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Beyond Da Vinci: The True Bride of Christ

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Beyond Da Vinci: The True Bride of Christ

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CHAPTER 1

Origins of the Bride

“Come out, you daughters of Zion, and look at King Solomon wearing the crown, the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, the day his heart rejoiced.”⁷

The striking literary feature of the New Testament is vivid use of first century customs as illustrations of spiritual truths. From the colloquial parables of Jesus to the apocalyptic imagery of John, doctrinal truths are impressed upon the reader’s mind by spiritual application of first century culture. In the midst of this rainbow of illustrations, the beauty of the marriage metaphor is unsurpassed. The figure begins with John the Baptist; Jesus taught parables of the Bridegroom and the Wedding Feast; Paul introduces the Bride; and John concludes by presenting the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

The symbolism is found in the familiar hymn, *The Church’s One Foundation*: “From Heav’n He came and sought her to be His holy bride; with His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died.”⁸

Medieval writers employed the Figure extensively, but they interpreted nuptial imagery as the *mystical marriage* of the individual believer to Christ, not figuratively of the corporate Church and Christ. Allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs contributed to this philosophy. Mystical treatment led also to the Gnostic abuses of the second and third centuries of the Christian era. It is these same Gnostic teachings that the Church is now accused of suppressing. Gnostic mysticism influenced later novelists and caused Christian writers to ignore the metaphor. It is regrettable that extravagant mystical language has colored and distorted this vivid New Testament symbolism.⁹ The present day resurgence in popularity of “goddess spirituality” and novels like *The Da Vinci Code* are revisiting the Gnostic and mystical abuses of earlier times. The New Testament writings give no basis for a mystical marriage between individual Christians and Christ, and certainly not a physical union with one of His followers.

Sadly, the present day Church has ceased to consider that she is *now* the Bride. “New interpretations” of end times that began in the mid eighteenth hundreds all but destroy the continuity of this symbol from the Old Testament to the New. Those who follow dispensational teachings view the Church as only a parenthesis in God’s plan for the ages. The supporters of this view want to give away to a false bride (a restored Jewish nation) a

large amount of the “New Covenant” (the New Testament), which is the “marriage contract,” belonging only to the Church who is the new Bride. In addition, even those professing to be followers of Christ are drawn away into skepticism regarding the true Bridegroom by the resurgence of Gnostic nonsense in modern novels and movies. The postmodern world in which we live is ready to accept such false notions believing it is impossible to make sense of life.

Since the “Bride of Christ” imagery was relegated to the future, there has been a tendency to ignore the figure in present day preaching. Emphasis is placed on the future of the figure to the detriment of understanding the present reality. One author writes, “We cannot speak correctly of the Church being now the bride. It is only in the end that the Church becomes the bride.”¹⁰ The evidence is abundant in the New Testament to justify the title “bride” for the present Church. The sublimity and beauty of this figurative theme shines brilliantly when the balance between the present reality, and the future hope of the Church is understood.

Present readers of the Bible find the imagery vague because of inadequate teaching regarding this symbolism. There is limited knowledge of marriage customs during the New Testament times. The lifestyle and focus in today’s church ministries is not helpful in clarifying this unique view of the Church. Nevertheless, “Here Comes the Bride”; She continues to prepare her trousseau, and awaits the coming of the Bridegroom. His coming will be announced with bold celebration, like the lightning that comes from the east and shines to the west¹¹. At the Bridegroom’s coming every eye will see Him¹², but only the Bride and Bridegroom will rejoice.

The Path of the Bride

The imagery in the New Testament focuses on Christ as the Bridegroom and the Church as the Bride. There are some allusions to the “disobedient wife,” similar to the theme in the Old Testament of Israel as the “unfaithful wife” of Jehovah. James’ mentions “adulterers” and “Adulteresses”¹³ and the apocalyptic representation of anti-Christian forces are symbolized by the symbol of the “great whore” in the book of Revelation.¹⁴ However, the dominant theme of the New Testament is the Church as the bride dressed in white prepared for her beloved.

The Dictionary defines “metaphor” as a figure of speech by which a tangible word is employed as an image. Any literary symbol or metaphor requires the understanding of the underlying physical term or event. Not

recognizing subtle differences of terms in parables of Christ such as “The Ten Virgins,” can lead to false assumptions. We need to look at the marriage customs of the Palestinian Jew of the First century to fully understand the symbol as used in the New Testament. Attempting to use modern day marriage customs to interpret the richness of the New Testament symbolism will only cause confusion.

The path of the bridal imagery leads back to the Old Testament, the primary literary source of New Testament writers. The Old Testament was the basis of marriage traditions of New Testament times. The allegorical Talmudic rabbinic traditions that contain figurative use of marriage are also helpful in understanding the metaphor. Jesus used existing rabbinical methods in teaching, but he introduced new and unique applications in His proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

Quotations are used in each chapter from the Song of Songs, although Solomon’s song of love is not considered an allegory of the love between Christ and the Church. Both in Jewish times and the Christian era, due to the explicit sexual tones related to the love between a man and a woman, Song of Songs has continually been interpreted as allegory. God placed the book into His divine library, to beautifully portray the love connection between a man and a woman, which He ordained from creation. Quotations from the Song of Songs at the beginning of each chapter are emblematic of the beauty in a loving marriage relationship that Christ chose to use in symbolizing the love between Christ and the Church.

The imagery touches on the debate over the events surrounding the return of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. This debate has raged since the mid-eighteen hundreds when Dispensational teaching was introduced. Although not the central purpose of this book, the figurative study sheds light on the historic faith and belief of the coming of the Bridegroom as a singular event at the climax of history, as outlined by our Lord Himself in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21.¹⁵

My wife loves the Zorro movies. On Thanksgiving day, 2005, we were alone so we decided to go out for dinner and a movie, “The Legend of Zorro”. Zorro must live up to the promise he made to his wife Elena (Catherine Zeta-Jones), a promise to give up his secret identity and live a normal life as Alejandro de la Vega. He cannot do it; he tells her, “It is who I am.” He rides off, responding to the people’s call for Zorro. In a strange twist, Elena divorces to protect his identity. In the last scene, Elena and Don Alejandro de la Vega are being remarried. As the priest is completing the ceremony, the bells toll, which is a call for Zorro. He becomes nervous, and finally says to Elena, “I must go.” She replies, “I know, it is who we

are." The bells call for de la Vega to put on the mask, the cape, take the sword, and go to uphold the good people against the evil ones.

If you are a believer, a Christian, you are a member of the Church, the Bride of Christ. We are clothed in fine linen, Christ righteousness, looking for the time of consummation. We must not lay down the sword, the Scripture, and we dare not put aside the bridal clothing. It is who we are. Learn afresh what it means to be the serving, betrothed, waiting bride of Christ.

CHAPTER 2

Palestinian Marriage Customs

Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday. Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends?¹⁶

Tracing any theme through both testaments is a rewarding method of bible study. Tracing the references to marriage, symbolic of God's relationship to His people, can become a joyful feast and lead to a new appreciation of God's Word.¹⁷ Meditating on this theme will hopefully lead you to a revelation of God's divine provision and His overwhelming love for the sinner.¹⁸ In the Old Testament the symbolism depicts Jehovah's relationship to Israel as husband-wife. In the New Testament, Jehovah is revealed to be the Messiah, the Bridegroom, in His relationship to the Church. The metaphor reaches in fullest expression in the love of Christ for His Church.¹⁹

To understand the depths of this spiritual figure, we must first understand the marriage customs of Palestine. Do not assume that marriage customs have always been "pretty much the same." The figurative language cannot be understood in terms of Western culture. In New Testament times, Jewish marriage customs held distinct differences from western culture.

Christ Himself always used known facts and culture to illuminate His teaching. The purpose of metaphorical language is not to obscure the Scripture, but to turn on the floodlights in our minds to God's spiritual truth. The Scripture can continue to herald its message with first century clarity, if we understand the very unique colloquialisms of those times. Description of personages such as, Christ the "bridegroom," and distinctions such as, John the Baptist as "Friend of the Bridegroom," and Paul as the "Best Man" relate to the regions in which the individuals grew up.

The important place of marriage celebrations in the social life of people during Old and New Testament times is not fully appreciated. Frequently, when a scriptural passage speaks of joy or the absence of it, allusion is made to *hearing* or *not hearing* the voice of the bride or bridegroom. Hearing the bridegroom's voice was considered a joyful occasion. Jeremiah the prophet wrote,

[There will be heard once more] the sounds of joy and gladness, *the voices of bride and bridegroom*, and the voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD, saying, 'Give thanks to the LORD Almighty, for the LORD is good; his love endures forever (33:11).'

When the Psalmist proclaims God's glory in the handiwork of creation, he relates it to the celebration and brilliance of the bridegroom:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, *which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion*" (Psalm 19:1-5).²⁰

The marriage was a time of great joy. Nuptial occasions were the major social event where everyone enjoyed an opportunity to celebrate and relax from the everyday rigorous stress of life.

Marriage in Palestine was divided into two distinct ceremonies: *betrothal* (corresponding somewhat to "engagement") and the *wedding ceremony*. There were important customs and traditions related to each ceremony. It is important that Christians understand *betrothal* in order to properly understand the spiritual relationship of the bride of Christ to our Lord. The Church is in the betrothal period.

The Betrothal

Betrothal in the Jewish community was a serious commitment, with legal implications, not unlike marriage. A betrothed maid could actually experience divorce before consummating marriage because of legal contracts. The relationship may loosely be compared to engaged couples that are separated for long periods of time by military duty. That separation is similar to the separation Jewish couples experienced during the long period of betrothal. In military situations great heartache is often experienced when one of them breaks off the relationship. Although today's engagement is not considered legally binding, the break-up of military couples could be likened to divorce that was also experienced by bride and bridegroom in Jewish betrothal.

Explanations of betrothal by the modern term “engagement is not adequate; it was a far more binding agreement or covenant than engagement as it exists today. Betrothal in Jewish law cannot be understood in the modern sense. The modern idea is an agreement of a man and a woman to marry, but it is not a legal bond. It is often broken and requires no formal divorce.²¹ The root word, *arus* (“to betroth) from which the Talmudic word *erusin* (“betrothal”) is derived must be considered in the sense of contracting an actual though incomplete marriage.²²

In biblical times, the woman spent a year in her father’s house preparing for the wedding. Breaking of the betrothal, which occasionally happened, required a legal “divorce” and may have felt like the separation of death. In a New Testament passage of Paul, we will look at writings that deal with being legally “dead” as a wife. In fact in Jewish Law, when a spouse died, the remaining partner was considered legally “dead” as a husband, or “dead” as a “wife,” which also pertained to “divorce” during betrothal.

Many in the Spiritual Bride of Christ have come from previously heart-rending broken liaisons. They have come from feeling deserted, to later find joy in a relationship to the *true* Bridegroom. In similar fashion, the faithful remnant of Israel recognizing the falseness and inadequacy of their former liaison with the emptiness of the Law, entered into a new, joyful relationship, *betrothed* to Christ, the Bridegroom. Those Jews who chose not to let go of the Law, as their means of salvation, are not the sovereign elect People of God, as some modern teachers would have us believe. All who will ultimately enter into the glorious consummation with the Bridegroom must first be betrothed to the Bridegroom.

Engagements are not taken seriously today. Many have already “consummated” their relationship physically long before the marriage. The betrothal in biblical times was binding, and though separated physically for a year, both the bride and the bridegroom considered themselves “married” and in a committed relationship. When this author was engaged, he viewed it as a lifetime commitment. Today’s couples can learn much from understanding this level of commitment in betrothal, and learn that relationship in marriage goes far beyond just sexual cohabitation.

There is a unique ruling found in the Mishnah concerning betrothal divorce. A father might forget to whom he betrothed his daughter. If two men claimed to be betrothed to her, it required that *two* bills of divorce be issued.²³ Certainly, this could be very disillusioning to a woman not yet married.²⁴ There is only one betrothal for the Bride of Christ, and that betrothal will be honored when the Bridegroom returns.

In two Old Testament texts where the term “betroth” occurs, the woman is specifically designated as “wife”: in 2 Samuel 3:14, the text reads “my wife whom I have betrothed” and Deuteronomy 22:24 refers to the rape of a maiden “betrothed” to a “husband” as a crime against a “neighbor’s wife.” In addition, the prospective husbands of Lot’s “betrothed” daughters were described as his “sons-in-law (Genesis 19:12-14). Also, let us not forget patient Jacob, who on completion of the seven years of service for Laban (the bride price), asked for his “wife”, Rachael, though their marriage was not yet consummated (Genesis 29:21).

Josephus, the Jewish historian, writes of Hyrcanus being spoken of as “Herod’s father-in-law” even though Herod did not consummate his marriage until four years later. Hyrcanus was a “father-in-law” because Mariamne was *betrothed* to Herod and therefore considered to be his wife.²⁵

Betrothal was a binding agreement, a final covenant; it lacked only the final physical consummation to bring it to completion. The appreciation of betrothal should help the Church to recognize its solemn commitment during this time of preparation. The Bride of Christ, the Church is now betrothed and bound to her Lord, the Bridegroom. She waits in anticipation for the time of consummation. The bride is coming. Let’s continue and meet her.

The Mohar

In today’s culture, often no thought is given to what the groom is bringing into the marriage as far as material wealth or gifts, or to what degree the groom will be able to support his future wife. Finances are often a main area of controversy in marriage, which was resolved in a practical way in biblical times. Couples today could learn from the careful planning that went into the betrothal agreement, the *mohar*, which was a financial agreement written into the marriage contract.

Payment of the *mohar* was an integral part of the betrothal ceremony. This financial settlement in New Testament times went to the bride. Among the Hebrews, this was not simply a barter or acquiring possession of the bride.²⁶ To the ancient Semite a gift is not an expression of sentiment. It was a necessary result of a real relationship between persons, and created or strengthened that relationship. The *mohar* emphasized the binding aspect of the betrothal and served also as a binding together of the two families.

Great focus was placed on “family” in first century times, during betrothal and the subsequent marriage. Today, some couples plan their wedding as if it is only about the two of them, and family members are only there as guests or to pick up the tab. In biblical times it was an understanding that the two persons joined together would create the bonding of two extended families, that in turn would be the support network for the new couple.

A minimum was set for the mohar in New Testament times. The minimum settlement was two hundred *Zuz* (a coin the value of a denarius which was about one days wages) for a virgin, and a *maneh* (one hundred *Zuz*) for a widow. It was permissible and commended if more were given. In case a “betrothed” husband should die prior to the consummation of the marriage, the betrothed maiden received only the minimum settlement. A woman widowed or divorced after her marriage received the full settlement.²⁷

When Shechem in the Old Testament was pleading for Dinah as his wife, he said, “Make the price for the bride and the gift I am to bring as great as you like, and I’ll pay whatever you ask me. Only give me the girl as my wife”(Genesis 34:12). The “price” referred to the required settlement; the “gift” was over and above the usual amount.²⁸ These details would be documented in the marriage contract.

In Old Testament times the mohar was usually paid to the parents of the bride, but by the time of Christ, the set minimum was for the bride. Among the more lowly classes the father continued to receive a “price” for his virgin daughter. There were some *vain* abuses of this custom, such as this humorous record in the rabbinic writings: “Rabbi bibi had a daughter. He treated her limb by limb [a depilatory on her legs] and took four hundred *Zuz* for her [double the minimum].”²⁹

There are examples in the Old Testament that show the mohar could be in the form of service in the field or in war (Genesis 28; 1 Samuel 18:25). David’s was perhaps the most bizarre: In the case of David, he doubled the amount set by Saul to show his earnest desire for the king’s daughter, Michal. King Saul had asked David to bring him 100 Philistine foreskins (hoping that the Philistines would kill him). Saul’s plot was foiled; David brought not 100, but 200 foreskins to show his love for Michal.

The *mohar* for the Bride of Christ was a payment to the Father, beyond human description. The payment was the sacrificial death of the Bridegroom. The Bride of Christ awaiting her Bridegroom can only kneel in awe and thankfulness at the Cross-, unable to fully comprehend this incredible love gift. Christ’s *mohar* joins the Bridal family together in a Heavenly relationship with God.

The Marriage Contract

In today's world, there are some who prepare nuptial agreements. The society pages refer to such events. For most we simply seal the engagement with a ring. When I became engaged to my wife, we were students at college. It was winter in Ohio, and I was wearing a heavy topcoat. We went to the student, dining hall on Sunday night, to partake of little more than leftovers from Sunday dinner. After supper, we had a very chilly wintery walk to the evening church service. All evening, I kept being silly, and saying with great exclamation, "Surprise!" for in my coat pocket was her engagement ring. On the way to church she kept trying to put her hand in my coat pocket to keep warm, and I resisted. She was puzzled, but all was well, when after returning to her residence, I took out the ring box, and asked the question of a lifetime. She accepted, and our "betrothal" was sealed with the ring. The extent of our *nuptial* agreement was discussion of our plans for the future and the timing of the wedding.

Generally, pre-nuptials today appear to be "protective" agreements, "golden parachutes" to determine what will be the settlements between the husband and wife in case of divorce. This was not so in the biblical marriage contract. This document was drawn up to give substance and security to the couple in marriage, not an escape hatch if the marriage failed.

The betrothal ceremony was a momentous social occasion in the lives of families that were soon to be united, second only to the wedding itself. The establishment of a home was also looked upon as a religious function, and participating in this ceremony was considered a *mitzvah*, a religious event. There was a feast in the bride's home, which accompanied the betrothal ceremony. Prior to the feast, representatives of the man and woman being betrothed would meet and prepare the marriage contract.³⁰ Batey relates that the document contained the amount of the bride's dowry, the *kethubah* (a wife's marriage settlement), given by the bridegroom, and the value of the gifts, which the groom planned to give to her.³¹ In post-exilic times (after 500 B.C.) and later, the marriage contract itself was called the *kethubah*, and specified the mutual obligations between husband and wife. It contained the amount of the endowment and any other special financial obligations assumed by the husband.

The Aramaic marriage contracts found at a 6th century B.C. Jewish community in Egypt begin with the phrase, "I have come to thy house."³² This phrase is found in each one and reveals the position of the bridegroom as the "supplicant who comes to the head of the bride's family to ask that

the bride be given to him in marriage.”³³ It could be strongly argued that there is a hint of this symbolism in Revelation 3:20, where Jesus stands at the door and knocks to come in. Certainly, the whole of Revelation is a heavenly message from Christ to His Bride. Christ is seeking for all who will respond in faith to become part of the spiritual Bride. The party speaking in the marriage contract is usually the bridegroom, and he addresses the head of the bride’s family.

The mohar and a list of the belongings brought into the marriage by the bride³⁴ are included in these documents. In this 5th century example, the *mohar* is paid to the bride’s family. Following the list is the bridegroom’s reply: “It has gone in to me and my heart is satisfied therewith.”³⁵

There is a phrase found in the Aramaic marriage documents that distinguishes them from Egyptian marriage contracts: “She is my wife and I her husband.”³⁶ The Jewish origin of this phrase is similar to words from Hosea 2:2. Hosea records a divorce formula which is the converse of the above phrase: “She is not my wife, neither am I her husband.” This formula speaks prophetically of Israel and Jehovah. The nuptial figure in the Old Testament rather than the *beauty* of marriage frequently portrays the *unfaithfulness* of Israel.

When both the parties of both families settled the details, the contract was dated with the day, month, year, region, and witnessed. The practice of a written document was first mentioned in post-exilic times (after 536 B.C.) but was in all probability instituted at a much earlier date.³⁷

The Banquet

The betrothal feast began when the formalities were completed. At the banquet the guests dined in the most elegant manner possible, governed of course, by the affluence of the bride’s father. The guests reclined on draped couches in a well-lighted room.³⁸ The bride and groom were ceremoniously introduced, when the bride was presented to the groom. The groom presented his valuable gifts and repeated, “Behold, you are consecrated unto me, you are betrothed unto me; behold you are a wife unto me.”³⁹ The declaration and the acceptance of the espousal gifts now meant they were officially betrothed. The bride was now subject to the same restrictions as a wife and could only be released from betrothal by a formal divorce.

During the twelve-month betrothal period, the bride prepared her trousseau. If the bride was a widow or the groom a widower, the interim

was reduced to thirty days.⁴⁰ For the Bride of Christ, she is in waiting; we do not know how long it will be before we see the heavenly entourage of the Bridegroom coming. the Groom is long-suffering, giving the Bride time to be clothed in the white garments of righteousness, and encourages her to be fully prepared for His coming.

The adaptation of the betrothal in some form today might bring a higher level of commitment to marriages before entering into the consummated relationship. Perhaps it would help stem the tide of divorces in the early years of marriage. The understanding of *betrothal* should also bring a deeper understanding to the spiritual Bride, the Church. This is the present reality. The Church is *now* the Bride; She is betrothed to her beloved. This is a binding relationship that requires total commitment and devotion. The Church should be preparing always to meet the Bridegroom. She should be carrying out His commands and diligently watching for His return, in the same manner that the bride, in the period of Jewish betrothal, focused on her preparation to be ready for the marriage consummation.

The Marriage Ceremony

There was a recent account of a wedding ceremony, where only members of the groom's family attended the wedding. The mother of the bride wanted a certain prestigious level of reception. She vowed that if it were not carried out in her prescribed fashion, the family would not attend the wedding. The lovely bride had three sisters whose marriages had been wrecked for similar reasons. This daughter had more spunk; not even her mother could deter her from her plans. She proceeded with the wedding with the absence of her entire family. The wedding photographers were asked to sit down at the reception just like family. The mother totally missed a blessing and did not understand the importance of joining two families together in this blessed event.

In a later chapter, Christ's parable of a king preparing a wedding feast for his son portrays important invited guests spurning the invitation. The king then invites strangers from the busy town crossroads to participate in the celebration. Many of God's original chosen people will not be celebrating with Christ because of their spurning the invitation brought to them by servants of the King. In the same fashion, many present day family members will not be celebrating with other family members in the future spiritual wedding of the Bride and Bridegroom. They are spurning the bridegroom and will be separated from those who make up the Bride of Christ eternally.

In biblical times, the marriage celebration was considered not only a time of great rejoicing but also a religious observance. The very term “kiddushin” (sanctification), used in rabbinical writings, speaks of the reverence of the ceremony. *Kiddushin* is defined as “He ... prohibits her to the whole world as a sacred object.”⁴¹ Bridegrooms of today should take note: The bridegroom put his bride on a pedestal above all other women of the world. The Scriptures speak of the bodies of believers being a temple because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Collectively, believers make up the Bride of Christ, and should be “set apart,” fully committed to the Bridegroom, sacred in His eyes. There is no place for toying, flirting, seeking other lovers in the world system; we are to be a sanctified Bride.

The bride and bridegroom were exempt from certain prayers and religious observances during the Passover week, since the ceremony was a religious observance.⁴² All those who took part in the wedding preparations were also freed from certain religious obligations. They were not required to attend the festival of Sukkoth (The Feast of Booths), one of the six divinely instituted religious observances (Leviticus 23:33,34 and Deuteronomy 16:13).⁴³ This is an important distinction between Israel’s Jehovah worship and the pagan worship of surrounding nations. Jewish marriage was holy because it was fulfilling the God-ordained physical relationship between a man and a woman, and not because it represented some pagan, mystical joining of a pagan god and goddess. Later inclusion of pagan fertility worship within Israel destroyed the purity and holiness of Jehovah worship and the purity and integrity of marriage. The corruption led ultimately to the downfall of Israel as a nation.

The wedding festivities began at the home of the bride, when her year of preparation had passed. The bridal attendants carried out the preparation of the bride. They were the females of her household or the “chosen virgins”(Matthew 25:1-13). She was bathed, perfumed, dressed in the best attire that her family could afford, and bedecked with twenty-four ornaments.⁴⁴ We would expect to find twelve ornaments, one for each tribe of Israel. However, when we reach the final stages of this figurative study, the spiritual Bride will be seen to have *twelve walls*, representing the *remnant* of Israel, and *twelve foundations*, representing the apostles as the foundation stones of the Church, the embodiment of all of the people of God in the new Christ-centered relationship of the New Covenant. Twenty-four ornaments may speak prophetically of the bride of Christ, made up of both Jew and Gentile, included in the spiritual wedding consummation in the Kingdom of Christ.

The Procession

The bridal procession proceeded to the groom's home following a feast at the bride's home. Before reaching his home, the groom, accompanied by the shoshbin "(best men)", relatives, friends, and musicians, met the procession and escorted it to his home. Such a procession is described in the apocryphal but very historic book, 1 Maccabees 9:37.38:

"It was reported to Jonathan and his brother Simon, "The family of Jambri are celebrating a great wedding, and are conducting the bride, a daughter of one of the great nobles of Canaan, from Nadabath with a large escort." ...They looked out and saw a tumultuous procession with a great amount of baggage; and the bridegroom came out with his friends and his brothers to meet them with tambourines and musicians."

Later parallels will be seen of this imagery in the triumphant return of Christ to earth. He returns to earth with all the procession of heavenly host to meet the Bride, who is caught up, to "meet" the procession. The entourage then proceeds to the bridegroom's "home," the Throne of David, the Royal City, Jerusalem, where the saints will enter the marriage feast, as Christ establishes His Kingdom reign.

The Marriage Feast

Elaborate preparations were made in the groom's home. There were numerous brightly burning lamps, beautifully draped couches and large tables straining beneath the roast meats, baked breads, parched grain, dates, nuts, and other condiments.⁴⁵ The bridegroom reposed at the head of the table in the place of honor. According to Jewish tradition, this practice came about because of the comparison of a bridegroom to a priest, who is at the head of the people. This is based on one variant reading of Isaiah 61:10.⁴⁶

The bridegroom was given many best wishes. The very religious considered the merit of attending a wedding to be derived from the words of congratulations addressed to the bride and groom.⁴⁷ The atmosphere was one of joy and unrestrained merriment. "Air passed through pipes containing wine emitted a piquant odor which mingled with the racy scent

of spices thrown upon the fire.”⁴⁸ The wine was considered a symbol of prosperity and diffused a pleasant perfume.

The great consummation of joy and climax in the wedding took place when the bride was presented to the groom. A marriage canopy was prepared into which the bride and groom would enter and consummate their marriage. This canopy consisted of many things, ranging from myrtle twigs to an elaborately carved wooden structure. It could also be simply a private room. The economic status of the wedding party and the local customs were the determining factors.

The bridegroom stood before the canopy and placed his arm over the bride. This symbolized “she had passed from under paternal authority to that of her husband.”⁴⁹ The father remained in authority over her until this momentous occasion. Upon entering the wedding pavilion, the bride became married and was under the full authority of her husband in all her affairs.⁵⁰

Once they were in the pavilion, the “friend of the bridegroom” listened for the ecstatic voice of the bride and bridegroom so he could bear witness they had intimately consummated the marriage. John the Baptist used similar language in speaking of his relationship to Christ. When interrogated by some of his disciples, John said, “The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete” (John 3:29).

The Shoshbins

The shoshbin’s role was similar to the “Best man” in contemporary marriage ceremonies. They were actively involved in the legal proceedings and preparations of the betrothal and the wedding. They were the overseers of numerous details handled today by the pastor or wedding director. The shoshbins were identified as “friends of the bridegroom” (John 3:29). The tradition was continued in Judea but not in Galilee.

In Judea there were at every marriage two groomsmen or ‘friends of the bridegroom’—one for the bridegroom, the other for his bride. Before marriage, they acted as kind of intermediaries between the couple; at the wedding they offered gifts, waited upon the bride and bridegroom, and attended them to the bridal chambers, being as it were, the guarantors of the bride’s virgin chastity.⁵¹

The groomsmen conveyed gifts to the bride, and were the representatives in charge of drawing up the marriage contract. The groomsmen were to be close at hand throughout the wedding ceremony, assuring the bride and bridegroom of fullest enjoyment during the seven days of the feasting. At the climax of the celebration, it was the groomsman who took the bride and presented her to the groom.

Some commentators have identified the phrase "children of the bride-chamber" in Matthew 9:15 as a reference to the *shoshbin*. However, *children of the bridechamber*, referred only to the invited guests, a distinction that will be explained when we give consideration to the saying of John the Baptist.⁵²

The foregoing description of the ceremonial and social aspects of marriage is an ideal; in common practice there were many variations. The location of the ceremonies, whether urban or rural, the individual's station in life, and many other factors, affected the performance of the nuptials. Nevertheless, marriage was held in high esteem and considered a very sacred act. No matter how poverty stricken the homes may have been, everything possible was done to make it a joyful and ostentatious occasion.

The dilemma of the less fortunate economic classes did bring about change in the customary observances, in spite of the potency of tradition. For many of the poorer class, the cost of establishing a new home and providing the proper marriage settlement were great hindrances. Many fathers were anxious to give their daughters in a suitable marriage. Women living under the paternal roof often preferred the pains of poverty to the solitude of celibacy.⁵³ The urge of life led to a new fashion of taking the husband into the bride's house. This began in the poorer sections of Jerusalem and then spread to neighboring farmlands and into Judea's highland. This change must have required great courage on the part of the Judeans, but slowly the inherited tradition was usurped by the inverse tradition of accepting the husband into the wife's family.

Marriages were not always as pleasant in the new tradition; among the inhabitants of Jerusalem's crowded slums, the newly married couple had to spend their first nuptial night in the same room with other members of the family. Even if another room was available, the custom of the groomsmen became burdensome. The couple was expected to share the room with these officials. In Galilee the picture was much brighter. The custom of *shoshbin* was not employed, so the couple was given full privacy on their wedding night.⁵⁴