

TWO WEDDING CEREMONIES: ALCESTIS AND SOME JEWISH PARALLELS

An interesting problem in the tragedy of *Alcestis* as portrayed by Euripides is in the conflicting reports of her wedding to Admetus. In the dramatic scene in which Alcestis takes leave of her husband's home in Pherae she addresses part of her speech to the marital bed on which she gave up her virginity (ll. 177-9). This picture is complemented by the speech of Admetus, returning from Alcestis' funeral, who compares the sad empty state of his house to its joyous state during the wedding festivities when he brought Alcestis there as a bride (915-25). These two references to a wedding in Pherae are contradicted by another speech of Alcestis in which she refers to the "bridal chamber in Iolkos, my fatherland".¹ This statement is substantiated by Duris who recorded, in the sixteenth volume of his Macedonian history, that Alcestis had been married in Iolcus where her father, Pelias, resided.² It is difficult to imagine that Duris was simply relying on the statement in Euripides' drama since the same drama also contains clear evidence that the marriage took place in Pherae. More likely Duris is here quoting some other historical tradition no longer extant.

There have been a number of attempts to reconcile this apparent contradiction. Dale, in her edition of the play, suggests that "Probably it is simply due to an oversight"³ and mentions that Duris "has not preserved any comment on the inconsistency of this version".⁴ Ms. R. Meridor has suggested to me orally that the best resolution of this problem is to be found in the fact that a playwright may often use

¹ 249-450. The translation is that of C.R. Beye, *Alcestis by Euripides* ("Greek Drama Series", New Jersey 1974), p. 74.

² Ed. Schwartz, *Scholia in Euripidem*, Vol. 1 (Berlin 1891), p. 224; Felix Jacoby, *FGrH* II a (Berlin 1926), F. 76:11, p. 141.

³ A.M. Dale (ed.), *Euripides: Alcestis* (Oxford 1954), p. 71, n. to ll. 248-9.

⁴ *ibid.*

contradictory versions of a story in order to heighten the dramatic impact.⁵ While this general statement adds to our understanding of Greek drama, it does not give us the right to ignore the possibility that any particular contradiction may be only apparent and may be reconcilable by other means. Along this line Beye has suggested, while not denying that Euripides is often careless, that "Perhaps at 911 ff. Admetus is describing a second ceremony for his own people."⁶ The contention of this article goes a little farther than that in claiming that the wedding ceremony is of two parts, one conducted at the bride's ancestral home and the second conducted when the groom brought his bride to his own home. A similar suggestion, in another context, has been made by Westermarck who states "Sometimes the wedding takes place in the house of the bride's parents, sometimes in that of the bridegroom; but feasts may be held in both places."⁷

Westermarck does not add any details. I suggest that we should distinguish between two types of ceremony depending on the distance between the home of the bride and that of the groom. In the usual case, where the bride's home was close to that of the groom, there was one ceremony which began with a festive meal at the home of the bride,⁸ included a procession to the home of the groom, and concluded there with a lengthier celebration. In the less usual case of a considerable distance between the two homes the two celebrations continued to be held but, because of the time and distance which separated them, they were considered two distinct marriage ceremonies. We shall attempt to substantiate this claim by evidence found in ancient Jewish literature.

Our first evidence of a double ceremony is to be found in the apocryphal *Book of Tobit* which is generally considered to have been composed in pre-Maccabean times — towards the end of the third

⁵ I wish to express my thanks to my teacher, Ms. R. Meridor, who read this play with me.

⁶ Beye, *op. cit.* (n. 1) 74.

⁷ E. Westermarck, *A History of Human Marriage* (London 1921, repr. New York-London 1971), II, 437-8.

⁸ For the evidence of a festive meal at the home of the bride see: T. Thallin, *s.v.* Hochzeit, *PWRE* VIII 2 (1913) col. 2129 with reference to *Od.* 4.3 and *Ath.* 4.1856. For the evidence of such a meal in ancient Jewish tradition see: A. Büchler, "The Induction of the Bride and Bridegroom into the חופה in the First and Second Centuries in Palestine", *Livre d'hommage à la mémoire du Dr. S. Poznanski* (Warsaw 1927), 106-8.

century B.C.E.⁹ or the beginning of the second.¹⁰ The book, which survives in several recensions,¹¹ tells of Tobias, the son of Tobit, who married his bride, Sara, in the home of her father, Ragouel, and there defeated the demon who attacked the bridegroom on his wedding night.¹² After this success, Ragouel celebrated a fourteen day γάμος for his daughter which seems to be longer than the normally expected γάμος.¹³ The second ceremony takes place when Tobias brings his bride to his paternal home. Here he once again celebrates a γάμος but this one is of seven days.¹⁴

The character of the two feasts as nuptial celebrations would seem to be obvious since they are both called γάμος. Indeed, Pfeiffer, in his

⁹ D. Flusser, "TWBYH", *Enc. Bibl.* III (Jerusalem 1958), 370 (Hebrew), A. Cahana, HSFYRM HHYZWNYM (Tel Aviv 1960), I, 309-10 (Hebrew).

¹⁰ R.H. Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times with an Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York 1949), 274. Pfeiffer also discusses the various opinions on this point. F. Zimmerman, in his edition and translation of Tobit (Dropsie College "Jewish Apocryphal Literature", New York 1958, p. 24), argues for a slightly later date for the main body of the book.

¹¹ The longer recension is that of the Sinaitic ms. (S or Ⳑ) while a shorter one is found in the Alexandrian (A) and Vatican (B) mss. S has been "commonly regarded as the superior" (S. Jellicoe, *The Modern Study of the Septuagint* (Oxford 1968), 295) and a new method of analysis has reached the same conclusion (J.D. Thomas, *The Greek Text of Tobit*, *J. Bibl. Lit.* 91 (1972), 463-71). However, Flusser, *loc. cit.* (n. 9) has argued for the superiority of the BA recension. A. Rahlfs, (8th ed., Stuttgart 1965), printed the BA version on the upper half of the page with S on the lower half and this arrangement was followed by Cahana in the Hebrew edition. Zimmerman used S as his text, in accordance with the plan of the JAL series, but printed B as an appendix. The Larger Cambridge Edition (A.E. Brooke and N. Mclean, *The Old Testament in Greek according to the text of Codex Vaticanus ... III. i* [Cambridge 1940]) gives the Vatican text but prints S as an appendix. A third, mixed, recension has been discerned by O.F. Fritzsche (*Libri Apocryphi V.T. Graece* [Leipzig 1871]; cf. the reference in S. Jellicoe, *loc. cit.*) in the cursives 44, 106 and 107 (the equivalent sigla in Brooke-Mclean are: 44; p; d).

¹² Ch. 8. For a discussion of this motif and the other marriage rites mentioned in Tobit see: H.L. Jansen, "Die Hochzeitsriten im Tobitbuch," *Temenos* 1 (1965) 142-9. Cf. H. Schwarzbaum, "The Hero Predestined to Die on his Wedding Day" (AT 934 B), *Studies in Marriage Customs (Folklore Research Center Studies 14)* Jerusalem 1974, 223-52.

¹³ 8.19-20. It is of interest that the festivities are here called γάμος only in the BA recension while S omits these references. Although the "third recension" is generally closer to BA than to S, here they follow S and lack both references to γάμος. The sole exception is ms. 44 which has the second reference. However, in later passages referring back to these festivities, they are called γάμος also in S (9.2 with a parallel in BA; 9.5 lacking in BA; 9.6 similar to BA; 10.8 similar to BA 10.7). These facts could be explained as an incomplete attempt to eliminate the consideration of this festivity as a γάμος.

¹⁴ S 12:1, BA 11:19. The duration of the festivities is not mentioned in S.

résumé of the story, relates of the second "then the wedding was celebrated anew".¹⁵ Although the apparent difficulty of a double ceremony has caused one of the most recent editors of the Greek text, F. Zimmerman, to suggest that the second feast is not a wedding celebration but is just meant to celebrate the return of Tobias to his home,¹⁶ an examination of the use of "γάμος" in the Septuagint and other writings of the times, does not really substantiate this meaning.¹⁷ A more likely solution is to be found in the recognition that it was customary, at least in some places, to hold a double ceremony — once when the groom took his bride in her parent's home and a second time when he brought her to his own home.

The custom of a double ceremony may afford us a better understanding of the unusual length of Tobias' first wedding ceremony — fourteen days as opposed to the normal seven. The extra week may be just an expression of the joy which was greater than that at a regular wedding due to the miraculous escape of Tobias from the demon. However, in the speech in which Ragouel beswears Tobias to stay with him for fourteen days he concludes "I am your father and Edna (*viz.* Sara's mother) is your mother". Perhaps this is meant to explain his request: Tobias is to celebrate one week with Sara's parents, Ragouel and Edna, and one week with his new parents, Ragouel and Edna.¹⁸

The evidence of Tobit seems sufficient to confirm the possibility of a two-part wedding ceremony. However, there is another fact in *Alcestis* which needs additional clarification. Although Alcestis refers to her bridal chamber in her father's homeland (*l.* 249), she says that she gave up her virginity in her husband's home (*ll.* 177–179). Beye stresses that

¹⁵ *Op. cit.* (n. 10) 263.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.* (n. 10) 108. Compare also his note to 6.13 where this feast, at that time still in the future, is called γάμος.

¹⁷ The Hebrew מִשְׁתֵּה appears some 45 times in the Bible (S. Mandelkern, *Veteris Testamenti Concordantiae* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv 1959, 1237–8) and is never translated γάμος except for the two times in which מִשְׁתֵּה actually refers to a wedding celebration and a doubtful passage in *Esther* 9.22. The other 15 times in which γάμος appears in the *LXX* (E. Hatch and H. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint* (Oxford 1897; reprint Gratz 1954), 234) all refer to marriage.

¹⁸ Cf. Ch. Tchernowitz, *Toledoth Ha-halaka*, IV (New York 1950), 396–7 (Hebrew), who deduces from the unusual length of the festivities that we are not dealing here with a connuptial celebration.

“Both passages turn on the loss of virginity”¹⁹ and a dual loss of virginity seems a somewhat difficult proposition to sustain. In the book of Tobit it is fairly clear that the loss of virginity was sustained in the home of the bride’s father.²⁰ For an understanding of this point we may again turn to Jewish literature.

According to ancient Palestinian custom, there was a significant period between the betrothal ritual and the entrance of the couple into the bridal chamber²¹ at the wedding ceremony. One source speaks of a twelve month period before the entrance into the bridal chamber.²² The Jewish betrothal was a much more binding affair than the Greek ἐγγύησις and could be dissolved only by divorce.²³ The betrothed woman had — in many aspects — the status of a married woman. Indeed, a girl betrothed according to Jewish law who committed adultery was punishable by death — just like a married woman.²⁴

¹⁹ *Op. cit.* (n. 1) 74, n. to 1. 249.

²⁰ Z. Falk, *Marriage and Divorce — Reforms in the Family Law of German-French Jewry* (Faculty of Law of the Hebrew University Legal Studies No. 9; Jerusalem 1961, 36, [Hebrew]) speaks here of the consummation of the marriage. However, Ch. Tchernowitz *op. cit.* (n. 21) III, 218, n. 27) follows Jerome who implies that the victory of Tobias over the evil spirit was achieved through abstention. This idea is opposed to the main folkloric theme of this incident which is the danger inherent in having intercourse with a virgin (Jansen, *loc. cit.*). See also: Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Indiana University Press, 1957) II, F 172.0.1.

²¹ For the identity of חופה-bridal chamber see: Büchler, *op. cit.* (n. 8) 82–132. Büchler also cites cases in which the bride was led directly to the groom’s house.

²² *Mishna Kethuboth* 5:2–3.

²³ B. Cohen, “Betrothal in Jewish and Roman Law” (*Proc. of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 18 (1948–9), 81) stresses the similarity of the two in that *enguesis* was “the beginning of the married state.” An even more forceful presentation of the Jewish engagement was made by L.M. Epstein who considers it the original marriage ceremony. He sees the betrothal period which follows the engagement as a later development, “a postponement of the time when the husband takes his bride to his home” (*The Jewish Marriage Contract*, [New York 1927, repr. N.Y. 1973] 295). On the other hand, H.J. Wolff did not stress the significance of the ἐγγύησις, describing it as a “contract to create the marriage” and asserting that its dissolution did not require divorce (*Written and Unwritten Marriage in Hellenistic and Postclassical Roman Law* (Pennsylvania 1939). Engagement was a legal prerequisite for marriage in Athens (W.K. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece* [London and Southampton 1968], 105) and was at least customary in other Greek states (*ibid.* 225).

²⁴ For a discussion of this point with reference to the sources see: A. Büchler, “The Jewish Betrothal and the Position of a Woman Betrothed to a Priest in the First and Second Centuries,” *Studies in Jewish History* (Oxford 1956), 126–38 (originally published in

Against this background, the report of the Mishna that there was a custom in Judea of "secluding" the bride with the groom at the bride's home, with the presumption of the possibility of intercourse (*Kethuboth* 1.5), does not seem so strange.²⁵ Where this custom prevailed, the groom was precluded from claiming, at the time of the consummation of the marriage, that he has just discovered that his bride is not a virgin as had been affirmed. The reasoning is that the burden of proof is upon him to show that he was not responsible for her defloration at the time of the "seclusion" — which he is, of course, unable to prove. Here we seem to have a double loss of virginity: the first loss is a legal presumption at the time of "seclusion" while the second, actual, loss took place at the time of the wedding ceremony. Of course, we can not pry into the real time of the actual loss. The Palestinian Talmud reports that the daughter of a prominent personality entered the bridal chamber pregnant²⁶ which implies that she must have lost her virginity some months earlier. However, this seems to be an unusual case and the more usual practice was not to consummate the marriage until the entry into the bridal chamber.

In summary, before we add the wedding of Alcestis as another item to the charge of Euripides' inaccuracies and contradictions, we would do well to consider that he here may reflect an actual custom: the holding of two separate wedding ceremonies as attested in Jewish literature some two hundred years later. Although there *were* both direct and

German in the *Israel Lewy Festschrift* (Breslau 1911), 110–44. See Falk, *op. cit.* (n. 20) 34–5 for a brief discussion of the history of the Jewish betrothal. He refers to this type of betrothal as an "incomplete marriage."

²⁵ The Palestinian Talmud, *Ketuboth* 1, 25d says that this custom arose in reaction to persecution. S. Krauss, ("La Fête de Hanoucca" *REJ* 30 (1895), 37–43) has attempted to date these persecutions to Hadrianic times while S. Assaf, "In Explanation of the Mishna: A Virgin is wedded on Wednesday," *Festschrift ... A.S. Rabinowitz* (Tel Aviv 1924, 44–9 Hebrew) has suggested a pre-Maccabean date. This position has been accepted by Z. Falk *op. cit.* (n. 20) (11). However, the historicity of this persecution has been denied by I. Levi, "Hannouca et le *Jus Primae Noctis*," *REJ* 30 (1895) 220–31) and this denial seems to be justified by the remarks of Westermarck *op. cit.* I, 166–206. Cf. R. Patai, "Ius Primae Noctis," *Studies in Marriage Customs (Folklore Research Center Studies 14, Jerusalem 1974)*, 177–80. This leaves us no obvious recourse but to abandon dating this custom. I hope to discuss the origin and significance of the custom more fully elsewhere.

²⁶ *Kethuboth* 1.5. 25c.

indirect contacts between the Greek and Jewish societies in the period under discussion, the unity of the human condition is a sufficient explanation for the development of similar marriage customs in different societies.

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