

The Bible: A Love Story

Pt 1: A Marriage made in Heaven?

We often refer to the Old Testament scriptures as falling into the category of the 'Old Covenant'. In their turn, the New Testament scriptures are, more properly, referred to as the 'New Covenant' ([Jer.31:31](#); [Matt.26:28](#)).

In the O.T., the Hebrew word for 'covenant' is *berith* whereas in the N.T., the Greek word is (commonly) *diatheke*.

Now it's important to understand that while *diatheke* is used in its less common meaning of a 'will' or 'testament' in [Hebrews 9](#), the usual meaning is that of a *covenant* (or *contract*).

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *berith* (*covenant*) describes a solemn binding agreement or contract between two parties which, in O.T. times, was

generally signed in blood! In fact, the Hebrew word *berith* literally means 'to cut' and the Hebrew expression for the making of a covenant was '*cutting a covenant*'.

In ancient times (as today), a covenant, once entered into, formed a bond between two parties and was typically conditional upon each party first agreeing to its terms and subsequently upholding its respective end of the contract.

Now what is important for our discussion here, is that a *berith* was also the term used commonly for the covenant of *marriage*! The *Old Covenant* is literally a reference to the marriage of Yahweh (Jehovah) to Israel - as we'll see shortly!

You'll remember how, after God delivered Israel from Egypt, their immediate destination was Mt Sinai. It was there that Yahweh first proposed

entering into a covenant with them when He instructed Moses to say to them: **if you obey me fully and keep my covenant....(Exodus 19:5).**

This was to be nothing less than a spiritual marriage proposal and Moses was to be the *mediator* (the *go-between* or the *celebrant*) of the impending union! God was intending to pledge Himself as a spiritual husband, Israel was to be His wife and the wedding was to be right there - at Mt Sinai.

Were the people of Israel aware that this was to be a spiritual wedding between themselves and Yahweh? It seems highly unlikely at the time! They would certainly have been aware that they were pledging (contracting) themselves as a nation to follow the one true God who had redeemed them from Egypt but it would be in the subsequent words and writings of the O.T. prophets that the true nature of this proposed spiritual

union would be made abundantly clear (see next message).

God had always intended that Israel be His (spiritual) wife. He had waited patiently for four hundred years while she had grown from sixty six individuals to a nation of over two million - ready to be released from Egypt (equivalent to the old family home) and united with Him as her husband.

Yahweh describes this moment in [Ezek. 16:8](#)

Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine.

We are immediately reminded of that tender moment in the book of **Ruth**, when Ruth startles Boaz awake by lying at his feet.

Ruth 3:9

“Who are you?” he asked. “I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”

Having redeemed Ruth's family, Boaz went on to marry her. In a similar way, having redeemed Israel from Egypt, Yahweh goes on to marry her!

Now God is a romantic - and the Bible is a love story! Every step in the forming of His covenant of marriage with Israel followed closely the pattern of the ancient Hebrew wedding.

Let's follow this through!

1. **The Shiddukhin** (*Day of betrothal*)

The very first stage in the Hebrew marriage process was the day of betrothal known as the *Shiddukhin*. On this day, the bridegroom would enter into negotiations with (commonly) the father of the prospective bride. They would mutually hammer out the terms and conditions of the prospective marriage and the terms agreed to would be subsequently recorded in a contract known as a *Ketubah*.

In the view of many rabbis, the *Shiddukhin* is recorded in **Genesis 15** where we find Abraham (the father of Israel - the bride-to-be), negotiating the terms of the future marriage with Yahweh, the prospective bridegroom.

There Jehovah promised Abraham what He would do for His intended bride: He would make of her a great nation (**15:5**), enrich her with great possessions (**15:14**)

and give her (as a family home?) the land of Canaan (**15:7,18-21**)

2. The Ketubah (*marriage contract*)

As we said above, the *Ketubah* was the written marriage contract which contained the terms agreed upon by the parties concerned! A typical Ketubah, signed by both parties shortly before the actual wedding ceremony, would include (as it still does today) necessary stipulations such as:

1. The *Mohar* (*dowry - bride price*)

2. Where the couple were to live after the wedding (the bridegroom was obliged to provide his wife with a suitable home)

3. How the property was to be disposed of in case of separation

4. The minimum human and financial conditions of the marriage (imposed on the husband by the Torah)

Three of these conditions in particular were derived from [Exodus 21:10-11](#) where, in reference to a man who leaves his first wife to marry a second time, it states:

If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her *food, clothing and marital rights*. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money (*italics mine*).

These three conditions (*food, clothing and marital rights*) have been included in every Jewish Ketubah (marriage contract) ever since! Failure on the husband's part to provide his wife with one or more of these, provides adequate grounds for divorce!

Interestingly, the wife isn't obliged to contribute anything specific in the Ketubah: she only has to agree to accept the prospective bridegroom's proposal and to be faithful.

3. **The Erusin (Eyrusin):** (Engagement period)

After *Shiduhkin* followed the *Eyrusin* (engagement period). During this time, the prospective bride and bridegroom lived apart: she remained in her father's house (preparing her wedding garments) whilst he returned to his father's house - preparing a home for himself and his bride. This would typically be a room (or rooms) in the father's house - depending on the prospective groom's financial status.

The length of the Eyrusin could vary between one year and seven. Its length was determined by the time it took for the bridegroom to complete the marriage

home. The father alone had the prerogative of deciding when the home was ready and he would then instruct his son to go and fetch his betrothed.

The Erusin, in Israel's case, is generally understood by the rabbis as comprising the period from [Genesis 16](#) to the time of Moses - in general, the length of time spanning Israel's sojourn in Egypt. The family home was, of course, the land of Canaan (Israel) itself. It was to there that the bride would be brought after the wedding.

4. [Preparation for the Nisuin \(\(*marriage*\)\)](#)

The Erusin had ended - Yahweh was ready to wed His bride ([Ex.16:8](#) de quo). The marriage ceremony could begin - once the terms of the Ketubah had been satisfied!

And by this stage, two of them had been met:

* the bride-price had been paid (the blood of the Passover lamb)

* the home had been set aside (the land of Canaan)

Events on the mountain then followed the sequence seen in a typical Hebrew covenant of marriage:

1. Firstly a *bridal bath* (**mikveh**) took place - in which the bride purified herself for the ceremony. This was symbolised by the following:

Exodus 19:10

And the Lord said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes.

It was also incumbent on the bride-to-be (during the *Erusin* leading up to the Ceremony), to keep herself (spiritually - in Israel's case) pure and devoted to her bridegroom alone. This was symbolised by Yahweh's command that, in preparation for the third day (the actual

ceremony), the people were to 'abstain from sexual relations.' (v15).

5. The Nisuin itself

Now the wedding could proceed.

In a typical Hebrew wedding, one of the groom's party would go ahead of bridegroom as the wedding party made its way to where the bride awaited. He would announce the groom's arrival with the shout: '*Behold, the bridegroom comes.*' This announcement was then followed by sounding of the *shofar* (ram's horn). This was the bride's cue to leave her father's house and join her intended. They would then together proceed to where the wedding was to take place.

In actual fact, the announcement and the blowing of the trumpet signified the actual start of the wedding ceremony. Both of these took place at Sinai. The announcement was signified by the sound

of thunder on the morning of the third day (**Exodus 19:16**) - thunder being often associated with the voice of God (**Psa. 18:13**) - and this announcement was followed by the blast of a trumpet:

Exodus 19:16

On the morning of the third day there was *thunder*and a very loud *trumpet blast*.

The ceremony had begun!

Now at any Jewish wedding you will find a Chuppah (kou-pah): a type of tent or canopy. After the announcement and the trumpet blast, the couple proceed to the Chupph, under which the ceremony itself takes place.

This is not the place to discuss the many details of the ceremony (the circling if the bridegroom, the seven blessings etc): suffice to note that Yahweh was married

to Israel under a Chuppah (canopy) of clouds:

Exodus 19:16-17

On the morning of the third day there was *a thick cloud (a Chuppah) over the mountain*

And it's here that the bridal party assembled with the Bridegroom (Moses continuing as *mediator* - or *celebrant* - if you will!)

v.17 Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.

In any Hebrew wedding, the *Ketubah* (marriage contract) was generally read aloud and the terms publicly agreed to by both parties.

As we said - the *Ketubah* was a record of the bridegroom's responsibilities: bride price paid - home to be provided etc.

And of course there were the further stipulations imposed on the bridegroom, outlining his general responsibilities to the bride.

So it was here at Mt Sinai, that we see the groom (Yahweh) now publicly completing His part of the Ketubah by stating how He intends to provide for His bride.

Firstly He assures of His already proven ability to care for her:

Ex.19:4-5

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

And He then announces what He has sworn to provide:

Exodus 19:5-6

..... out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole

earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...'

And the bride then publicly agrees in principle to His proposal:

Exodus 19:8

[8] The people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has said."

So Moses (and here he's continuing in his role as mediator) brings their answer back to the Lord.

This was not yet the actual signing of the covenant by both parties (we see that formalised in **Exodus 24**), but it did constitute both parties' agreement to the principles of the proposed Ketubah.

Notice at this point that this *berith* (like most ancient contracts) was a conditional one:

If you obey me fully and keep my commandments.....

The bride didn't have to provide for her husband but accepting her intended's proposal meant she had to promise him loyalty and faithfulness!

And in this spiritual marriage, how could Israel show this devotion and fidelity? By following only Jehovah! By seeking to please only Him; by remaining obedient to His commandments -lovingly respecting His wishes!

In the words of our modern vows, she would forsake *all others and cleave only to him*.

And His wishes were conveyed in the 10 commandments brought down by Moses from the mountain! These were the conditions the bride was to fulfil in order to show her love and devotion to her intended husband! That's exactly what

the law was - a detailed list of the bride's obligations: her responsibilities under the terms of the Ketubah - the Old Covenant - a declaration of her total commitment to her husband.

That's why the first four commandments were as follows:

1. You shall have no other gods before me (Ex 20:4)
2. "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below." (Exodus 20:4-5)
3. "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God", (Exodus 20:7)
4. "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy (Ex.20:8)

These constituted the requirements of a devoted, committed husband - who would settle for nothing less than unqualified devotion from His intended wife!

In fact, in regard to the first two commandments, which in particular are to do with fidelity, Yahweh says:

[5] 'You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.....'

It is interesting to note that the word '*jealous*' in this verse is the Hebrew word *qanna*. This word is used of God alone in the O.T. and given the context, it would appear to intimate a attitude or feeling much like we would understand as marital jealousy - without, of course, any of the negative connotations we commonly associate with such an emotion.

As we said previously, keeping the first four commandments would, of course, be equivalent to '*forsaking all others- and cleaving only to him.*' The remaining six commandments would, in their turn,

follow on naturally from these first four - constituting as they do, the practical expression of a spiritual attitude.

So now we go to **Exodus 24**

The people have accepted the proposed covenant in principle but now Moses has been given the fine print of the Ketubah on the mountain (**Exodus 20**). He accordingly conveys this verbally to the people:

Exodus 24:3

....Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws

And they publicly - in front of witnesses - again voice their consent to its terms.

....and they responded with one voice, "Everything the Lord (Yahweh) has said we will do."

So now that both Bride and groom have agreed to the terms of the Ketubah, these are formally recorded

Exodus 24:4

Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said.

It now only remained for the Ketubah to be signed by the bridegroom and witnesses present. The contract would then be in force!

As we mentioned earlier, contracts were signed and validated in blood, and for this to be done, Moses sets up an altar and erects twelve stone pillars - the altar to receive Jahweh's signature and the twelve stone pillars for that of His bride.

Young bulls are then sacrificed and their blood is collected in bowls. Now comes final reading of the contract in its written form - in which it is now referred to as the '*Book of the Covenant.*'

Exodus 24:7

Then he (Moses) took the Book of the Covenant (the Ketubah) and read it to the people.

The bride then re-affirms her willingness to accept the written conditions of the Ketubah:

They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey."

Moses (still acting as mediator - [Galatians 3:19](#)) then splashes half of the blood on the altar. This constituted Yahweh's signature. The other half he takes and 'sprinkled it on the people' ([Ex.24:8](#)) - presumably on the twelve representative pillars - which in turn constituted their signature.

These formalities completed, Moses then declares the *marriage* to be finalised with these words:

“This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

Equivalent to: 'I now declare you husband and wife'

A Reception, of course, always follows a wedding - and Jews really know how to party. A typical reception generally lasted for seven days (in the newly-weds' house or under the Chuppah). In this case, it was under the canopy of thick cloud around the mountain. Here, according to [Ex.24:11](#), the 70 elders of Israel ate and drank with God. And [verse 16](#) records that the *Chuppah* of clouds (and presumably, the '*reception*') lasted for the traditional seven days.

But the story, at this point, does not have a '*happily ever after*' ending! Remember that this covenant was conditional:

Ex. 19:5

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant

The parties had declared fidelity to one another! And certainly the husband was going to be faithful

Deuteronomy 7:9

Know therefore that the Lord (Yahweh) your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.

But the story of the bride is a far different one! It's a story of betrayal and broken vows - culminating in the tragedy of divorce!

This will be the subject of the next message in this series: *The Great Divorce*

(Incidentally - one can see an amazing correspondence between all these events and the impending marriage between Christ, the Lamb and his bride, the church - but this will be the subject of the final message in this series).