

THE BRIDAL CHAMBER AND THE MYSTICAL WEDDING. INTERPRETATIONS OF PSALM 18(19):5 IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Abstract

This paper examines the concept of the bridal chamber within the framework of the mystical wedding, particularly in Psalm 19. The article presents the significance of the bridal chamber in both secular and religious traditions throughout history. In ancient times, the retreat of the bride and groom into intimacy was considered the key moment of the wedding ceremony, and the marital union was not considered complete until it was consummated. Drawing on historical and patristic sources, the paper proposes four interpretations of the bridal chamber in biblical history: (1) the Holy Temple, in parallel with the Garden of Eden, the Church, and the Synagogue; (2) the womb of the Virgin Mary; (3) the tomb of Christ; and (4) man himself, both body and soul.



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Introduction

Continuing the Jewish discourse on hierogamy, Christian theology associates salvation with the metaphor of the mystical wedding. In the New Testament, the Saviour suggested that He is a bridegroom (Mt 9:14-15), and He explicitly presents John the Baptist as *the friend of the bridegroom* (Jn 3:22-39), because John was His friend. In the Gospels, in some parables, salvation is described as a wedding day (Mt 22:1-14;

25:1-13), and in the Pauline epistles the Church is designated as the bride of Christ, betrothed to the Saviour (Eph 5:21-23; 2 Cor 11:1-3).

While at the beginning of the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, an uncompleted wedding can be observed, at the end of it, in the Book of Revelation, it is explicitly stated that “the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready” (Rev 19:7). So, as can be seen, this topic is not present in the New Testament only, but also in the Old Testament, specifically in the discourses of the prophets, in Psalms, and Song of Songs, serving as a leitmotiv throughout the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, a large number of works have been written on this subject, from both Jewish and Christian perspectives, emphasizing that the bridegroom from Scripture must be YHWH or Jesus Christ, and His bride must be the world as a whole, the Synagogue, the Church, or any person, depending on the context.

Within this framework, the present investigation seeks to clarify the earthly site of the mystical wedding in Christian thought. Specifically, the first part of this study provides an overview of the role of the bridal chamber in world history, considering its significance across different cultures and time periods. The second section, which forms the core of the work, analyses various hypotheses regarding the possible locations of the bridal chamber in the context of biblical hierogamy. These include the Holy Temple, the womb of the Virgin Mary, the tomb of the Saviour, and, last but not least, man himself. The final section of this paper offers general reflections on the place of the bridal chamber in the Christian tradition, leaving the question open, as each of the variants proposed in this study has its own arguments. They are not mutually exclusive, but complementary images, even juxtaposed, which together form the ideal picture of the bridal chamber according to the biblical narrative.

Bridal Chamber in History of the World

Regardless of culture, historical period, or geographical place, the consummation of marriage has always been a special moment for people, accompanied by special rituals.

In the History of Religions, the concept of the bridal chamber or nuptial bed has been present since ancient times in Ugarit, in some ritual texts such as RS 24.291 (KTU³ 1.132) (see Dietrich, Mayer 1996, 165-176), in Mesopotamia, in *the Emar's entu Installation* (see Fleming 1992), and also in Egypt, in *the Liturgy for a New Year's*

festival imported from Bethel to Syenes by Exiles from Rash (Papyrus Amherst 63) (see Steiner 1991, 362-363).

It also appears in Herodotus' writings regarding Babylon (*The Histories*, 1.181.5), in the *Iliad* (XVIII.490) and in the *Odyssey* (XXIII.198-202), and even in the poems of Catullus (*Carmina* 66). In Latin culture, it was the mother's duty to prepare the bridal chamber for her son on the wedding day (Pilitsis 1981, 12), while the best friend of the bridegroom had the duty to guard this room (lat. *thalamos*) during the wedding, for the two spouses not to be disturbed (Oakley, Sinos, 1993). This ritual was almost the same in Greece, but slightly different in ancient Israel, where a friend of the bridegroom was responsible for preparing the bridal chamber, not the bridegroom's mother (Malul 1989, 241-278).

In biblical literature, even from the Book of Genesis, it is mentioned that in Jewish culture, the wedding culminated with the bride and groom entering the bridal chamber (named in Hebrew huppah), while the guests were celebrating and rejoicing (Gn 29:15-29) [1]. The bridal chamber is also mentioned in the Old Testament, in Tobit 6:17-18, in Joel 2:16, and in the apocryphal literature (IV Ezra 9:38-10:4; Joseph and Asenath, 15), while in the New Testament, the bridal chamber is only suggested in Matthew 9:15; 22:10 [2].

In the early centuries of Christianity, the bridal chamber is mentioned in *The Shepherd of Hermas* (23, 1). It occupies a special place in Gnostic literature, being present in *The Wedding Hymn of Acta Thomae*, in *The Gospel of Philip*, and not only [3]. Furthermore, it seems that the Valentinians had a special ritual dedicated to the bridal chamber (see Strathearn 2009, 83-103), attested by both Clement of Alexandria (Clement Alexandrinul 2020, 90) and Irenaeus of Lyon (*Adversus Haeresis*, 1.21.3, 196), but without any details about it.

According to Constantine Porphyrogenitus (10th century), in the Middle Ages, in the Byzantine Empire, the Basileus and Augusta were greeted with cheers by the crowds when they entered the nuptial chamber on their wedding day, but there is no record of any kind of blessing for the nuptial chamber by the clergy (Radle 2012, 135, n.18).

In the same century, according to the *Sinai Gr. 957* manuscript, in Christianity existed both a special prayer for preparation of the bridal chamber, named in Greek *Εὐχή εἰς τὸ στῆσαι παστὸν γάμου*, and a special prayer for the "untying" of the bridal chamber, named *Εὐχή εἰς λύσιν παστοῦ γάμου*. Similar prayers are found in that time in *Vatican Gr. 1863* and *Ottoboni Gr. 344* manuscripts, but also in some documents of

the East Syriac Church, with the particularity that there the bridal chamber was blessed on the day of the wedding, and on the 7th day after the wedding it was “untied,” after the “bridal week”, time during which the two spouses spent time together in intimacy in a specific part of the house (Radle 2012, 139-143).

In that period, Western Christianity had a special blessing for the bridal chamber, recited by the clergy, known in Latin as *Benedictio ad thalamus* (Van Houts 2023, 119-141), and even a *bedding ceremony*, referring to a wedding custom in which the couple was laid together in the nuptial bed in front of numerous witnesses, usually family, friends, and neighbors, to fulfill the marriage.

Nowadays, this practice is not so meaningful to people. In Christianity, the wedding ceremony still includes references to the intimate union of the spouses, and the wedding night is a special moment for many couples, but not as visible as in the past.

Interpretations of the bridal chamber in the biblical hierogamy

“[At the ends of the Earth, the Lord] has prepared a tent for the sun, and from there it rises like a bridegroom coming out from its bridal chamber” (Ps 19:5b-6^{BHS})

Over time, various authors have tried to clarify who is the bridegroom and who is the bride within the mystical wedding, in the context of Psalm 19. Perhaps this aspect was not very clear for pagans. For them, the sun was a deity to which they worshipped (Ezek 6:4), as can be seen in Egypt, where the god Ra was famous; in Rome, where it was celebrated *Sol Invictus*, but also in Babylon, where the divine couple *sun-moon* was well-known: *Šamaš-Sîn*. This is why the Scriptures urge believers not to worship the sun, because it is only a creature made by God on the fourth day.

Meanwhile, in Christianity, this question is quite simple (see Pașca-Tușa 2011; 2018; 2020). Jesus Christ must be the bridegroom, because He is *the sun of righteousness* (Mal 3:20^{BHS}) and *the light of the world* (Jn 8:12). According to the Bible, there is a close relationship between the king and the sun (Pașca-Tușa 2018, 425): the sun represents the king, and the king leads the people and helps them in wars, like the sun. (Josh 10:13). He is the Messiah, and “the glory of God comes from the East” (Ezek 43:2).

For this reason, the focus of this paper will no longer be on the bridegroom or the bride in Psalm 19, but on the nuptial chamber – the tent from which the sun rises like

a bridegroom – trying to find its characteristics, and its place in the World, where God and man intimately encounter each other, as in a wedding moment.

To designate the place where the sun retreats, the psalmist used the term אֹהֶל (Heb. *ohel*), which means an ordinary tent. For the bridal chamber, however, the Jews used the word חֻפָּה (Heb. *huppah*), which was the chamber, canopy or bed where the bride and groom retreated on the wedding night and consummated their marriage, as can be seen, for example, in Joel 2:16, where it is written: “Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber” (Tob 7:15-17).

In the Gospel of Philip, this chamber is called: ΝΥΜΦΩΝ, ΠΑΣΤΟΣ or ΚΟΙΤΩΝ (Strathearn 2009, 89). It says that *the children of the bridal chamber* can enter there every day (Gos. Phil. 122), because the mystical union celebrated there is eternal (Gos. Phil. 78). Perhaps the tent had some marital connotations for the Jews, in everyday life, as can be seen in Genesis 24:67, where it is said that Isaac entered his mother’s tent with Rebekah and loved her there. But since the Bible in Psalm 19 does not speak about an ordinary wedding, but about hierogamy, it is obvious that there cannot be an ordinary room, but a special space, as we will see in the following chapters, where we will present some hypotheses about the bridal chamber.

The bridal chamber is the Holy Temple

There is a close connection between the Garden of Eden, the Tabernacle, the Temple in Jerusalem, the Church, and the Kingdom of God. All these places are spaces of encounter between Heaven and Earth, between *here* and *beyond*, built according to a unique pattern: in the centre is always the Divine Presence (in the Garden of Eden was the Tree of Life || in the Holy Tabernacle was the *Kavod*, likewise in the Temple in Jerusalem || in the Church is the Holy Eucharist || in the Kingdom of Heaven is God Himself), and around it, concentrically, is placed the whole of creation.

Following this pattern, rabbinic literature asserts that God is present amid the world, surrounded by angels who, as true gentlemen of honor, participate in the mystical wedding along with the whole of creation (*Genesis Rabbah* 58,3).

In this perspective, from the Christian point of view, the Church is par excellence the place where man’s direct encounter with God takes place, reproducing, on the one hand, the scene in the Garden of Eden and anticipating, on the other hand, the eschatological encounter in the Kingdom of Heaven. Having consecrated himself

to God through Baptism and accepted divine paternity by grace (Eph 1:5; Gal 4:7; Rom 8:15; 8:23), man is incorporated into the body of the Church, the spouse of Christ. In this way, he has the possibility of inheriting the patrimony of the Father and, through the Church, of re-entering the Garden of Eden, the Kingdom of Heaven, which is man's home (Phil 3:20), the ultimate place of encounter between the Creator and His creation.

By its nature, the Church is *a thin place*, between Heaven and Earth, and the mystical wedding must take place in the middle of it, close to the altar, because nowhere else can the meeting between the bridegroom and the bride be more intimate than in the place where each sacrifices for the other.

God is present everywhere, for the whole creation, like the sun which, although it is only one and in one place, shines everywhere in the world and can be felt in many houses simultaneously. To demonstrate that He is present everywhere, God spoke to the people in many ways: sometimes through unbelievers, sometimes through animals, or even through a bush, as happened to Moses, without any problem for Him (*Exodus Rabbah* 2:5). But just as there is more water in a river than in the air, so God's *Shekhinah* is more present in the holy place than anywhere else. So, the mystical wedding must be in the Church | in the Garden of Eden | in the Holy Temple | in the Kingdom of Heaven, which are all expressions of the same single reality.

In the Jewish conception, the sanctuary was located in the center of the Earth (*Ioma* 64b). The consecration of the Temple was a wedding day for the Jews, and their return from Exile and re-entry into the Temple in Jerusalem was like a wedding moment for them, Israel meeting its Bridegroom there, in the Holy Temple, in the new Garden of Eden (*Leviticus Rabbah* 9:6; *Song of Songs Rabbah* 5:1)

God revealed Himself to the people in the Holy Tabernacle, between the two cherubim that were above the Ark of the Law (Ex 25:22). The people, however, did not worship the cherubim, but the One who sits on the cherubim (Ps 98:1). So, as in the case of the Song of Songs, YHWH is present in the Holy Temple, in the midst of the people, paradoxically by His supra-present absence, living among the people as He promised (Is 25:8). Moreover, He receives the people in His place (Ex 25:10-11) and dines with them.

In the Gospel of Philip, the mystical wedding is described as an initiation in three stages, corresponding to the tripartite architectural structures observed in many Middle Eastern temples, including the Jerusalem Temple (69:14ff) (MacRae 1984, 184-185). In the final stage of the Temple, designated the bridal chamber,

a sacred marriage was celebrated, binding for the eternal life (Robinson 1982, 30). According to some authors, this ritual probably involved a holy kiss (59:2-6) (Nibley 2005, 526), while others think that this act (gr. ἀσπάζομαι) could be a hug or a greeting (Lampe 1961, 245-246). Regardless of its form, the most important thing for this investigation is that such a practice is associated by some scholars with the Temple of Jerusalem (Schenke 1997, 403).

In the New Testament, the Body of Christ is the temple of the Holy Spirit (Jn 2:21), the tent that was not made by human hands (Heb 9:11), where the Lord came into the world to save human nature. Furthermore, Christ will be personally in the midst of creation at the end of time. People will no longer need another temple (Rev 21:22), because He is greater than the temple (Matt 12:6). As has been said, the most essential thing in the Word is not the tabernacle or the temple, but the One who is inside it (Mt 23:21).

St Peter, referring to his body, calls it a tent (2 Pt 1:13), but more than that, in the Gospel of John (1:14), it is said that “the Word Himself became a tent”, because He gathers in Himself divinity and humanity, time and eternity, soul and body, the uncreated and the created (Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa 1995, 128-130). In this sense, it is essential to note that in ancient Judaism, the bridal chamber was the same size as the holy tent and was decorated similarly, reinforcing a specific connection between the two (Bb 6, 4). (Pitre 2018, 126)

From an ontological point of view, there is only one archetypal reality of the bridal chamber, and that is eternally in Heaven. The others (the Garden of Eden, the Tabernacle, the Temple, the Church) are only reflections of the bridal chamber of Heaven, helpful for a man to perceive that reality according to his measure and to understand what is beyond the veil.

In the Christian view, the Church has surpassed the Tabernacle and the Holy Temple. While in the Temple YHWH was present amid the people only through His glory (Ezek 10:4), in the Church He is truly present, because for Christians the Eucharist is Jesus Christ Himself, the actual tree of life (|| Hos 14:9), with whom the believers have real communion within the Divine Liturgy.

Thus, in Christian thought, the union between man and God is accomplished in the bridal chamber, which in the Old Testament was the Holy Tabernacle, then the Holy Temple, and now it is the Holy Church, the inaugurated Kingdom of God.

The bridal chamber is the womb of the Virgin Mary

In Sermons 187, 188, and 191, St Augustine used Ps 18(19) to explain the birth of the Saviour into the world, affirming that the Virgin's womb is the actual bridal chamber, Christ is the true sun, and the Church is the bride prepared for the wedding. St Augustine further affirms that every believer who has renounced sin can be a virgin in front of God and give birth to the divine Logos by confessing the truth to people (St Augustin 1992, 41).

The womb of the Virgin is the bridal chamber in which, through Jesus Christ, the divine and human natures were united as in a temple. The Saviour is *the sun of righteousness* (Mal 3:20). The womb of the Virgin is the holy tabernacle, from which the Saviour, coming forth, appeared to the world like a bridegroom on the wedding day, as it is written in the Psalms (Ps 19:5). So, by descending into the womb of His Mother and assuming, by *enhypostatise*, human nature in all respects except sin, He became one body with the Virgin, having one flesh. By this act, however, Christ did nothing else but anticipate the nuptial union between Himself and the Church, which He would accomplish on Golgotha at the proper time.

In the Epistle to the Ephesians (5:29-31), the Apostle Paul says that the Saviour and the Church are a single body. He is the head, and the believers are the members. This union between man and God would not have been possible, in the broadest sense, for each person, if it had not first taken place in the womb of the Virgin (Chavasse 1940, 152-15). Just as the Lord, after the Resurrection, passed through locked doors without opening them (Jn 20:26), so He passed through the womb of the Virgin without damaging it, as Ezekiel had foretold (Ez 44:2).

The bridal chamber is the Saviour's Tomb

In the Christian Orthodox Church, the Paschal hymnography beautifully describes the nuptial relationship between Jesus Christ and the people. In the Greek tradition, the first three days of Holy Week are known as *the Days of the Bridegroom* [4]. In Byzantine liturgical tradition, the hymn "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh" is sung in Church during this period, recalling the mystical wedding. Along with it, the hymn "I see Your Bridal Chamber adorned" is sung in the Church in this period, which is important for the present investigation because the Greek term used for *chamber* is *τοὺ νυμφώνα*, i.e., bridal chamber.

The New Testament scene in which Mary Magdalene searches for Christ after the Resurrection, as it is constructed in the Fourth Gospel, seems to be composed on the narrative level according to the model of the Song of Songs. Mary Magdalene looks for the body of Jesus, which she did not find in the tomb, just as the woman in the Song of Songs once looked for her beloved in bed, whom she did not find at home (Song 3:1-6).

At the same time, the angels placed in the tomb on either side of the stone in the Resurrection scene – the interior of the tomb being empty – are aesthetically echoes of the Ark of the Law and the Covenant on Mount Sinai, which, according to some exegetes, represents the wedding moment in the Old Testament between YHWH and the people of Israel. The tomb of the Lord is, therefore, reminiscent of the bridal chamber, both philosophically and aesthetically.

In the Fourth Gospel, the Resurrection of the Saviour takes place in a garden. In biblical exegesis, this place is associated with both the Garden of Eden and the Song of Songs. Although Adam and Eve did not give birth to children until they were expelled from the Garden of Eden (cf. Gn 4:1), they were a couple there. Although in the Song of Songs the bridegroom sometimes seems to be absent from the bridal chamber (Song 5:2-8//1:4; 2:4), the main action took place in a garden (4:16; 5:1; 6:11). So, the garden is a wedding place in biblical aesthetics, and the fact that Mary Magdalene, according to the Gospel of John (20:14), mistook Jesus for the gardener after the resurrection is not without significance, but suggests the idea of mystical wedding.

Expanding on this image, St Romanos the Melodist says that, according to the New Testament, heaven should be the bridal chamber where Christ receives people after the Resurrection, as seen in the parable of the ten virgins (Sf. Roman Melodul 2012, 184). In this case, the tomb is nothing more for man than a cloakroom through which he passes in order to reach the true bridal chamber, the Kingdom of God [5].

Last but not least, with regard to the tomb of the Saviour as a bridal chamber, the Syrian theologians use the term *gnōnā* for the baptismal font or baptistery (Klijn 2003, 28; Murray 1975, 39), because in the Christian faith baptism means death and resurrection together with Christ, as St Paul also says in the Letter to the Romans (Rom 6:3-11).

The bridal chamber is the man himself

The idea that man himself is a bridal chamber is quite reasonable, considering that the human body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19, 20), or if the temple built of stone was a bridal chamber for the Jews, as have already shown in this paper,

then it is natural to think that man, the temple of the Holy Spirit, should himself be a nuptial chamber (see Pugliese 2004, 299).

St Basil of Ancyra says that no virgin should seek immorality with her tongue, her hearing, her eyes, or her mind, but adorn her body like a bridal chamber, because there her soul unites with God like a bride and a bridegroom (Sf. Vasile al Ancyrei 2014, 146). Furthermore, St Ephrem the Syrian says that, in relation to God, the human soul is a bride, the body is a bridal chamber, and the senses are the guests of this universal event, the mystical wedding. (St. Ephrem the Syrian 1998, 28).

In this respect, in Christian spirituality, the *mystical ecstasy* is not so important for the knowledge of God, as *enstasis*, because the Kingdom of God is within man (Lk 17:21). Only in this way can man enter the Kingdom of Heaven, being ready at any moment to give himself to the Bridegroom who is already there, ready for the mystical wedding.

Taken as a whole, human life is a continuous occasion of encounter between man and God. In this respect, prayer is an important moment for man and God to be together, and this does not happen anywhere, but in the chamber of the soul (Mt 6:6 – *ταμειῖον*), in maximum intimacy. But more than prayer, Eucharistic communion brings man closer to God, body and soul. Through it, man receives the body of Jesus Christ and obtains perfect union with Him. Thus, for Christians, the Divine Liturgy is a nuptial event during which Christians consecrate their bodies and souls to God, as God has ordained (Lv 21:8).

While Gnostic literature maintains that the human body has negative valences and that therefore only the human soul can be a bridal chamber for the mystical marriage, Christian literature maintains that the human body contains the image of God and therefore, together with the soul, it must be a bridal chamber, as can be seen, for example, in the case of holy relics, which are an ark in which divine gifts rest.

In the Divine Liturgy, believers unite with Christ and become members of the ecclesial Body of Christ. They receive a foretaste of the Resurrection, and as they are spiritually alive, they draw closer to Christ, particularly through the Eucharist. In this sacred sacrament, humanity and divinity are brought into perfect union, fulfilling the mystical wedding.

Conclusions

This study has explored the significance of the nuptial chamber within the context of the mystical wedding. In the first section, the special role of the bridal chamber in world civilizations was highlighted, particularly in the writings of antiquity and the Middle Ages, when rituals for its blessing were present in both Eastern and Western Christian traditions.

Regarding the tent of Psalm 19, we demonstrated that it likely refers to the bridal chamber, offering four interpretations: (1) the Holy Temple, akin to the Garden of Eden, the Church, and the Synagogue; (2) the womb of the Virgin Mary; (3) the tomb of Christ; and (4) humanity itself, encompassing both body and soul.

When considering the significance of the nuptial chamber within the Christian tradition, it is essential to acknowledge that its role in biblical hierogamy remains open. The interpretations presented here are not mutually exclusive, but rather serve to illustrate a complementary and interwoven set of images that collectively shape the ideal conception of the bridal chamber in Christian thought.

Notes

[1] In the Greek world, wedding songs are called *epithalamium*, derived from *ἐπι + θάλαμος*, which means song dedicated to the bridal chamber/bed.

[2] The Patriarch Callistus of Constantinople, reproducing the text of Mt 9:15, says “the disciples of the Bridegroom” (*οἱ τοῦ νυμφίου μαθηταί*) instead of “the children of the nuptial chamber” (*οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ νυμφῶνος*). See Corbu 2024, 51.

[3] In Gnostic literature, the bridal chamber can be seen in: *Gospel of Thomas* 75, 104; *Dialogue of the Saviour* 138.48–50; *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* 57.10–18; 62.6–10; 65.35–66.8; 67.5–11; *Authoritative Teaching* 22.23–34; *Teachings of Silvanus* 94.19–29; *Exegesis of the Soul* 132.2–133.10; *Tripartite Tractate* 93.1; 122.15–16, 21; 128.33; 138.11; *Gospel of Philip* 65.1–26; 67.2–27; 69.1–70.4; 70.9–71.15; 72.17–23; 74.12–24; 76.1–5; 81.34–82.26; 84.14–86.18. See 2009, 85, n. 4.

[4] In Orthodox churches in Greece, during the first part of Holy Week, it is customary to place a life-size icon of Jesus the Bridegroom in the centre of the nave. On Good Friday, this is replaced by the Holy Cross, which is placed in the centre of the church instead of the icon of Jesus the Bridegroom.

[5] In his commentary on the Parable of the Ten Virgins, St. Jerome states explicitly that those who awoke from their sleep entered the bridal chamber [of the Bridegroom] (lat. *cubiculum sponsi*). See Fer. Ieronim 2023, 365.

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