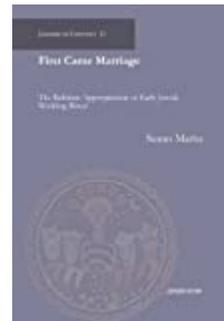




Susan Marks. *First Came Marriage: The Rabbinic Appropriation of Early Jewish Wedding Ritual.* Judaism in Context Series. Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2013. ix + 261 pp. \$183.04 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59333-585-4.



Reviewed by Jane Kanarek (Hebrew College)

Published on H-Judaic (July, 2014)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Ancient Jewish Weddings between Ritual and History

With the goal of uncovering practices that have heretofore been unnoticed in ancient Jewish weddings, Susan Marks sets her methodological task as negotiating between the poles of ritual and history. She contends that approaching the study of Jewish weddings from the perspective of ritual theory alone misleads, but so too does the sole perspective of history. A simplistic view of ritual that assumes ritual is unchanging leads to one interpretation of evidence, while a historical skepticism leads to another. Instead, Marks argues for a perspective that she terms *ritual within history*, an approach that simultaneously uncovers change and continuity (pp. 4, 136). She aims to present a methodology of the study of ritual and history as well as a particular case study that illustrates the utility of that approach, particularly in avoiding anachronistic understandings of ancient Jewish weddings. In other words, Marks's goal is not only to uncover hidden aspects of ancient Jewish weddings, but also to prevent us from falling into the trap of layering what we already think we know about Jewish weddings from the contemporary context onto these ancient

sources, thus misconstruing them.

Marks divides her work into six sections: an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. In the introduction, she lays out her methodological approach, outlined above. In each of the four main chapters, Marks utilizes the work of a different ritual theorist to ground her explorations. Chapter 1 turns to Pierre Bourdieu's work on the ways in which practice neutralizes social distinctions and posits the tannaitic rabbis as the main actors in new constructions of marriage and, in particular, as concerned less with marriage ritual itself than in using marriage as a way of constructing and maintaining social distinctions and boundaries. Chapter 2 utilizes the work of Jonathan Z. Smith on the ways in which ritual enacts *the way things ought to be* in conscious tension to the way things are to examine wedding preparations and Marks argues that amoraic texts reflect increased rabbinic authority over weddings and thus other communal institutions (p. 73).^[1] Catherine Bell's conception of ritual as process, something embedded in its temporal historical context and thus changing over time,

grounds chapter 3's examination of tannaitic wedding processions and their conceptions of end time. Chapter 4 uses Sherry Ortner's conceptualization of ritual acts and change to argue that the recitation of wedding blessings reflects a deepening amoraic rabbinic authority over communal weddings and a ritualization of that authority. The book thus builds to a larger point about expanding rabbinic authority itself. In addition to the work of these ritual theorists, Marks also utilizes evidence from non-rabbinic sources and the larger Greco-Roman context in order to further illuminate her rabbinic sources.

Chapter 1 most challenges the contemporary reader's understanding of Jewish weddings. Marks opens with the first mishnah from tractate Kiddushin that prescribes three methods through which a man acquires a woman: money, document, and intercourse. She argues that most scholars have misunderstood this mishnah as describing a betrothal ritual when in fact it is better understood as part of an after-the-fact rabbinic policing of communal boundaries. Utilizing Bourdieu's idea of ritual as having the social function of establishing boundaries of legitimacy, Marks contends that this mishnah, and Mishnah Kiddushin as a whole, should not be viewed as primarily describing the transition from a personal status of not-betrothed to betrothed (ritual as rites of passage) but rather as a description of who in society may never betroth and who may. Thus, tannaitic literature expands the biblical categories of who may and may not marry from non-Jews to include certain categories of Jews, such as a *mamzer* (the child of a forbidden union) who may only marry another *mamzer*. Building her case also through the examination of Roman pagan and Christian slavery, Marks points out that Roman society acknowledged two types of marriage: one recognized by Roman law, *conubium*, and one recognized by custom and practice, *contubernium*, applicable to noncitizens ineligible for *conubium*, such as slaves. Much as Roman society stratified marriage, so too did rabbinic society. Betrothal becomes a location through which the rabbis establish their own citizenship laws and a new understanding of the community Israel.

Whereas tannaitic sages were less concerned with locating themselves within the actual performance of ritual, Marks argues that amoraic rabbis strive for a more authoritative role over wedding ritual itself. One location in which she sees this is in the amoraic formulation of new blessings to accompany wedding feasts, a liturgy that the Babylonian Talmud attributes to what the Mishnah and Tosefta call the groom's blessing (M. Megillah 4:3, T. Megillah 3:14, bKetubot 7b-8a). Using Ortner's

idea that communal change becomes possible only when power relations shift in a way that actors can view an alternative vision, Marks contends that such a situation applied during the amoraic period. Again, turning to comparative evidence, she points to phenomena in roughly contemporaneous Roman and Christian society in Antioch, Rome, and Mesopotamia that might provide an environment for a new rabbinic vision: the recitation of blessings at Christian weddings by Roman bishops and disputes over the value of celibacy. The liturgy for the groom's blessing becomes a vehicle for increasing rabbinic authority and influence not only over communal boundaries but also over precisely how those boundaries are enacted. Textual traces of more detailed ritual are evidence of a growing communal rabbinic authority.

The larger goal of Marks's project is admirable: to articulate a methodology for using ritual theory to help us better understand rabbinic history and in particular the development of wedding ritual. She also continuously cautions us against the danger of our modern-day tendency to view weddings as rites of passage and the ways in which that may mislead our reading of ancient evidence. Nevertheless, there are a few places where Marks is misled by contemporary assumptions. For example, she reads the evolution of M. Kiddushin 1:1's three methods of acquisition—money, document, and sexual intercourse—to map onto the practices of respectively the betrothal ring, the *ketubah* (marriage contract), and seclusion of the bride and groom after the ritual. While money does map onto the betrothal ring, document and sexual intercourse remain as other means of effecting betrothal. The *ketubah* is a document that does not effect a status change for the woman but names financial obligations of the groom to the bride in the case of death or divorce. Seclusion after the wedding is one understanding of *hup-pah*, the legal process by which a woman moves from the status of betrothed to fully married.[2] Marks also uses the term *minyan* to describe the quorum of ten required for the groom's blessing, but "minyan is not used in classical rabbinic literature to refer to a quorum of ten. Similarly, I am not convinced that the amoraic sages began to view themselves as communal leaders at life-cycle ceremonies" (p. 187). Again, this perspective seems anachronistic. Were the rabbis beginning to frame themselves as authorities over life-cycle moments or rather again crafting a vision of a rabbinic community of which these moments were simply one aspect? The evidence is ambiguous. My above critiques illustrate the difficulty of avoiding anachronistic readings of weddings and layering onto ancient sources contemporary vocab-

ulary and concerns, even for a scholar whose self-named task is to avoid such a problematic. ancient ones?

The challenge that Marks lays before historians of ancient society is a worthy one: to negotiate between and integrate the disciplines of ritual and history in order to avoid the pitfalls of anachronistic readings of evidence. Turning Marks's methodology on its head, I wonder how we would also reread contemporary Jewish weddings through the ritual theorists she utilizes to elucidate

Notes

[1]. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 63.

[2]. On *ketubah*, see, for example, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Ishut 10:7. On *huppah*, see the long discussion in Arukh Ha-shulhan Even Ha-ezer Hilkhot Kiddushin, 55.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Jane Kanarek. Review of Marks, Susan, *First Came Marriage: The Rabbinic Appropriation of Early Jewish Wedding Ritual*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. July, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39842>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.