LEVIRATIC MARRIAGE

By Keith Greer

"And Judah said to Onan, Go in to your brother's wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother. "{Genesis 38:8} This is the first mention of the practice of leviratic marriage. In this case, Onan refused to give an heir to his brother and the Lord killed him, Genesis 39:9-11.

What was the purpose of this type of marriage? The custom was when an Israelite died without leaving a male heir, the nearest relative should marry the widow in order to continue the family name of the deceased brother. The term levirate means "husband's brother." Such marriages were not strictly required under Jewish law, but were considered an act of love.

Take the case of Ruth and Boaz. If the brother-in-law did not wish to marry the widow, he was not forced to do so. Apparently the next male relative in line could do so. This was the situation we read about in the case of Boaz and Ruth in the book of Ruth. When the offer was made to the near kinsmen he gave his permission for Boaz to marry Ruth instead of him, Ruth 4:5-11.

Jesus Himself dealt with this subject during His public ministry. The question was asked in an effort to trick our Lord. The rabbis taught that in the resurrection the widow, even though taken as wife by the dead man's brother, would revert back to his wife. In the question, all seven brothers had her to wife-whose wife will she be in the resurrection? "... You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven." {Matthew 22:29,30}

This was strictly a family and inheritance custom of the Jews. Keeping the line of Jewish descendants going was important to them. This by no means changed what God's design for marriage has always been-one man and one woman for life. This custom rose out of a need to preserve the family name among one who had no rightful male heir. Genealogy and descendants were important to God's people in the physical type of law they lived under. Let us be careful to note this design had its problems- remember Onan. ***