

# First Century Jewish Wedding Practices

Compiled and Written by Theresa Lisiecki

Within the ancient Jewish marriage practices there were four stages. First there was the **pledge or promise**. Most often families would get together when their children were very young, (as early as infancy but usually when their children were six or seven years old and “arrange the marriage. When the young girl “came of age” (menstruation had begun), in a somewhat public ceremonial fashion (larger family gathering) the young man would offer a cup of wine to his



intended. This was stage two, the **betrothal**. If she accepted and drinks the wine then the official year of betrothal began. Within this year the bride and bridegroom lived separately with their respective families but lived as completely committed to the other. During this time the groom often found/prepared/built their home under the supervision of his father. It was the father of the groom that determined that the home was ready and the wedding could happen. The bride also prepared as well in sewing and weaving for their future life together. This is what St. Matthew understood when he wrote that *Mary had been engaged/betrothed to Joseph* (Matthew 1:18). This year of living separate but committed lives was a legally binding commitment. Should one or the other not live within the expectations of being ritually, spiritual clean for their future spouse a divorce decree can be sought, which is why St. Joseph, after finding out that Mary was pregnant considered *divorcing her privately* (Matthew 1:19).

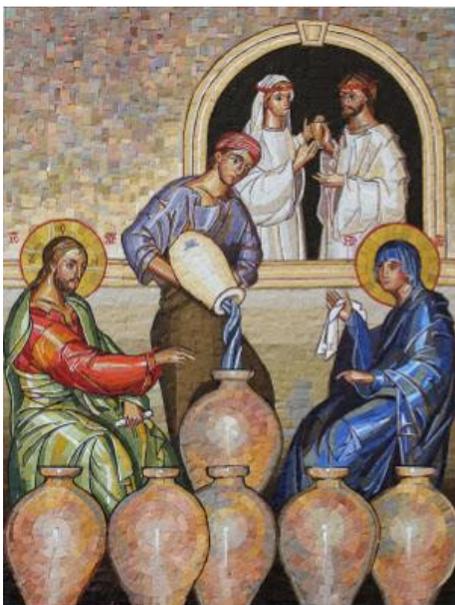
Usually about a year later the families will celebrate the finally coming together of the bride and groom with a **wedding feast**. The celebration began with the bride *adorning* herself, preparing herself to meet her groom. (Revelation 19:7-9; 21:2) Once the bride was prepared the bride along with her family and friends process through the town arriving at the home of the groom where she was announced (Revelation 19:9) and accepted with joyous celebration by all. (Revelation 21:2-8) It would be now that the wedding feast would begin and unlike the three to four-hour celebration we experience today, in the time of Christ the wedding feast lasted at least a week. Finally, when the time was right, with great fanfare the groom would come to his bride and carry her off to their home to consummate the relationship. From that point on they would live together as one in a covenant relationship of love.

In understanding of the image, from the time of our conception we have been *pledged or promised* to God. We were created in love by God for love, for God. Many are not aware of this and others refuse

to acknowledge or live for God. At the designated time God, through His Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven, lived among us and then died offering the cup of His sacrificial blood for our sanctification thus offering us the promise of betrothal. Those of us, through baptism, Confirmation and participation in the Eucharistic feast we, as the bride in these moments we accept Christ's cup of sacrifice and become, celebrate our betrothal to the Lamb. Those of us who honor this commitment live out our lives preparing ourselves to live in union with God forever in heaven. The key phrase here is *ongoing conversion* to purify or prepare our hearts to beat as one with Christ. But there are all too many who have accepted the betrothal but not the lifestyle expected and we can't have it both ways. This is the just judgement of God that we have studied in the book of Revelation.

Continuing with the image, the groom too has gone to prepare a place for us (John 14:3). After the resurrection and ascension, the groom has returned to heaven to prepare our home for us. As God through Jesus Christ's betrothed, when we die, we are welcomed into the family of God with great jubilation. This is why a funeral Mass is called a "celebration". We may be sad in our loss but the deceased, the bride is processing to the home prepared by Christ his/her groom. Think of it as the procession to and the reception of the bride at the home of the groom. But there is still time we must wait. We must wait until the end of all time to celebrate our union with God and to "consummate" our relationship, to become one with God. So, in our waiting we continue to prepare ourselves, we adorn ourselves as we go through our final purification (purgatory) preparing for the wedding feast.

At the end of all time, the groom, Christ, will announce and come for his bride with great fanfare (Revelation 11:15) to receive the bride, all the faithful into the heavenly kingdom where we will live as one with God, our hearts and minds united as one. This final stage will be revealed when we study the visions of St. John of the "New Jerusalem" in Revelation 21:9-22:5.



One final comment. Like with any image or analogy in trying to explain God, Christ and our relationship with, they will always fall short. Our language is limited our understandings are limited. But I hope through this explanation it will make the images we are to discuss become more alive and understandable.