



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2015.08.05

Susan Marks, *First Came Marriage: The Rabbinic Appropriation of Early Jewish Wedding Ritual*. Judaism in Context, 13. Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 261. ISBN: 978-1-59333-585-4. Hardcover. \$95.00.

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While marriage in antiquity has become a major topic of scholarship in recent decades, weddings in their own right have only recently begun to attract attention. Researchers now have access to thorough descriptions of classical Greek nuptial practices from such works as John Oakley and Rebecca Hague Sinos' *The Wedding in Ancient Athens* (1993) and Anne-Marie VÉrilhac and Claude Vial's *Le mariage grec du Vie siècle av. J.-C. à l'époque d'Auguste* (1998), and to Roman ones in Karen Hersch's *The Roman Wedding* (2010). Marks's book, which focuses on the emergence of rabbinic Judaism in the aftermath of the Jerusalem temple's destruction, is a welcome contribution to our understanding of ancient weddings. This is especially true with respect to questions of how distinctly Jewish weddings were construed in multiple contexts.

Chapter one, "Recognizing Betrothals after the Fact," focuses on rabbinic efforts to determine the validity of contested marriage arrangements and marriages. This was an important question for a number of reasons. If a marriage was not valid, any offspring it produced had the status of *mamzer*, bastard, rather than that of legitimate offspring with rights to inheritance, full religious participation, etc. Legitimacy also concerned the authority of parents, especially fathers, who have the right and, though this is not the focus of Marks's discussion, the obligation to arrange marriages for their children. Marital capacity also delineated free from slave status, and here Marks's attention to the relationship between rabbinic and contemporaneous Roman law is especially valuable.

Chapter two, "Preparing the Bride," explores textual evidence for such practices as the production of cloth for the bride's new home and dowry, the dressing of the bride in rich attire if possible, and the bedecking of the bride in jewellery, flowers, etc. Here Marks provides a detailed synopsis of nuptial observances, about which there is no shortage of scattered information, that will be useful for anyone undertaking research on Jewish weddings in antiquity. Marks makes clear that in the early rabbinic period, Jewish weddings seem to have been very similar to those evinced in surrounding communities, as were early Christian weddings. She skilfully delineates how formally similar, even identical, practices could be construed as distinctive by supplying unique rationales or interpretations for their use in *Jewish* (or Christian) communities.

Chapter three, "Debating Wedding Processions, Negotiating Post-Temple Jewish Practice," develops an earlier article in which the author focused on bridal processions and the wearing of nuptial crowns.

According to the author, *m. Sotah* 9.14 suggests that some rabbis proscribed these rituals as practices in the mourning of the Second Temple after its destruction. Marks avoids protracted discussion of the passage's questionable historical reliability and instead explores the wedding as a site of contested religious authority (i.e., between emerging rabbinic establishments and the larger populace) in later centuries.

Chapter four, "Wedding-Feast Blessings and Rabbinic Communal Mobility," examines the gradual codification and elaboration of prayers recited over the groom's cup at the wedding banquet, a task that rabbis increasingly reserved to themselves throughout the late antique and early medieval periods. It was in the middle ages that specific, identifiable Jewish weddings are first evident, including some that remain recognizable (e.g., glass-breaking; the *chuppah*), and Marks explores these practices as further examples of rabbinic attempts to assert authority over an expanding area of religious practice.

The study might have benefited from a more detailed assessment of how fully the rabbis actually succeeded in asserting their authority over weddings. Marks notes throughout chapter two that the preparation of the bride repeatedly appears as a crucial component of weddings but that rabbinic sources allude to it only rarely. She observes correctly that the few rabbinic allusions that do exist involve brides who are depicted as passive (or dead), and notes briefly that this is in contrast to the active brides depicted in other sources (e.g., *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* and *Joseph and Aseneth*). The observation might be explored beyond Marks's conclusion that it indicates rabbis' marginalization of brides' roles in their own weddings. This is one possibility, but another, which is not necessarily mutually exclusive, is that the rabbis considered this to be a women's affair with which they need or ought not (or, presuming that effectiveness was their goal, could not) concern themselves. The rabbis' focus on the blessings over the groom's cup, which was the only part of the wedding that put the groom rather than the bride in the spotlight, may point to just such a situation.

This book is a valuable addition to the literature on ancient weddings and their religious and social meanings. The appendix containing fuller original text for ten heavily cited Aramaic, Greek, and Latin texts is especially useful, although translations of those besides *LAB* might have been more practical. Marks's clear, systematic approach to presenting seemingly disparate sources of information makes it accessible to scholars of early Judaism who are less familiar with ancient nuptial practices (and vice versa).

Eliza Rosenberg recently completed a dissertation involving weddings. Over thirty and not married, she lives with her cats.