



## Marriage Customs in the Old Testament

Marriage in the Old Testament revolved around two issues that reflected on social status for clans: honor and wealth. With the cultural emphasis on group identity over against individual desires and rights, marriages functioned as social

contracts between families for the purposes of strengthening pre-existing kinship ties, creating social advantages through new relationships with other groups, and ensuring the continuing existence of the clan. All of these aims revolved around the need to insure against sudden reversals of fortune and grow social honor through beneficial matches. To be sure, there was an emotional component to these marriages, but the idea of two individuals “choosing” each other would have been completely alien and a betrayal of cultural and familial values.

Marriage was often sought in larger kinship groups, resulting in cousins and even half-siblings (such as Abraham and Sarah) mating. The reason for this is economic. A marriage within the group (endogamy) means the head of the household does not need to extend his wealth outside the group. There is no risk of land or herds leaving the household for another clan due to the death of a male heir. Thus, while often presented in the OT as sacred in nature (especially in post-exilic Ezra and Nehemiah), endogamy was first and foremost an economic insurance to protect the clan. This custom was not inviolate; we have several examples of marriage outside the kinship group (Joseph married an Egyptian: Gen. 41:45). However, endogamy was clearly the preference.

The marriage covenant itself was arranged within strict social negotiation guidelines created to protect the economic status and the social honor of both parties. In the time of the Patriarchs, the groom’s family provided a gift in the form of “bridewealth” (Heb. *mohar*) to the head of the bride’s family, ostensibly to offset the loss of a valuable family member. This custom also discouraged suitors that were insincere or from lower economic stratification, with whom a marriage would have equaled a loss of honor. Bridewealth was later replaced by the dowry, a gift to the bride herself by both families. The bridegroom would also have presented gifts to the bride in keeping with his economic status, demonstrating her acceptance into the new family and new social status. These gifts formed the basis of her wealth in case of widowhood. Marriage negotiations would be finalized with a banquet celebrating the union of the two people and clans.

As mentioned, the vitality of the patrilineal line remained a major focus of a marriage covenant. The levirate marriage practices of the period allowed for this continuity. If the husband died, a close relative would be responsible for procreation of a male heir with the widow. This supported the clan social system in two ways. First, the male heir of this union would inherit from the widow's husband and be named as his son. This would keep the family wealth intact within the larger kinship group. Second, levirate marriage would also provide economic security for the widow since she now had a male heir to represent her interests and hold her wealth. The levirate marriage was not binding – the widow was not identified as a wife of the donor relative and was free to marry outside the clan without risking its economic security. The cultural value of this practice is apparent in several OT passages, where characters that refuse to perform this responsibility are criticized.

In the Patriarchal period, polygamy was driven by economic forces more than cultural or religious considerations. In a semi-nomadic herding society, having several wives for procreation would ensure plenty of workers. Also, with the high death rate (via childbirth, war, famine, and the low life span of the period), multiple partners ensured security for the familial line. This practice seemed to die out in the wider population by the period of the Israelite kingdom (10<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) as the cost to house and feed so many people rose with fixed settlements, smaller land plots, and more sedentary agricultural economies. The average household of this time was less than 9 people and almost never contained three generations due to short lifespans. Only the very rich (like Solomon) could afford to support a huge household. A survey of the polygamists in the OT reveals that only men in positions of power, men with wealth, or men that had distinction in some way are recorded with multiple wives. To be fair though, common, lower class people do not factor much in the overall biblical narrative. The Hebrew text is aware of the presence of polygamy, but it is clearly frowned upon and blamed for social ills in marriage (i.e., Hagar and Sarah; also see Wisdom Literature such as Proverbs).