

The History of Marriage

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Prehistoric Relationships:

Paleontological and anthropological evidence suggests that early humans, circa 10,000 B.C., either:

- 1) lived in female-centered groups made up of mothers, sisters, and their young, accompanied by temporary male companions, while younger males, left the group when they reached mating age, or
- 2) lived in groups based on male kin, in which fathers, brothers, and sons, along with their female mates, stayed together, and females left at puberty, or
- 3) were organized around one male mating with several females and traveling with them and their offspring (Coontz, 2005).

Whatever theory is correct, “nuclear families” did not exist. No single male and female could have survived. Early humans lived in groups or clans. Division of labor between the sexes developed with men involved in hunting and women nursing children. Women were not dependent on men but provided for themselves by gathering and processing plants and shellfish, manufacturing clothing, trapping small animals and making digging or cooking implements. Men and women were interdependent although specialized in tasks undertaken to survive. Men probably did not “dominate” women in this era. Women and men needed each other. Women’s ability to bear children gave them special status in the pre-civilization era. This ability was reflected in the fact that early gods tended to be female (e.g., Gaia, The Goddess of Earth).

Relationships during the rise of civilization:

Marriage as an institution did not evolve until much later. Relationships between men and women were based on survival. Men and women had to cooperate on a fairly equal basis or all would have died given the difficulty of staying alive. Life was difficult and required constant attention to providing food, protection from the elements, and defense against predators most notably other humans. Sexual unions were necessary for procreation and may have been pleasurable for both parties. Relationships based on love were probably rare and certainly not considered necessary. In fact, until the 19th century, marriages based on love were generally looked upon with suspicion. Marrying for love might detract from the necessity of marrying to provide for physical survival, procreation, and the protection of property rights.

As civilizations arose and the ownership of property developed, men became more dominant in male-female relationships. Gradually societies moved from being matriarchal to patriarchal. Even gods moved from primarily female to primarily male. Ultimately “God” became a single, masculine entity. A male god can be thought of as a metaphor for the emergence of male economic and political dominance.

Western societies emerged primarily from Hebrew and ancient Greek and Roman societies. A detailed summary of that influence was detailed by William Heibert and is given below.

References

Baxter, Stephen (2003) *Evolution*. Ballantine: New York.

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Heibert, William. *The Changing Shape of Marriage*. University of Iowa Marriage Counseling Conference, May 13-16, 1974.

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