God, doing the minimum is not enough. What God does is not to simply get by, but rather to achieve the greatest fulfillment. For all righteousness to be fulfilled, the groom needed to come to the bride. While the marriage was legal through Abraham, it was still not arranged in all righteousness until Jesus came to us. The point at which Jesus came to His bride is found in Mark 1:15, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." Note that "fulfillment" is part of this message -- the groom had finally arrived! Not only did Christ and Church enter the *kiddushin*, but the *kiddushin* was now properly performed. But it was still not consummated, at least not by the contemporary definition of that word. Once the two had met, the groom needed to leave the bride for a time so He could prepare His home. This is where the aforementioned John 14:2 comes into play: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that *I am going to prepare a place for you?*" (italics mine) And the bride has a duty to do as well, as she must prepare to leave her home. And while I believe there are scores and scores of biblical examples I could choose from here, I think perhaps the most profound way we are to prepare to leave this world is to assist others in leaving the world. "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations." (Matthew 28:19). We will be ready to leave our old home of Earth for the new home of Heaven when others are capable of entering Heaven themselves.

And, of course, we still have the fact that the groom will return. This is well attested to in all the apocalyptic literature in the New Testament. But for now, I will simply build on John 14's account by including the third verse: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be." Upon His return, we know that joyful consummation will take place. No single image concerning God's desired relationship with man is more common than the marriage, and Jesus played out the entire Jewish wedding in the gospels. Indeed, our wedding is the only wedding in the Bible that plays out exactly as it ought to play out, with no unusual circumstances changing the narrative.

So now that we know what a proper Jewish wedding is like, what can it tell us about Saint Joseph? Well, for one thing there are almost no details about his wedding at all, only that the *kiddushin* had taken place, but not the *nisu'in*. Because there is no narrative speaking of how the wedding is different, we can assume that the wedding between Mary and Joseph was proceeding as a wedding should have been for their culture. As such, they were already married at the point of the Annunciation, and could have had sexual intercourse without much public concern. But we know from the scripture that they did not, because Mary asked how she can possibly be pregnant (Luke 1:34). And from this point on, I am not going to dwell on what really happened, but to discuss what didn't happen, and why this is so important in understanding Saint Joseph.

Most importantly, Mary being pregnant after the *kiddushin* would not be a great scandal for *her*. After all, she was the woman and needed to obey her husband. It was ultimately Joseph's responsibility to abstain from sexual activity until the *nisu'in*, not hers. Her being pregnant was embarrassing to *him*, especially since he had the reputation of being a righteous man! Knowing he was not the father, he had every right to not only divorce her, but to subject her to the Trial of Bitter Water (Numbers 5:11-16), and would fully expect her to die from the ordeal. But he chose *not* to exercise this right, and let the world think that he used her for a one night stand and then dumped her. Even before God spoke to him

in a dream, we know this from scripture: "Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, *yet not willing to expose her to shame*, decided to divorce her quietly." (Matthew 1:19, italics mine). By not exposing her to shame, he chose not to make her undergo the ordeal. By divorcing her quietly, he told the world that the child was his, even though he knew better. He was willing to sacrifice a reputation he spent a lifetime creating to protect his wife and a child that was not his. But there is more.

By making the divorce quiet, the whole world would have thought they were still married, and he just never would have followed up with the *nisu'in*. I believe it is unlikely that he would have asked for a bill of divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). He wanted to keep the secret quiet, but a priest was needed for the bill. The priest would have had a moral obligation to expose such sinful behavior. The possibility that Saint Joseph intended to lie to the priest also seems unlikely for a righteous man to do. It appears to me that Saint Joseph originally planned to simply support his apparently unfaithful wife and her bastard child, yet not be a part of their lives. This has far reaching consequences. By not getting a legal divorce, he would have given up the ability to marry again. But perhaps most importantly, if the divorce were not legal, then this child, who was not his own, would have stood to inherit all that Saint Joseph had. Albeit, Saint Joseph was a poor man, as he paid the poor woman's holocaust and sin offering for her uncleanness of giving birth (Leviticus 12:8 and Luke 2:24). Of course, we know that Mary was not unfaithful, nor that the child was a bastard. But until Saint Joseph had the dream, that would have been what he was thinking. But no matter how far one can actually take this line of thought, the fact remains that Saint Joseph was willing to do anything and to sacrifice everything to protect his family, no matter how dysfunctional it appeared to be.

Despite not speaking a word, Saint Joseph has given us the most perfect example of what a (human) husband and father does. Nothing short of Yahweh was more valuable to him than his wife and her child. Even with the appearance of adultery on her part, Saint Mary remained his most valuable earthly possession. And let's not forget the love he had for her child, as he was not going to let the child suffer for her apparent indiscretions. His willingness to take them to Egypt to save their lives was merely another example of his integrity that was already proven by his decision to stand by Mary as best he could.

Without saying a word, Saint Joseph has given our culture the answer to all the "deadbeat dads," single parent families, and abortions that are taking place today. For a man who never spoke, it is difficult to find another who has more to say concerning the matter of fatherhood.

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