

Jesus as the Fulfillment of the Joys of Jewish Wedding Customs.

John D. Bullough

Abstract

Marriage and weddings played a central role in Jewish social life during the time of Jesus. Extending God's identification as a groom to the bride Israel in the Old Testament, Jesus takes the role of the bridegroom for himself, not only in his preaching but in the public actions of his earthly ministry. From his conception to his crucifixion and resurrection, the ministry of Jesus closely follows the complex pattern of an ancient Jewish wedding, with the Church serving as the bride – the new Israel, encompassing Jews and Gentiles alike. Jesus' contemporaries would have seen his words and deeds as a bold claim of divinity.

Keywords: Jewish wedding customs, bridegroom imagery, Christology, method C

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is referred to by numerous titles. Among these titles include: Son of Man (e.g., Mark 8:31), Son of God (e.g., Rom 1:4), the Word (e.g., John 1:1), the Good Shepherd (e.g., John 10:11), the Alpha and Omega (e.g., Rev 1:8), and the Bridegroom (e.g., Matt 9:15). Many of these titles lay implicit or explicit claim to Jesus' divinity; certainly, Son of God, for example, hardly seems subtle. Others are more symbolic, but as will be argued, lay no less a claim to Jesus' divinity than the title Son of God. Specifically, in the New Testament, the mysterious title of bridegroom conveys not only a closeness between Jesus and his

bride (the Church), but because the same title is used by God the Father with regard to Israel in the Old Testament¹ (e.g., Hosea 2, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 16, Isaiah 54), claiming the title bridegroom also claims a divine role. The Gospels contain only a few direct descriptions of Jesus as bridegroom (i.e., Matt 9:15, Mark 2:19-20, Luke 5:34-35, and John 3:29).

In the ancient Jewish world in which Jesus and his contemporaries lived, there were numerous well-established customs associated with Jewish weddings,² and thus with the role of the Jewish bridegroom. The central argument of this paper is that although explicit identification of Jesus as the divine bridegroom is relatively infrequent in the Gospels, Jesus patterned his earthly ministry as a betrothal and wedding, with himself as the bridegroom; in addition, many of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' passion follow close parallels to the actions taken by and the situations encountered by a Jewish bridegroom. While such an argument has been undertaken by Pitre in his popular work *Jesus the Bridegroom*,³ I hope to amplify and extend beyond the arguments made in that inspiring work.

APPROACH TO SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

To build the argument intended in this paper, the exegetical approach described by Pope Benedict XVI⁴ as "Method C" is used. Method C is named as a synthesis of two historically common methods of exegesis, denoted Methods A and B. Method A is the patristic-medieval method in which (primarily) Christological analogies are derived from Scriptural or other texts as applicable to Jesus. For example, Abraham's

¹ Brant Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told* (New York: Image, 2014), 17-19.

² Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 162-181.

³ Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*.

⁴ Matthew J. Ramage, *Jesus, Interrupted: Benedict XVI, Bart Ehrman, and the Historical Truth of the Gospels* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 56-58.

willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac in Gen 22 is seen as a foreshadowing or “type” of the Father’s giving of his Son as a sacrifice on behalf of humanity. Method B is a more scientific, critical approach in which the text(s) in question must first be understood in a proper historical context. Method B attempts to provide a reading that would be understood by the contemporary readers or hearers of a given passage, without making ahistorical assumptions (such as a modern journalistic interpretation whereby each word is assumed to be literally true, and attributed authorship is similarly literal). Pope Benedict’s Method C thus steers a middle ground between approaches that might yield a pious yet possibly overly fanciful reading, or that might rob a text of its transcendent beauty by negating the miraculous. To argue that Jesus’ earthly existence was patterned after the bridegroom of ancient Jewish tradition, I first define some of the historical traditions and customs associated with the bridegroom as understood in early first century Judea (Method B), and then apply Jesus’ words and deeds as example of, or allusions to, these customs (Method A).

METHOD B: ANCIENT WEDDING AND MARRIAGE CUSTOMS IN ISRAEL AND THE NEAR EAST

Marriage held a pre-eminently special place in ancient Israelite and Jewish culture.⁵ While procreation was undoubtedly an important part of the centrality of marriage (“Be fertile and multiply,” Gen 1:28),⁶ countless other motivations for marriage exist including romantic love, sexual desire, monetary stability, social status, and accumulation of power – not all of these reasons are inherently benign.⁷

⁵ Thomas H. Horne, John Ayre, and Samuel P. Tregelles, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, Volume III* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), 439.

⁶ All Scripture citations from the *New American Bible, Revised Edition* (NABRE).

⁷ Ken Stone, “Marriage and Sexual Relations in the World of the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality,*

At the time of Jesus, Jewish weddings were highly formalized into ritualized stages. In principle, these stages derived from the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. Given the few direct commands to marry in the Old Testament, Greenberg⁸ postulates that the marriage customs formed through Rabbinic scholarship interpreting the meager directives about marriage in the Scriptures and formulating them into concrete directives. Table 1 lists these stages, more or less in chronological order, with a brief description of each.

Of special note, the groom's blessings made up an important part of the liturgy of the Jewish betrothal and wedding customs. The Babylonian Talmud describes these blessings,⁹ first recited by the groom to witnesses upon the betrothal period and later during the ceremonies, often by guests at the wedding feast, as follows:

1. Praise to God as the creator of the world
2. Praise to God as the creator of Adam
3. Praise to God for creating Adam in his likeness and for creating Eve
4. Blessing of Israel who will be gathered and restored in Jerusalem
5. Blessing of the bride and groom soon to rejoice in their love
6. Blessing on all the people of Judea who will hear the joyful cries of the bride and groom as they enter their martial union

and Gender, ed. Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 173-187.

⁸ Blu Greenberg, "Marriage in the Jewish Tradition," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22, no. 1 (1985), 4.

⁹ Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*, 64.

Table 1.
Stages of Jewish Marriage Customs.

Stage	Description ^{10,11,12}
<i>Shiddukhin</i>	The groom (or his representative) calls on the bride (and her family)
<i>Kiddushin</i> (or <i>Erusin</i>)	The period of betrothal
<i>Mohar</i>	The groom provides a gift to the bride and her family
<i>Berachot</i>	Recital of a series of “groom’s blessings” in the presence of at least ten men
<i>Ketubah</i>	The groom prepares a covenant agreement with the bride and her family
<i>Nisuin</i>	After the betrothal period (possibly longer than a year), the wedding proper begins
<i>Mikvah</i>	The bride is bathed and ritually purified
Procession	Bride, groom and wedding party go to the house of the groom
Crown (or Garland)	Groom (and bride) wear a crown to denote royalty
<i>Chuppah</i>	Promises and vows exchanged under a canopy prepared by the groom
<i>Seudat Mitzvah</i>	Seven-day (or longer) feast with food and wine, cup of wine is blessed, groom’s blessings are repeated and songs are sung
<i>Yichud</i>	As the feast continues, couple retire to bridal chamber prepared by the friend of the groom (<i>shoshvin</i>) to consummate their union

¹⁰ Greenberg, “Marriage in the Jewish Tradition,” 8-11.

¹¹ I.-D. Manolache, “Marriage Among the Ancient Peoples of the East: Brief Overview of Wedding Rituals in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Israel,” *Revista Teologică* 2022, no. 2 (2022), 48-52.

¹² Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*, 163-180.

In conjunction with the blessing of the cup of wine offered at the beginning of the wedding feast, these blessings when offered by wedding guests or members of the wedding party are referred to as *Sheva Berachot*, or “seven blessings” and forms of these blessings continue in modern Jewish weddings.¹³

METHOD A: NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES TO JESUS AS THE BRIDEGROOM

John the Baptist was the first New Testament personage to directly identify Jesus as the bridegroom (John 3:29), and in doing so, John further identified himself as the “best man” or friend of the bridegroom (*shoshvin*)¹⁴ who helps prepare the bridal chamber for the couple’s consummation at the *yichud*.¹⁵ John’s role in preparation is evident in his baptismal ministry; he helps the people recognize and confess their sinfulness,¹⁶ and even makes an introduction of sorts between Jesus and his bride, the future Church, whom he graciously hands over to Jesus without rivalry or jealousy: “The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens to him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice” (John 3:29).

Jesus also self-identifies as the bridegroom, and he is the only other individual within the Gospels to make this identification. In all of the synoptic Gospels, Jesus was questioned as to why he and his disciples did not fast as was common for Jewish rabbinic teachers of his time. In reply, Jesus said, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and they will fast on that day” (Mark 2:19-20; see also

¹³ Greenberg, “Marriage in the Jewish Tradition,” 11-12.

¹⁴ Manolache, “Marriage Among the Ancient Peoples of the East,” 51.

¹⁵ Greenberg, “Marriage in the Jewish Tradition,” 11.

¹⁶ Horne, Ayre, and Tregelles, *Introduction to the Critical Study*, Vol. III, 444.

Matt 9:15, Luke 5:34-35). Jesus appears to refer to the joy associated with the wedding procession, noted by Manolache¹⁷ as “a much-loved moment in Israel,” and in which even “Torah scholars must interrupt their studies and participate” when it passes by.¹⁸ Of similar joyfulness is the feast, a time of “communal festivities.”¹⁹

Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 11:2), refers to Jesus as a bridegroom; Paul serves as the father of the bride presenting his daughter, the Church in Corinth, to Jesus, the bridegroom, as a pure virgin. Confirming the purity of the bride to the bridegroom was significant in many Jewish marriages. Satlow²⁰ describes cases in which a bridegroom might make a claim that his new wife was not a virgin upon the consummation of their marriage. Interestingly, such claims were infrequent and in many cases, no serious attempt to verify a bride’s virginity was made at all;²¹ nonetheless, the symbolism of a virginal bride and the trust between bride and bridegroom such customs signify would have resonated particularly among the hearers of Paul’s letter.

To the Ephesians (Eph 5:23-32), Paul exhorts married couples to behave as an idealized version of Jesus’ marriage with his Church, in which he leads her and exhibits protective, sacrificial love, while the bride (the Church) is to obey her husband and place herself under his protection and spiritual headship. The extent to which this application of Jesus as the bridegroom to everyday marriage has been strenuously debated, and the potential for abuse of women has been

¹⁷ Manolache, “Marriage Among the Ancient Peoples of the East,” 51.

¹⁸ Étan Levine, *Marital Relations in Ancient Judaism* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), 52.

¹⁹ Ibid., 110.

²⁰ Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*, 167.

²¹ Ibid.

noted,^{22,23} although the submission of humanity to Jesus as Lord and God is never questioned.

Finally, the Revelation of John provides ample evidence that all of salvation history can be viewed as preparation for and consummation of a wedding. Jesus, referred as the Lamb of God as he was by his *shoshvin* John the Baptist, is about to take part in being wedded to the bride, his Church, rescued from all calamity at the end of the world for eternity (Rev 19:7-9, 21:2, 22:17). Here Jesus' marriage to the Church is unmistakably described as sacrificial, universal, eternal and irrevocable. This provides an additional motivation for Jesus to ban divorce (Mark 10:7-9); if marriage is a reflection of God's eternal union with humanity, and God does not change,²⁴ then marriage also is unending. It is a gift offered by God through Jesus to the entire human race, an eternal *seudat mitzvah*.²⁵

PARALLELS BETWEEN JESUS' MINISTRY AND HIS ROLE AS BRIDEGROOM

In the present section of this paper, I intend to review the elements of the Jewish wedding ceremonies listed in Table 1, and to apply each of them to Jesus' earthly ministry. In doing so I hope to illustrate that Jesus did not merely mean to allude to marriage frequently in his spoken words and in his actions, but that he viewed his physical life from conception to crucifixion as a period of betrothal and wedding ceremony, with his (and humanity's) eternal life representing our consummated marriage. In the following subsections, the words and actions

²² Stephen C. Barton, "Marriage, Family, the Bible and the Gospel," *Theology* 119, no. 3 (2016), 168-169.

²³ Willy Rordorf, "Marriage in the New Testament and in the Early Church," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 20, no. 2 (1969), 200-201.

²⁴ Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), DS 800.

²⁵ Manolache, "Marriage Among the Ancient Peoples of the East," 51.

of Jesus are viewed in light of their meaning as part of the wedding customs of the Jewish people of his time.

Shiddukhin

To initiate the betrothal and marriage process, the bridegroom and the bride must meet and begin to know each other. This is facilitated through the families of the prospective couple, and sometimes would be carried out by their servants.²⁶ The annunciation by the archangel (and God's servant) Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1:26-35) is a beautiful illustration of the way God initiates the formal *shiddukhin* with his Church. Of course, Mary herself was betrothed in the traditional human manner, and her betrothal status must have been in the forefront of her mind when she heard the angel proclaim "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35) and that her son from this union would be the "Son of God." Knowing God is good and therefore not one to request adultery, Mary accepted on behalf of the human race (Luke 1:38).

Kiddushin (or *Erusin*)

Upon Mary's acceptance, the betrothal period between God, in the person of Jesus, and his people begins. The *kiddushin* begins with a festive gathering at the home of the bride.²⁷ Among the first actions Jesus undertakes after his baptism and temptation is to come to the synagogues in his homeland of Galilee to teach, and "was praised by all" (Luke 4:15). As Mary is Jewish and also from Galilee, these synagogues could represent her "family" of faith, and thus they appear to be fitting locations to begin the *kiddushin* between Jesus and his people.

²⁶ Manolache, "Marriage Among the Ancient Peoples of the East," 48-49.

²⁷ Ibid., 49.

Mohar

It is in his hometown of Nazareth where Jesus fulfills one of the bridegroom's obligations of the *kiddushin*, which is to provide a gift of some value to the bride and make a formal proclamation of his love an intent. Jesus comes to the synagogue in Nazareth and reads from the scroll of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19). After reading he tells his people these gifts are being given starting today. More than a ring or other item of monetary value, Jesus' gift is that of happiness, health and freedom. Later, Jesus will offer his very body and blood as the ultimate gift to his bride (1 Cor 11:23-26).

Berachot

Another *kiddushin* obligation of the bridegroom is the recital of the groom's blessings, or *berachot*. Although as mentioned previously, a text of these blessings (the only extant text dating to ancient times²⁸) was recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, there seem to have been regional variations in the specific wording of these blessings (e.g., in Babylon versus Galilee or Judea).²⁹ Jesus begins his major teaching of the Sermon on the Mount in front of a crowd (more than ten men, for sure!) with a series of blessings (the Beatitudes: Matt 5:2-12; Luke 6:20-23) in the presence of large crowds. These blessings mirror the *berachot* in structure and even in content. The wedding *berachot* begin by praising God for providing Adam with a home (creation), a partner (Eve), and a son (Seth), the latter with whom Adam and Eve can be "comforted" when they "mourn" (Matt 5:4) the loss of their son Abel (Gen 4:25). They also counsel the bridegroom and bride to "rejoice" in their union,

²⁸ Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*, 64.

²⁹ Ibid., 65.

just as Jesus tells the people they will “rejoice” (Matt 5:12) when they are persecuted.

Ketubah

The *ketubah* that Jesus draws up with his bride is the very covenant he establishes on behalf of his Father, the payment of the *mohar* that he enacts with his own life (Heb 9:15-17).

Nisuin

Between the *kiddushin* and the start of the wedding proper (*nisuin*), there can be a waiting period as short as weeks or as long as a year or more during which the bridegroom and bride maintained their virginity.³⁰ Jesus’ earthly public preaching and healing over a period of three years suggests this period of building up and maintaining purity by casting out demons and curing illnesses among Jews (e.g., John 5:6-9) and Gentiles (e.g., Matt 15:22-28) alike.

Mikvah

The *mikvah*, the ritual bath of the bride is undertaken in Jesus’ ministry in two key ways. The sacrament of Baptism is the primary way that we, as his bride, can be presented to him “in purity and cleanness.”³¹ However, the Gospel of John also shares a way that Jesus himself washes his bride, through the washing of the apostles’ feet at the Last Supper (John 13).

Procession

The procession of Jesus’ bridal party is best shown in the Palm Sunday narratives (Matt 21, Mark 11, Luke 19, John 12) when Jesus, accompanied by throngs of followers, enters Jerusalem,

³⁰ Manolache, “Marriage Among the Ancient Peoples of the East,” 50.

³¹ David I. Brewer, “Three Weddings and a Divorce: God’s Covenant with Israel, Judah and the Church,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 47, no. 1 (1996), 20.

his capital and his home as the eternal King of Israel. It is a time of joy and festivity.

Crown (or Garland)

Wearing a crown or garland to signify the joy of the wedding occasion was common for both bride and bridegroom, perhaps in honor of Solomon's crowning in the Hebrew Scriptures (Songs 3:11).³² Jesus also was crowned, with thorns (Matt 27:39, Mark 15:17, John 19:5), unknowingly by the Roman soldiers as evidence of his status as the bridegroom during his scourging.

Chuppah

The Jewish bridegroom and bride would exchange their vows under a special structure (*chuppah*) with a canopy, prepared by the groom. Jesus' *chuppah* could be signified by his Cross, which he carried willingly to the place of his crucifixion. Here he joined the apostle John to his earthly mother and vice versa (John 19:26-27), representing the joining of the families of the bride (humanity) and the bridegroom (Jesus, with the Father and Spirit). Jesus had earlier promised that he would prepare places for all of his disciples (John 14:2-3).

Seudat Mitzvah

The wedding feast of the Jewish bridegroom and bride was a joyous feast featuring a blessing of a cup of wine, singing and further recitations of the groom's blessings by the attendees. How can the Eucharist not come to mind, with Jesus offering the wine which becomes his very blood (Matt 26:27-28, Mark 14:23-24, Luke 22:20, 1 Cor 11:25)? The Last Supper was further followed by the singing of hymns, reflecting the singing at the *seudat mitzvah*. Finally, during Mass, worshippers recite

³² Horne, Ayre, and Tregelles, *Introduction to the Critical Study*, Vol. III, 443.

the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer,³³ a parallel to the seven blessings recited at weddings (the blessing of wine plus the six traditional *berachot*).

Yichud

Finally, the *yichud* or consummation of the marriage is performed. Pitre³⁴ reminds us of the words of Jesus on his Cross (John 19:30): "It is finished," or more appropriately, "It is consummated." The work begun by the bridegroom with help from his *shoshvin* (John the Baptist, who prepared the people for this consummation by preaching to and baptizing them), occurs in the hearts of each of Jesus' people. Unlike the custom of check the bedsheets for blood after the couple's union to confirm the bride's virginity,³⁵ Jesus is a merciful bridegroom, knowing we all have sins in our past. "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her," Jesus says (John 8:7). He consummates his marriage with all: "virgins, but also the widowed, the married, the sinful, the soiled, and males."³⁶

CONCLUSION

Marriage in Jewish culture in the time of Jesus means a highly stylized set of customs and rituals, all with specific meanings in the context of the relationship between the bridegroom and his bride. Jesus was no stranger to Jewish weddings (e.g., John 2:1-11). Therefore, it is possible to see his public actions and statements throughout his encounters with Jews and Gentiles alike as a continuous stream of overtures to a bride from the heart of a bridegroom. This is not merely an image, but a

³³ Brian G. Najapfour, "Thomas Aquinas: His Theology and Spirituality of Prayer as Reflected in His Commentaries on the Lord's Prayer," *Medieval Mystical Theology* 29, no. 1 (2020), 15.

³⁴ Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 52.

³⁵ Levine, *Marital Relations in Ancient Judaism*, 196.

³⁶ Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis," *Church History* 77, no. 1 (2008), 18.

relationship the Church and the world desperately need to understand, to accept, and to live out in our own lives. Jesus calls us to be light-bearers (Matt 5:14-16); let it be the light of a joyous evening wedding procession!³⁷

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³⁷ Manolache, “Marriage Among the Ancient Peoples of the East,” 51.

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