



Traditional vs Civil Marriage: A Biblical and Spirit of Prophecy Model

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Introduction

Customary Marriage

Definition

“Customary marriage is a marriage concluded in accordance with customary law” (Budlender, Chbokoane and Simelane 2004, 3)

There are two major cultural societies: patrilineal and matrilineal

A patrilineal marriage is sealed by the transfer of property known as the bride wealth, usually in the form of cattle in return for the transfer of rights of marriage including procreation. If divorce occurs, the bridal wealth must be returned, less a proportion for each child who remains with the husband’s group” (www.everyculture.com)

”The Baganda are patrilocal, therefore, the new families tend to generally live near or with husband’s parents.”(www.hungerforculture.com)

“Among the Bemba people of Northern Zambia, marriage is matrilineal”

(Stuart Queen et al, 1961:78)

“In a matrilineal society bride wealth is not transferred because children belong to the wife’s clan or lineage and will inherit from that group.”(Meekers, 1992: 66)

“The traditional African family is a very broad concept which has variations across the continent. These variations are caused by differences in tribal customs or culture according to geography, history, religion, external influences of colonialism, inter migration, political and economic structures and influences.”

www.hungerforculture.com

“Patrilineality, matrilineality, and the practice of polygyny are three of the major distinguishing variations of the African traditional extended family.”

Evaluating Traditional Marriage

- Is it in total harmony with Scripture?
- Are there rituals that have elements of ancestor veneration?

- Are there practices that undermine individuality and power of choice?
- Are there customs that are unfair to a spouse or children?
- Is the church involved in the blessing of the marriage?
- Has the church already taken a stand on a particular form of traditional marriage?
 - Polygamy
 - Cohabitation
 - Common law marriage
 - Marriage of convenience

Civil Marriage

- Definition

“A civil marriage is a marriage performed, recorded and recognized by a government official. Such a marriage may be performed by a religious body and recognized by the state, or it may be entirely secular.” (www.Wikipedia.org)

Civil marriage is usually entered into by two consenting individuals in the presence of a marriage officer and two witnesses. As it stands, this goes contrary to most African community norms.

Forms of civil marriage

- These may differ from country to country or may even be different from region to region in the same country.

The following options are available in the South Africa system:

- In community of property
- Out of community of property
- Antenuptial contract with accrual system

Evaluating Civil Marriage

- Are there biblical principles that are violated?
- Are there traditional customs where the couple resides that are not followed that are in harmony with Scripture?
- Is the marriage solemnized by a government official or by a pastor?
- What are the implications for the choice of a type of civil marriage?

Blending Traditional and Civil Marriage

- Following traditional processes but choosing a civil marriage
- Two weddings one couple: a traditional and civil one
- Traditional process and living together with a view to do a civil wedding later

Question:

At what point should the church be involved?

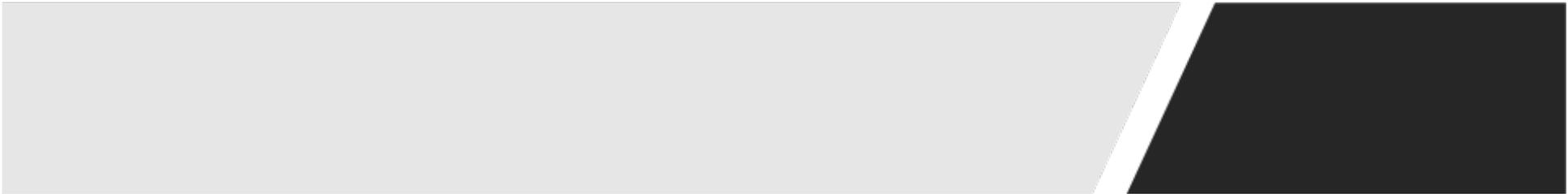
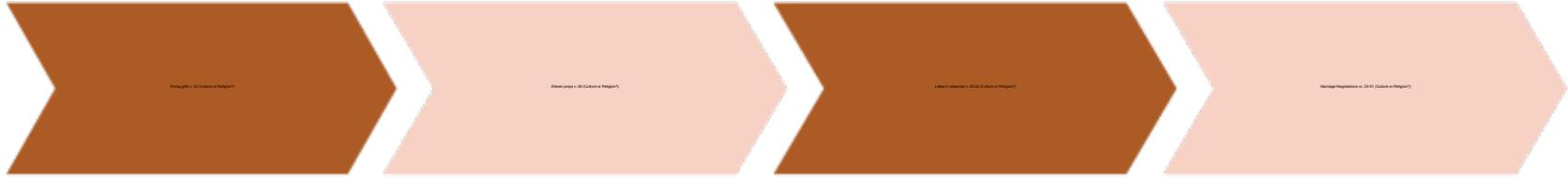
At what point should the marriage counselor come in?

These are critical questions in the process whatever the option one takes.

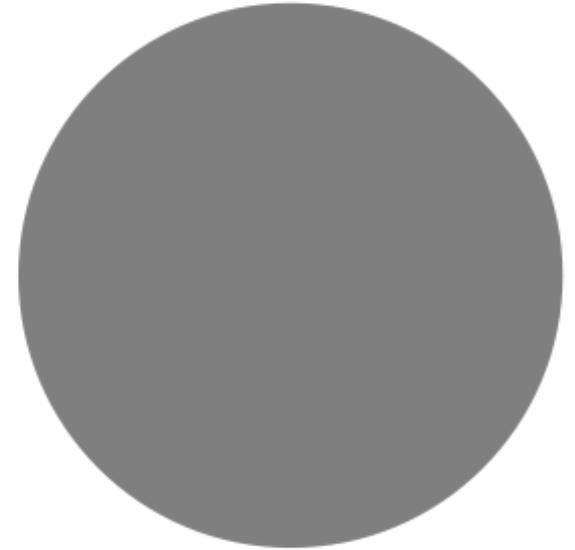
Drawing
biblical
principles
from a
narrative

Genesis 24

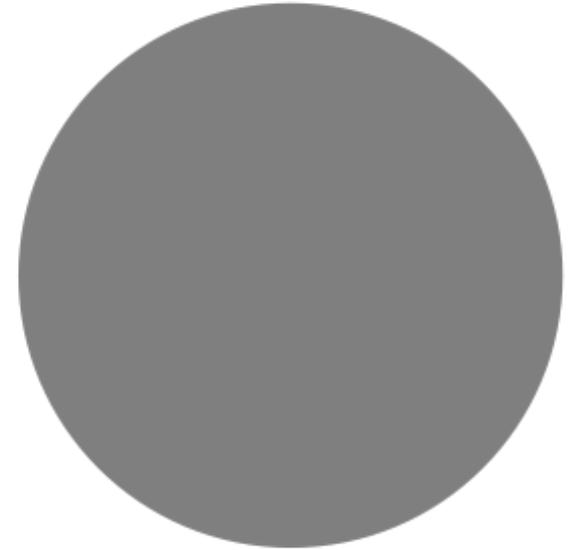
- Theology of the narrative relates back to God's call in Gen 12
- Eliezer takes an oath v. 9 (Culture or Religion?)
 - Not to take a wife for Isaac from the daughters of the Canaanites
 - Not to take Isaac back to the land where Abraham came from
- Asking for a sign (Culture or Religion?)
 - Hospitality was an important value in the ANE societies
 - Prayers of the servant divine commitment to the covenant (Gen 24:12, 14, 27)
 - Rebecca appears, she was very beautiful, of marriageable age and not married. Eliezer's prayer is answered.



- The servant puts Rebecca in the story v. 45-48
 - Then he makes an appeal to Laban and Bethuel (see v. 49)
 - He has to convince the elders first to follow the custom (Num 30:4-6; Deut 22:16; Judg 14:3,10)
 - The role played by Bethuel in the story is not unusual. Generally in the ANE the elder brother played a prominent role in the household.
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- The men of the household respond before Rebecca does. v. 50, 51
- The servant bowed himself and thanked God before he responded in a customary way v. 52
- Gifts are given v. 53 (Culture or Religion)
 - Rebecca received Jewelry of silver and gold and some clothing from the servant.
 - Costly gifts are given to Laban and Milcah
 - They ate after the arrangement was sealed. They respectfully changed the order in the culture to give priority to praising God.





Ellen G. White

- Background: Abraham was an old man close to time of his death
 - Task that was left undone, Isaac was his successor but he was unmarried
 - Isaac could not marry the daughters of the Canaanites because they were idolatrous and such a marriage would lead to apostasy.
- (Is the statement below referring to culture or religion?)
- “In ancient times marriage engagements were generally made by the parents, and this was the custom among those who worshiped God. None were required to marry those whom they could not love; but in the bestowal of their affections the youth were guided by the judgment of their experienced, God-fearing parents. It was regarded as dishonor to parents, and even a crime, to pursue a course contrary to this.” PP 171.2

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- Ellen G. White gives a perspective of Isaac:

“Isaac, trusting to his father’s wisdom and affection, was satisfied to commit the matter to him, believing also that God Himself would direct in the choice made.” PP 171.3

“Abraham committed the important matter to ‘his eldest servant,’ a man of piety, experience, and sound judgment, who had rendered him long and faithful service. He required this servant to make a solemn oath before the Lord. . .”

“What a contrast between the course of Isaac and that pursued by the youth of our time, even among professed Christians! Young people too often feel that the bestowal of their affections is a matter in which self alone should be consulted – a matter that neither God nor their parents should in any wise control.” PP 175

“If there is any subject which should be carefully considered and in which the counsel of older and more experienced persons should be sought, it is the subject of marriage; if ever the Bible was needed as a counselor, if ever divine guidance should be sought in prayer, it is before a step that binds persons together for life.” PP 175.4

Summing it all up

- The process of choosing which type of marriage to opt for is left with the individuals.
- There is a need for guidance in the process.
- There is a growing trend of following customary marriage without the involvement of the church.
- This paper has attempted to trace traditional and customary elements in the Bible and how they are dealt with.
- The application of the principles will depend on each local context.
- The guiding questions for evaluating both the customary and civil marriage are not exhaustive.

Works Cited

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