

THOUGHTS ON THE “Bride -Price’ in Exodus 21 v7-11

Customs of dowry -were part of many ancient cultures . Abrahams servant took valuable gifts (Gen 24v22). In some cultures the brides family paid, but usually it was toward the bride’s family. The Hebrew word (mohar) for this dowry was understood to mean a “marriage gift”. It was to compensate the father of the girl for the contribution she would otherwise have made to the family. It was not regarding the girl as saleable asset.

Why “sell” a daughter . ? we assume this was a often situation of economic desperation and that the father of the girl was in debt, or very poor and wanted the best situation for his daughter (better than he could provide her). It seems that this transaction was made with the object of marriage to the richer man or his son.

This marriage payment would prevent the rest of the family having to leave their own inheritance while their family worked off a debt.

Her situation was therefore different to any other servants (especially males) who would “go out free” in the year of release. She had entered a different form of commitment , an expectation of marriage .v7

Who would she be promised to?

Again we must assume that this richer man was not adding wives to a harem, so the man was unmarried or a widower, or even a divorced man (Deut 24) . Or he was a man with grown up sons and was finding a wife for his son. As a “case law” sample, whatever rules God made applied to both father and son, but the father had the authority and responsibility to make sure it happened appropriately.

If the prospective marriage was for a son, the father must treat her as a daughter in his house. V9

Why did God give the Law at all?

It seems that the primary object was to protect the girl placed in a tenuous situation. Custom seems to indicate that girls in arranged marriages covered their faces and so possibly the prospective husband had not actually seen her or had

not been able to decide on her intelligence, character and suitability until she actually arrived.

If the prospective husband (or the father of the son) changed his mind once he saw her and got to know her the following options were possible. She was now left very uncertain and vulnerable. His decision to renege was described as “dealing deceitfully” v8 (ESV has “broken faith”).

She would feel jilted and disappointed, especially if the one she had come there to marry then marries someone else.

The Options

- Either her father or other relatives could redeem her presumably by a monetary payment . v8 Compare to the redemption price in Exod 21v30
- She could not be on sold , certainly not to Hebrews (Lev 25v39) nor to a foreigner. V8
- The man who had “bought’ her as a prospective bride must continue to treat her as a daughter in his house v9. This meant preserving her virginity, providing well for her needs, not expecting her to overwork and perhaps even paying for her marriage to someone else.
- If he was unwilling to treat her as a daughter , providing food, clothing and shelter, then he had to let her go free without payment of any kind. .

The duty of marriage v10

- The word “duty’ is a unique Hebrew word “Onah or Ownah” .It does not occur anywhere else in the Bible so we have little opportunity to compare its usage in other contexts .
- It has been translated in quite varied ways , but with little support other than men’s assumptions and an incorrect connection to 1 Cor 7v4-5.
- TWOT (no 1581) explains its root word is “ma-ona” indicates “habitation or dwelling”. The majority usage of this word is God’s dwelling (combined often with “holy”) or in other cases is used of the dens of animals .
- There is no Hebrew proof that this means that “duty “ of marriage is a sexual relationship.
- If it did mean having a sexual relationship, why not marry her..?

- If it did mean sexual relations , that means God is approving her now becoming a concubine and her children would be illegitimate and thus banned from the “congregation” of worship Deut 23v2
- A calculating rich man could have used such a this law to accumulate a harem of very disappointed women.
- While Strong and others translate “onah’ as “sexual relations” this is not a proven translation .

ESV (Exod 21:10) *If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights.*

Youngs Literal has for this verse . *'If another woman he take for him, her food, her covering, and her habitation, he doth not withdraw"*

My preference is to suggest that God is actually protecting the vulnerable woman from abuse, not allowing the man to take advantage of her due to her family’s situation.

God’s view of Marriage

- From the beginning God intended that one man married one woman, for life. God hated divorce , especially with a view to remarriage. (Matt 19v4-6)
- The patriarchs did use existing customs to marry more than one wife (Jacob) and to use handmaids as concubines. While God worked with this situation there is no case of God approving or recommending it. It often brought great stress. God supported Hagar who was a victim of such an awkward situation.
- It does appear that Abraham had at least one concubine (Keturah) and maybe others (Gen 25v6)- while this created tensions (sons being sent away east) . It is possible ,given the order of sons listed in 1 Chron 1v33 that these concubines existed before Isaac’s birth.
- Isaac only had one wife., as did Joseph, Lot and Noah .
- The only other case of concubinage (other than kings) was the Levite of Judges 19, and he seems to have been a very evil and immoral man. This episode was an example of men “doing right in their own eyes” and everyone in this sad story should be condemned.
- God did not want Israel to appoint kings, but knowing Israel would demand to imitate the other nations he regulated the appointment process and

warned them that kings would damage their social fabric, recruiting armies and servants , heavy taxation and creating a dynasty.(1Sam 8v11-22)

- So God required Jewish kings not to accumulate wealth , wives or horses and chariots. Deut 17
- Despite this clear intention, Saul, the first king, soon followed the gentile kings by creating a harem including concubines (1 Sam 21v11, 2 Sam 3v7)
- David also began multiplying wives,even before he ascended to the throne see 1 Sam 25v43 , and later had many concubines (2 Sam 19v5, 20v3)
- Solomon exceeded all in accumulating wives and concubines (1 Kings 11v3)
- Later Kings certainly had multiple wives and concubines.
- God rarely rebuked kings for the practice of multiple wives and concubines, but perhaps it was a case of God allowing men to be punished by the consequences of their actions. It did create all kinds of tensions ,and disasters . (eg Michal, Solomon's wives etc)
- God did recommend taking a second wife, but only in the case of securing your childless brother's inheritance. (Deut 25v5-9) You could refuse to take her and the right passed to the next relative (eg Ruth) .
- God allowed this second marriage to secure the inheritance, and it superceded the one man , one wife principle.
- It would seem this must have been the family situation that the very godly man Elkanah found himself in , with his first much loved , but childless wife Hannah , trying to cope with a second wife (originally her sister in law) having many children with Elkanah.
- God gave laws about this situation that precluded favoritism to a wife more loved than another. (Deut 21v15)- you would think this could have only been in the inheritance scenario, not God permitting multiple wives.
- God also seems to have prevented a man marrying 2 sisters (Lev 18v18) , thus repeating the tensions evident in Jacob's family. However this may have been a commandment to actually only have one wife (see AV margin)
- [Youngs Literal for \(Lev 18:18\)](#) has 'And a woman unto another thou dost not take, to be an adversary, to uncover her nakedness beside her, in her life.'
- [The Hebraism translated " to her sister" actually mans "as a rival wife"](#) . The counterpart Hebrew translated "a man to his brother" is used 20

times and does not indicate a blood relation.

- So we conclude that while God did regulate much undesirable human behavior, He did not approve of men marrying more than one wife , or keeping concubines.