

What do ancient marriage traditions teach us about love and marriage?

Culture tells us to do what feels good, try the milk before you buy the cow. The more milk you get for free is better than having to buy the cow, anyway. If you don't have to make a commitment, there's no commitment to break if it doesn't work out. This attitude permeates our worldview; TV shows, music, movies, books. This outlook on life tries to infect everyone but the results are damaging to all involved. The collateral damage to surrounding friends and family negatively affects us for generations.

Lust and the desire for sexual relationships are as old as Adam and Eve but God's plan for the Redeemed Life is to experience sexual relations within the boundaries of marriage. The greatest question revolves around finding the right person and choosing when to get married. For insight, let's look at God's plan, where He speaks in Jeremiah 6:16:

This is what the LORD says:

“Stop at the crossroads and look around.

Ask for the old, godly way, and walk in it.

Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls.

So what was marriage like in ancient biblical culture? Here's a little insight we have learned from biblical and ancient external sources. First, marriage was the expectation for young people and happened at a relatively young age. In ancient culture, the availability for marriage was, more or less, dictated by puberty. When a young lady showed signs of puberty, the community recognized that she was ready to marry. This seems odd to us but, if you relied on children to increase your status in the community or provide extra help with day-to-day tasks, the earlier you get married, the more children you can create together.

When a young lady was ready, her father would entertain offers for her hand in marriage. The fathers of young men would consider the young lady for their son. Society was driven by patriarchal influence and the men of a family had a great deal of say in who you married. Your family mattered a

great deal; you are a product of your family experiences. If your father was seen as dishonest or was known as untrustworthy, the girl's options would be hindered; likewise for the family of the young man looking for a wife. If a father thinks the young lady would be a great fit for their family, he would approach the girl's father to try to work out a deal for her. This could be a dowry of money, livestock, or anything of value and, once a Bride Price was set, the young man would approach the lady with a proposal and, eventually, a wedding would occur where the marriage would be consummate and followed by a one year honeymoon before accepting family responsibilities.

This is a foreign concept to our culture today, almost laughable; no consideration for love or attraction. No flirting or learning about goals or ambition. But there are advantages that we need to consider:

1. When you are 13 years old, you hardly know yourself, much less what your life goals are.
2. Your extended family has known you all of your life. They know your likes, dislikes, personality, shortcomings. Who else is qualified to help you choose a partner for life?
3. Your input was welcomed, either party could say no. It was highly unlikely that you would reject their advice because you have learned that they are looking for what's best for you.
4. The ancient understanding of Love is totally different than ours today
 - a. There are 3 types of love in ancient biblical texts, understanding them is key to seeing how God's plan is better than ours

There are 3 expressions of love in ancient Hebrew marriage:

- The first is *rayah*, it's the infatuation part. Remember when you first met? You are obsessed with your new relationship, you don't want to leave them, there's hope and excitement and attraction; their eyes, hair, shape, smile...you can't stop staring...they're perfect! *Rayah* is all about feelings and excitement, the anticipation.
- The second is *ahava*, which means committed love. It's like the feeling you have for your family that always has your back, maybe a brother who would fight for you or drop whatever they are doing to help you, regardless of what you are going through or who's fault it is;

ahava says, “I’m going to be here for you no matter what happens, no matter what comes around the corner, no matter how I feel.”

- The third is *dowd*, the sexual erotic love. It’s the union of a man and woman that God says makes us one flesh... in Genesis 2:24-25. *Dowd* is what creates and keeps intimacy between the man and woman, “they were naked and knew no shame”.
- The understanding is that a long lasting relationship happens when all 3 are working together; if one is missing, the marriage is unfulfilling and laborious.

If you think about it, we have the same 3 expressions of love in our culture today. That’s true but the difference between now and in ancient culture is how they are explored and experienced. Today, we engage in *rayah* first, flirting and trying to learn as much as possible about our prospective mate. Instead of getting input from trusted friends and family, we usually get infatuated; our emotions cloud our judgement. The excitement is overwhelming and we go straight to *dowd*, trying to satisfy our lust and need for intimacy. We wait to work on *ahava*, the woman using *dowd* in the hopes of finding commitment and the man deciding if the *dowd* is worth sticking around for. If not, the relationship is abandoned and both parties are hurt by rejection, whether they realize it or not.

In ancient culture with pre-arranged marriage, *ahava* was the first love to consider. Marriage is meant to last a lifetime and that takes commitment, a commitment that says, “I’m not leaving, you are my spouse and we will make this work”. The second expression is *dowd*, the sexual union to “seal the deal”, and after the wedding, you had a year to establish *rayah*, learning about each other and seeing the wisdom of your family come to life. *Rayah* comes and goes in a relationship, it takes *ahava* to keep the spark going, doing what needs to be done to place high value on your mate.

God’s path for marriage in the Redeemed Life is that you commit to the other person for life, no matter what. Isn’t that what He has done with humanity? He pursues us and answers our cry for help no matter what our situation. *Rayah* comes after we give our hearts to Him, learning more about Him and His *ahava* for us. Which way is better? Isn’t it obvious?