Arab Marriage Customs
and Biblical Similarities

Bruce Satterfield
Department of Religious Education,
Brigham Young University - Idaho

Those who have studied both the Bible and the modern Arabs will quickly recognize that in many instances there is a striking similarity between the customs and traditions displayed by both. This is especially true where marriage is concerned. Indeed, understanding the Arab customs concerning marriage will illuminate and clarify many biblical references concerning marriage. This paper will focus on modern Arab marriage customs and similar marriage customs that existed in biblical times.

With the encroachment of western habits and ideals upon the Middle East, slight but noticeable reformations in what for centuries has been “the way of life” are occurring. Marriage customs are not immune to this change. Therefore, in order to avoid any distortions that might come from the use of present day research, I have chosen to obtain my information from sources that would be least affected by westernization. These sources include travelers and anthropologists who wrote in the latter parts of last century and the earlier parts of this century before the great influx of western influence upon the Middle East.

For the most part, marriage customs throughout the Middle East are similar. Each tribe or village might vary the theme a little but nevertheless a general protocol or standard seems to prevail. Marriage is contracted in several steps: (1) the choosing of the bride, (2) the sending of the go-between, (3) the betrothal, and finally, (4) the wedding ceremony. Each step will be briefly discussed.

The Motif of the Choosing of the Bride

In the Middle East, it is not customary for men and women to select their own spouse. This is normally the prerogative of the father. It is he who feels the ultimate
responsibility for procuring a bride for a son and sees that his daughter gets married. H. Clay Trumbull, who traveled and observed much of the Middle East towards the end of the 1800's, gives this brief insight: “Among Semitic peoples generally it is held that as the divine Father provided a wife for Adam, so the earthly father is to select a wife for his son; or, in the absence of the father this duty devolves on the mother or the elder brother” (Trumbull, p. 11).

Immediately, one can begin to see biblical similarities. Father Abraham felt the responsibility of procuring a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24: 1-4). Hagar, after she was expelled from the camp of Abraham, sought out a wife for Ishmael from among the Egyptians (Gen. 21: 14-21). It was Jethro who gave Zipporah, his daughter to any man who could capture Diriah-sipher (Joshua 15: 16,17), and Saul who offered his daughter to anyone who could kill Goliath, the boastful champion of Philistines (1 Sam. 17: 1-25).

It has been said among the peoples of the Middle East, that if a man, during his life time, has given all his children in marriage “it sounds well in the ears of the fellahin”. He then has fulfilled the duty of his life (Granqvist, 1931: pp 46-47). Yet, if a young man reaches the marriageable age and is not betrothed, it becomes his privilege to ask his father to find for him a wife (Trumbull, p. 12).

Hilma Granqvist, who lived in a Palestinian village in the 1920's, noted that when “a young man’s own people put off his marriage he is angry”. He tells the story of a young man who arrived at the marriageable age but his father was in South America. He was very upset and offended. Immediately, his mother set out to arrange a marriage for him. Such restless young men have been described by those whom they live with in the following words: “If someone comes and wishes to marry and he is told: ‘Go and work!’ then he will not. If one says to him: ‘Do this and that’, he does not obey. He strikes his sister and his mother. He does everything the wrong way” (Granqvist, p. 57).

Just how the choice of a bride is made and from among what groups varies throughout the Middle East. Donald Cole, who lived among the al-Murrah bedouins in the Arabian desert, noted that the al-Murrah “marry within a very small circle of
kinspeople.” The most preferred marriage is with their *bint’amm* (father’s brother’s daughter) although this is not always the case. Often this is not possible. Cole remarks that the only real requirement of marriage is that they marry people of equal status. Among the *al-Murrah*, the choosing of the bride and the negotiations for her are both carried out by the father (Cole, pp. 71-72).

In some areas, a young man may see a girl that might interest him. If local tradition permits, he may tell his father or mother of his desires and they may look into the matter for him. However, it is up to the father to see if the matter is a reasonable one (Trumbull, pp. 12-13). We find this similarity in the Bible. Shechem asked his father, Haron, to get him a wife (Gen. 34:1-4) and also Samson entreated his father to get him a wife (Judges 14:1-3).

Like the *al-Murrah*, most Arab marriages are made between members of close kinsmen. This type of practice has its biblical similarities. When Abraham decided it was time for Isaac to marry, he sent his servant to find Isaac a bride from among his own family in Mesopotamia (Gen. 28:2). Laban thought it better to give his daughter to Jacob, a nephew, rather than to a stranger (Gen. 29:19). Samson’s father was disheartened when Samson wanted to marry out of their tribe (Judges 14:3). And the words of Moses, according to the word of the Lord, were: “This is the thing which the Lord doth command concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, saying, Let them marry to whom they think best; only to the family of the tribe of their father shall they marry” (Numbers 36:6).

**The Motif of the Go-Between**

When a girl is found that suits the taste of the father, and sometimes more importantly the mother, there are a few preliminary details that need to be done before the formal betrothal negotiations begin. These are often accomplished by a go-between or deputy. This go-between is usually a friend of the father or son or may be a professional go-between. These go-betweens often form an important class in the community (Trumbull, pp. 17, 21). Granqvist observed this custom among the Arabs he lived with. He said:
A man does not expose himself to refusal. If he is not certain that his proposal will be well received, he sends someone to the girl’s home to make a preliminary inquiry. The messenger can also ask the girl’s relatives directly if they wish to give her to such and such a man, in this manner preparing them for a proposal. If they answer that he is welcome, he is sure that they wish the marriage to take place. The usual thing is that the formal request for the bride is made by the young man himself but by one or several friends or relatives who act as intermediaries. (Granqvist, 1931: p. 10)

In the areas where Trumbull observed, he saw a different and more intense role of the go-between. When it came time for the young man to marry, the father would call in a go-between. The go-between is “informed of the state of affairs, and the requisite dowry” (the money paid at the time of betrothal). The go-between would then go to the house of the girl’s father and begin to negotiate for the bride. When he arrives at the house, he would be invited in and coffee would be offered to him. The go-between would refuse saying that he had come on an important mission and would not eat or drink until the mission was accomplished. The reason for his visit was then explained and negotiations began. After all had been discussed and agreed upon then they would all get up and shake hands and eat (Trumbull, pp. 17-20).

This view of the go-between reveals a role that is far more than just simple observations and inquiry as Granqvist mentioned. The go-between actually carried out the negotiations of the betrothal. Among some Arabs, the go-between not only carries out the negotiations but also finds the bride for the young man. Of course, the role of the go-between is played differently in different areas and in some areas it is non-existent.

Modern go-betweens are not without their biblical counterparts. In the Bible, the go-between is often referred to as “the friend of the bridegroom.” Abraham sent his servant to both find his son, Isaac, a wife and act as the go-between. When he arrived at the house, “there was set meat before him to eat: but he said, I will not eat until I have told mine errand.” (Gen. 24:33) Samson used a go-between in his marriage with his first wife (Judges 14:20) and also David sent a go-between to receive Abigail to wife (1 Sam. 25:40, 41).
The Motif of the Betrothal

The preceding section has already made mention of the formal request for the bride. Normally this is done by the father of the intended bridegroom though in some cases it is done by a go-between such as a friend or group or relatives. In any case, one of the major items discussed at this time is the amount and payment of the wedding dowry.

The reason for the bride price or wedding dowry seems to be that it is used as a compensation to the parents of the bride for the loss of her labor after leaving their home (Smith, p. 96). When a family lives in the desert such as many of the Arabs do, it is important to the economy of the home to have everyone work, whether in household jobs (making tents, weaving, etc.) or other jobs (tending sheep, camels, or wage labor). When a girl leaves her father’s home and is married, the father loses part of his labor force. Therefore, to compensate for the loss, the bridegroom (normally the bridegroom’s father) pays a bride price. Another reason for the bride price is to compensate for the taking of the girl from the parents home and building up a “strangers” home. Of this Granqvist has said: “This theory seems to be supported by the fact that ‘bribes’ are given to her relatives to let her go, and also that the stranger the family to whom she goes to the greater is the bride price and the more numerous are the people who must be ‘bribed’ and compensated for letting her go from the family, from relatives, and from the village” (Granqvist, pp. 133-134). Donald Cole noted that among the al-Murrah tribe, marriages were sought for between close relatives in order that the high bride price need not be paid since they lived so close that no real labor loss occurred (Cole, pp. 73).

The amount of the bride price and the means (money, animals, land labor, etc.) by which it is to be paid varies from place to place. It is decided upon by the fathers of both the bride and the bridegroom. Often an area will dictate different bride prices for different categories. Granqvist noted: “I have shown that the bride price is not individual but that there are certain bride prices for the different bride categories: the cousin bride, the village bride, and the stranger bride, so that one
knows beforehand what bride price should be given. But still there must be an agreement as to the bride price in every separate case (Granqvist, p. 13). Once the bride price is agreed upon a portion is paid immediately and the remainder is kept back to be paid to the wife in the event of a divorce (Trumbull, p. 20). In many areas part of the bride price is given to the bride herself as a dowry along with other goods to be taken to her new home.

The bride price may be paid in many forms (as agreed upon by the two parties). Quite often the bride price is paid in the form of money. Among the al-Murrah tribe, non-cousin marriages require the bride price of approximately 1,000 riyals ($222 in 1968-70) (Cole, p. 73). Among the bedouins of the Negev the average payment is between IL. 2,000-3,000 (the equivalent of a family’s income for two or three years) (Marx, p. 102). Sometimes the bride price is paid in land, animals, or labor. Granqvist tells the story of a young man who paid the high bride price by working for the girl’s father:

The Ta’amre people used to come on account of want, naked and hungry. The people of Artas took them into their service, e.g. as shepherds. They received IL.4 to IL.5 in the year and clothes and food. Thus also Hasan Abu Sawriye came (to Artas). He said to my uncle (Jedallah ’Ode): ‘Wilt thou not allow me to serve for one of thy daughters?’ He said: ‘I take thee into service.’ Thus fate had willed it and he served. He said: ‘I will have Hadra.’ He served eight years for her. (Granqvist, p. 108)

This sounds very similar to the biblical account of Jacob working for his wives (Gen. 29:15-30).

After all the negotiations for the bride and the bride price are concluded, there is an immediate betrothal feast. In some areas the feast is just a small occasion but in other areas it is quite a big affair.

There are many examples throughout the Bible concerning the bride price, the betrothal and its ceremonies. After Abraham’s servant had carried out the negotiations for Rebekah, he “brought forth jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment, and gave them to Rebekah: he gave also to her brother and to her mother precious things.” Then the account tells of the betrothal feast in these words: “And they did eat and drink” (Gen, 24:53-54). When Hamor asked Jacob
for his daughter as a bride for his son, Shechem, he said: “Ask me never so much dowry and gift and I will give according as ye shall say unto me: but give me the damsel to wife” (Gen. 34:12). That the bride price was paid in other forms than money is borne out in the case of Othniel (Joshua 15:16,17) and David (1 Sam. 17:25; 18: 17-27). The example of Jacob has already been cited. In the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15: 8-10), the ten pieces of silver mentioned are most likely part of the bride price that the daughter received. In the Middle East, it is a common custom that the woman is entitled to all her wearing apparel, therefore, any wedding dowry she receives she will normally wear. This quite often consists of coins, jewelry, bracelets and the like (Wight, p. 128).

In some areas of the Middle East, after the betrothal ceremonies have been performed, the bride and the bridegroom are not permitted to see each other until the wedding. Any communication that goes on between the two is carried out by the friend of the bridegroom (Granqvist, pp. 15,16).

The Motif of the Wedding Ceremony

When the day of the wedding finally arrives, many preparations are made. Among these preparations are the dressing of the bride and the bridegroom. The bride is dressed in very fine garments and jewels. Granqvist gives a list of the wearing apparel that the brides wore in the area he lived in:

Articles of dress:

1. A dress called “queen”
2. A silk dress
3. A “green” dress
4. A girdle
5. An embroidered jacket of velvet or cloth
6. A black head cloth of crepe with gaily-colored fringe

Ornaments:

7. A chin-chain
8. Bracelets
9. Finger-rings

In order to decorate the bride for the wedding they further need:

10. henna
11. Antimony
12. Gold-leaf  (Granqvist, pp. 44-45)

Much time is spent in the preparation of the bride. A special bath is given for the bride and then special cosmetics are put on along with the different dress and ornaments. Much of this is accompanied with special women gatherings and feasts.

The bridegroom is also given a special bath and is shaved. A special wedding garment is placed upon him to set him apart from the rest of the crowd.

The above description of the wedding apparel worn by the bride is reminiscent of the language the Lord used in describing Israel as his betrothed wife:

  I clothed thee also with broidered work, and shod with badgers’ skin, and I girded thee about with fine linen, and covered thee with silk.
  I decked thee also with ornaments, and I put bracelets upon thy hands, and a chain on thy neck.
  And I put a jewel on thy forehead, and earrings in thine ears, and a beautiful crown upon thine head.
  Thus was thou decked with gold and silver; and thy raiment was of fine linen, and silk, and broidered work . . . (Ezekiel 16:10-13)

The events of the wedding day proceed differently throughout the Middle East. In some areas, the bride is taken by her friends and relatives in a procession to the bridegrooms house or the betrothed couples new home. In other areas, the bridegroom, himself, goes in procession to get his new bride and take her to their new home or to the house of his parents, depending on the local custom. Either way, the bridal procession is a prominent feature of social life in many Middle Eastern communities. It is almost always accompanied by dancing and singing. Granqvist noted that in the bridal processions he saw there was horseback racing, dancing, flute playing, singing, and he also mentioned that in earlier times, before the strong central government took over Palestine, there were shooting matches
Hints of this type of social activity existing in biblical times is shown from this warning of doom by the Prophet Jeremiah: “Then will I cause to cease from the cities of Judas, and from the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride: for the land shall be desolate” (Jer. 7:34; see also 16:9 and 25:40).

When the bridegroom comes to pick up the bride she is heavily veiled. Granqvist said of this: “Completely wrapped up in her thick veil and a mantle which does not permit one to guess at her form, she looks like a big bundle” (Granqvist, p. 81). A bride is covered with the veil when her husband comes for her and only by marriage is it lifted. This is an extremely important oriental custom. Truth of this is in the Bible. Rebekah seems to have had no thought to veil herself in front of Abraham’s servant. It also didn’t seem important to have her face veiled while making the trip to the camp of Abraham. But when they drew near to the camp and she saw Isaac coming towards them “she took a veil, and covered herself” (Gen. 24:65).

Quite often the wedding festivities begin at night. The daytime is used for bridal processions with much fanfare. Trumbull observed a wedding in Arabia and the course of events went as follows. On the day of the wedding there was a long bridal procession where the bride was shown off considerably. The procession took the bride to the house of the groom. He noted the day was very hot and the veiled bride must have been extremely miserable underneath the veil and all the wedding dresses. The bridal procession did not arrive at the groom’s house until nearly sundown. The bridegroom was not there but was off somewhere else with his friends and relatives waiting to begin his procession to receive his bride. Trumbull was told that the procession would move out later in the evening. They waited patiently but it did not come. They supposed that somehow they missed it so they went to bed. It wasn’t until almost midnight that they finally heard a man running through the village yelling and waking people up informing everyone that the bridegroom and the procession was coming. Trumbull was quite impressed with this sight. There were flaming torches lighting up the way and dancing, singing,
and all kinds of activities. All this kept up until the procession reached the wedding feast which is always held after the bridegroom comes to claim his bride (Trumbull. 1894: pp. 45-59).

George M. Mackie, who lived in Beirut for several years, gives us this impressive picture of weddings he observed:

During the day the bride is conducted to the house of her future husband, and she is there assisted by her attendants in putting on the marriage robes and jewelry. During the evening, the women who have been invited congregate in the room where the bride sits in silence, and spend the time commenting on her appearance, complimenting the relatives, discussing various family matters, and partaking of sweetmeats and similar refreshments.

As the hours drag on their topics of conversation become exhausted, and some of them grow tired and fall asleep. There is nothing more to be done, and everything is in readiness for the reception of the bridegroom, when the cry is heard outside announcing his approach.

The bridegroom meanwhile is absent spending the day at the home of one of his relatives. There, soon after sunset, that is between seven and eight o'clock, his male friends begin to assemble. Their work for the day is over; they have taken a hasty supper, and dressed themselves, and have come to spend the evening with the bridegroom and then escort him home. The time is occupied with light refreshments, general conversation and the recitation of poetry in praise of the families chiefly concerned and of the bridegroom in particular. After all have been courteously welcomed and their congratulations received, the bridegroom, about eleven o'clock, intimates his wish to set out. Flaming torches are then held aloft by special bearers, lit candles are handed at the door to each visitor as he goes out, and the procession sweeps slowly along towards the house where the bride and her females attendants are waiting.

A great crowd has meanwhile assembled on the balconies, garden-walls, and flat roofs of the houses on each side of the road. It is always on impressive spectacle to watch the passage of such a brilliant retinue under the starry stillness of an Oriental night. The illumination of the torches and candles not only makes the procession itself a long winding array of moving lights, but throws into sharp relief the white dresses and thronging faces of the spectators seen against the somber walls and dark sky. The bridegroom is the center of interest. From time to time women raise their voices in the peculiar shrill, wavering shriek by which joy is expressed at marriages and other times of family and public rejoicing. The sound is heard at a great distance, and is repeated by other voices in advance of the procession, and thus intimation is given of the approach half an hour or more before the marriage escort arrives...Along the route the throng becomes more dense, and begins to move with the retinue bearing lights. As the house is approached the excitement increases, the bridegroom’s pace is quickened, and the alarm is raised in louder tones and more repeatedly, ‘He is coming, he is coming!’

Before he arrives, the maidens in waiting come forth with lamps and candles a short
distance to light up the entrance, and do honor to the bridegroom and the group of relatives and intimate friends around him. These pass into the final rejoicing the marriage supper; the others who have discharged their duty in accompanying him to the door, immediately disperse, and the door is shut. (Mackie, pp. 124-126).

The preceding illustrations give great insight into the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13). The ten virgins were most likely part of the maidens that were with the bride at the bridegroom’s house. Because the hour was late, they fell asleep. As soon as they heard the cry, “Behold, the bridegroom cometh,” they got up to trim their lamps and go out to help light up the way. It was at that time that five of the virgins realized they had not brought enough oil for their lamps. That was foolish for they should have known that their stay there would have been quite a long time, not knowing just when the bridegroom would come.

Already mentioned, is the marriage feast that occurs at the end of the long wedding processions. This is a time of much festivity which may last up to seven days. At a wedding Trumbull observed, the father sacrificed a camel for the occasion. This is a real treat throughout the Middle East for meat is extremely expensive (Trumbull, p. 47). So everyone eats heartily and joyfully not wanting to miss the treat. This sacrificing of the camel gives understanding to a biblical analogy. When the Savior was questioned as to why his disciples did not practice fasting, the Savior answered: “Can ye make the sons of the bridechamber [those who share the wedding festivities] fast, while the bridegroom is with them [whose father supplies the meat and food without cost]? But the days will come; and when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them [going to his home after the festivities], then shall they fast in those days [having no meat they returned to their regular mundane food in their dreary home]” (Luke 5:34-35; see also Matt. 9:” 14-15).

Other biblical references to the marriage feast include the wedding feast of Samson ( Judges 14:12-18) and the marriage feast the Savior attended in Cana (John 2:1-10). The marriage feast was also the subject of some of the Savior’s parables including the royal marriage feast and the wedding garment (Matt. 22:1-14) and the marriage supper (Luke 14:7-11).
After the marriage feast of the first day, the bridegroom and the bride are escorted to their private room. It is now that the marriage is finally consummated. There are two important events that occur at this time that will conclude our discussion of Arab marriage customs and biblical motifs.

First, this is the time when the bridegroom may take off the veil and look upon his bride. For some, this may be the first time that the bridegroom will have seen the bride. If so, the go-between or the friend of the bridegroom, who may have done the choosing and negotiations of the whole marriage, is patiently waiting to hear whether or not the bridegroom is pleased. Second, it is at this time that the bridegroom deflowers the bride and her virginity is proven.

During all this time, all those who have attended the marriage feast wait outside the room, talking, dancing, singing, and waiting! Finally, the bridegroom appears and voices his approval of the bride. At this point everyone screams and hollers with excitement. If a friend or go-between was used, there is probably no one more excited for his work was good. In the Bible, John the Baptist, referred to himself as a figurative “friend of the bridegroom”. When comment was made to him about the growing popularity of the Savior, whom he had baptized, by those who did not understand who the Savior was, John answered: “Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom [the Christ]: but the friend of the bridegroom [John the Baptist], which standeth and heareth him [voice of approval], rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegrooms voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase [now that the marriage is complete], but I must decrease [now that my job is done]” (John 3:28-30).

After the bridegroom voices his approval of the bride, the sheet with the blood stain on it is brought out and paraded throughout the town to her mother’s house as proof of the brides virginity thus giving honor to the bride and her family. This final scene also has its biblical parallel:

If any man take a wife, and go in unto her and hate her,
And give occasions of speech against her, and bring up an evil name upon her, and
say, I took this woman, and when I came to her, I found her not a maid:

Then shall the father of the damsel, and her mother, take and bring forth the tokens of the damsel’s virginity [the blood stained sheet] unto the elders of the city in the gate [the judges]:

And the damsel’s father shall say unto the elders, I gave my daughter unto this man to wife, and he hateth her;

And, lo, he hath given occasions of speech against her, saying, I found not thy daughter a maid; and yet these are the tokens of my daughter’s virginity. And they shall spread the cloth before the elders of the city.

And the elders of that city shall take that man and chastise him;

And they shall amerce him in an hundred shekels of silver, and give them unto the father of the damsel, because he hath brought up an evil name upon a virgin of Israel: and she shall be his wife; and he may not put her away all his days.

But if this thing be true, and the tokens of virginity be not found for the damsel:

Then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father’s house, and them men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die: because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the whore in her father’s house: so shalt thou put away evil from among you. (Deut. 22:13-21)

Conclusion

Much more could be said and written for surely not all of the customs and details have been mentioned. Yet, in conclusion, it can be seen from all the foregoing examples that there is much similarity between the modern Arab customs concerning marriage and the ancient customs that existed in the Bible. And truly, understanding the modern customs gives help in understanding those portions of the Bible for the Bible does not explain the customs for it was written to a people who already understood.

Bibliography


