

Well, This Is Awkward!

Marriage Practices of Late Bronze Age Canaan

When reading Genesis, there are plenty of things that make us a bit uncomfortable, but probably nothing is as awkward as reading the marriage practices of the people in the area. The Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) have some peculiar arrangements.

Marrying Family

- Sarah was Abraham's half-sister (Gen 20:12).
- Isaac's wife Rebekah's grandfather was Abraham's brother Nahor, making them first cousins once removed (Gen 24:24, 25:20).
- Jacob marries the two daughters of Rebekah's brother Laban (Gen 24:29, 27:43, 29:15-30), so his cousin was also his uncle and his father-in-law.

While there was later a prohibition on marrying family (Leviticus 18), there was no restriction on marrying close family members in Mesopotamian and Canaanite cultures at this time. The reasoning was essentially the idea of not having to form alliances with other people groups or clans through marriage.

Polygyny and Concubines

- Sarah has an Egyptian servant Hagar who she gives to Abraham to have a child, Ishmael (Gen 16:1-4).
- Jacob's two wives, the sisters Leah and Rachel, each have a servant who has children with Jacob (Gen 35:22-26).

Essentially, when a man married a woman, he married her *and* a female servant who served as a sort of dowry. This servant (*sheppehah*) had one purpose. If the wife was unable to have children, the wife could have her husband conceive children with the servant. She was effectively a secondary wife, and the husband could, if he so chose, elevate her to equal status with his actual wife.

There was also no restriction on the number of wives a man could have (polygyny) except that he had to be able to provide for them. Women were not, however, permitted to have more than one husband.

Just Taking Women and Marrying Them

- The son of Hamor sees no problem with simply taking Dinah and then making arrangements to marry her after (Gen 34:1-6).
- Judah appears to do the same thing with the daughter of Shua (Gen 38:1-2).

There is actually a provision in the Torah for this kind of marriage (Deut 22:28-29). While not a particularly favorable situation and there are severe consequences for it, this kind of thing appears to have happened enough to have a law for it.

Levirate Marriage

- When Tamar's husband Er dies, she is given to his younger brother Onan. When Onan dies, she is promised Judah's third son (Gen 38:1-5).

This idea of raising an heir to a childless older brother was not uncommon. The younger brother was free to marry a wife of his own if he conceived a child with his brother's widow, because then the widow would be cared for by her son who inherited the older brother's property. The relationship could extend beyond brothers to near relations, as was the case with Ruth (Ruth 3:1-13, 4:6-11). There is a carefully worded law dealing with this (Deut 25:5-10).

Legitimate Prostitution

- Judah is tricked into conceiving a child with Tamar because she disguises herself as a prostitute (Gen 38:11-26).

There was no prohibition on prostitution in this world, as long as the woman was unmarried and not a widow. There is little reference to this outside of the Bible, but apparently they wore veils so men did not know who they were. This allowed a woman to participate in the practice and still be eligible for marriage. Some scholars believe that because they were called "sacred women" (*qadeshot*), the practice was tied to their religion. Some groups at the time did have a thing called "sacred marriage" that married young women spiritually to the gods through similar practices.

The Torah has a strict prohibition against marrying women who had engaged in this practice (Lev 21:7), and in context it appears to have been very common among the Canaanites. Apparently, the Israelites did engage in it to some extent, given that there is a statement against offering funds made in this way for the temple (Deut 23:18).

What To Make of All This?

Remember first and foremost that Genesis is a time *before* Torah. God has not given his instructions, so people are living according to the mores of their culture. We cannot judge people of different times and cultures by our own standards. It is a mistake to hide these awkward parts of the Bible because we think they are "inappropriate." This is the inspired Word of God, reporting things as they were - not as we wish they were. The presence of these practices in the narrative does not legitimize them, but it does help us better understand the world(s) of the Bible better.