

Soc 333

# History of Marriage and the Family

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Throughout history, marriage and the family has evolved to meet the demands and expectations of society. Marriage began with the creation of Eve from Adam's rib. This united them in one flesh. As we know, this union would sink the world into sin; which changes everything. Because of the addition of sin into world, the first marriage would become under the direct control of man. Each society has left its own imprint on the institution we now call marriage.

Roles within the family have also changed to meet society's needs. Most societies were ruled by men while the women and children stayed at home. There were some societies where women had more status in everyday life. There were some societies where the married couple had children to secure alliances with surrounding countries. These adaptations were based on the public opinion of each society and the needs of the times.

In Ancient Israel, the marriage of the children was arranged by the patriarch. Fathers would go out into the community or the surrounding communities and choose a wife for his son. Sons and daughters were considered ready for marriage once they hit puberty, which was in their early teens. Once the patriarch found a bride for his son he would pay her father a 'bride price' for her hand. This down payment was considered payment for the loss of the women's labor in her father's home. According to the Halakhah, a collection of texts with views on Jewish traditions, there were three criteria that had to be met before a marriage was considered valid.<sup>1</sup> First, the groom's father

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<sup>1</sup> 'Women and the Law in Ancient Israel', James C. Thompson

must pay the bride's father the 'bride price'. Second, the bride must consent to the marriage. And third, the marriage must be consummated.

There was one main reason for marriages; the production of children to carry on the family name and to provide an heir for property and livestock. Men and women were despised if they were not married. If there were no heirs, the family would melt into history and be forgotten.

Marriage was lopsided in favor of the man. Women were property. They were considered an employee with benefits. They had little or no say in day to day family decisions. What the man decided was what the family as a whole did. In fact, the children of the patriarch would stay with him and be the ones to work on the family land.

At one time in Israel's history, it was acceptable for a man to have numerous wives. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines<sup>2</sup>. Men were discouraged from obtaining a divorce, but were able to petition for one fairly easily. They only had to write the wife a note of divorce, sign it and make her leave his household immediately. It was, however, almost impossible for a woman to obtain a divorce from her husband.

Ancient Israel had a certain type of marriage that allowed a man, after his death, to secure a legal heir. This marriage was called a Levirate marriage. This allowed, even required<sup>3</sup>, a man to marry his brother's widow. This union allowed the dead man another chance to have an heir to his property.

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<sup>2</sup> NIV Study Bible; 1Kings 11:3

<sup>3</sup> NIV Study Bible; Deuteronomy 25:5

Ancient Greece had some very different ways at looking at marriage. Love was an honorable feeling; especially between men. Women were married to produce heirs and run the man's household. Sex with the wife was only required to conceive children to take over the father's estate. In fact, a wife would only be accepted by the groom's family once she conceived a child. Any erotic needs of the men were satisfied by young adolescent boys. This love is known as Pailerastia, or anal intercourse between a man and a boy.<sup>4</sup>

Fathers were responsible for finding his son a wife. Wives were chosen for purposes of finding an ally or acquiring land or money. A groom was usually in their thirties and the bride was in her teens. Once a wife was chosen the father of the bride would pay the groom a dowry.

Men played a major role in politics and public life, while the women stayed home and ran the household in his husband's absence. Women were restricted from taking an active part in daily politics. Becoming a Religious Priestess was the only job outside the home, with any great significance, for the women of Ancient Greece. Most wealthy women stayed at home rather than work outside the home. Poor women often worked with their husbands at the market.

Divorce was easier for the husband but they were required to return the dowry given to them as payment. This requirement could have led to the murder of the wife over divorce proceedings. Divorce was required if the wife was caught in an adulterous relationship. Divorce was also granted if the wife could not bear children.

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<sup>4</sup> The Free Dictionary By Farlex; <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com>

Female girls were married in their early teens while males were required to join the army for two years. Males were encouraged to marry, produce heirs and join public politics at the age of thirty. Any childless man was shunned by society.

Ancient Roman Republican marriages were considered civil arrangements with no interference of government or the religious institutions. Marriage served as an opportunity to further a man's public career. In fact, wife swapping was considered a huge career move.

A father would pick a wife for his son and make the necessary arrangements with the groom's father. A father was considered to be the highest ranking living male. Women were property of their fathers until they married and then became property of the senior male. Therefore, marriage was considered a contract to transfer property from one household to another. Husbands had total control over their families, especially his wife. Wives could be punished, sold, or killed just as slaves.

Medieval Europe saw little or no change in marriage. Marriages were still considered business transactions between the groom and the bride's father. Love still played second fiddle to heirs, money, and land. As in past eras the women had little say to who they were to marry. Women would go from under the control of her father to being under the control of her husband.

Women were still responsible to produce an heir especially in well off families with vast estates. Many families were rather large to ensure an adequate amount of workers in poorer families. Poor women were required to help their husbands in bringing in money to support the family while at the same time raising her children. Richer

women enjoyed a leisurely life with help from nannies in raising her children and there was no reason for her to work outside of the home.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it became a requirement for all marriages to be conducted by a priest and witnessed by at least two witnesses. Marriages were still arranged by older family members and mostly for furthering the family name. Things for the women did not improve. Men still had authority over their wives and were permitted to correct them. Poor women were still required to work in the fields with their husbands and rich women organized the household while their husbands were out of town.

Divorce was not permitted, but annulment became a way of releasing parties from an unhappy marriage. Annulment would act as a sponge to wipe the marriage off the books like it never happened. This change in dissolving a marriage was a direct effect of the rise of the Christian Church.

Marriage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has changed quite a bit since its start in the Garden of Eden. Some of these changes have perverted the institution of marriage, and some have made it better. Women and children have found a voice and men are no longer allowed to hit, kill or sell their wives for any reason. However, marriage is now much easier to dissolve and is threatened by the injection of same-sex marriages.

Marriage has become a contract that is entered into by two consenting adults (preferably one man and one woman). Love is now a major reason for marriage. Arranged marriages still exist but are no where near as popular as previous eras. Heirs are no longer required of marriages. In fact, many couples never have children and remain very happy throughout their married lives.

Women are now much more active in politics and public life. They are no longer required to remain barefoot and pregnant if THEY choose not to be. Women can work in any career they choose and some are better at their jobs than men ever were. Regardless of whether they choose to stay at home with the kids or enter the work force, it is their choice. The jury is still out on if a woman working outside the home, when she has little kids, is harmful or helpful to the family as a whole. Women now share more control on decisions made within the family. Children are now sent to public school for an education; instead of being sent into the fields.

With every positive change to marriage there is at least one negative change. In fact, some of the 'positive' changes have negative consequences on the individuals along with the institution of marriage. For example, with the increasing number of women leaving the home to enter the work force, children are left abandoned at home. These children have less adult supervision and more chances of getting into trouble.

Divorce has become more popular and easier than ever before. To petition for a divorce one only needs a couple hundred bucks and a reason; any reason will do. Once the divorce is final, both parties are free to enter into another marriage with no stigma attached. Meanwhile children are shuffled from one parent to another and never truly have a place to call home.

Another 'negative' change to marriage is the idea that members of the same sex should have the same rights to marry each other as a man and a woman have to marry one another. Whether this policy becomes widely accepted, in the court of public opinion, remains to be seen.

Regardless of which changes are positive and which are negative, marriage and the roles of each family member have changed drastically over the centuries. These changes show how the world does everything in extremes. Instead of teaching men and women how to make decisions together as a cohesive unit, they are taught to control each other as much as possible. Men are the spiritual head of the family, but he is not the enforcer of all laws. Women have been treated very poorly within marriage throughout the years, but it does not give them the right to treat their husbands and children poorly now. A happy family will find that compromise is the key to weaving their way through the world as a loving and supportive unit.

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