

## WEDDING TORCHES

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Scholars usually recognize that the ‘lamps’ (e.g. ESV, KJV, NASB, NIV, NRSV) of Mt. 25.1 are not the small, hand-held Herodian period lamps, which would generate very little light, but torches.<sup>1</sup> Commentators often cite in support of this contention early modern Palestinian village practices. Many continue to follow Jeremias’s observation from traditional Arab weddings that in poorer villages these torches may have been sticks wrapped with oiled rags.<sup>2</sup> Most traditional Palestinian village weddings climaxed with women torchbearers going out to meet the groom’s company and leading the bride to the bridegroom’s home, as in Mt. 25.1-12.<sup>3</sup>

In this case traditional Middle Eastern practice continues ancient custom. Commentators have not always drawn attention to the ancient evidence, however, which is widespread throughout the Mediterranean world, although less attested in early Jewish sources. Some of these references to the use of torches in ancient Mediterranean weddings already appear in my 1999 commentary on Matthew.<sup>4</sup>

1. Either meaning is possible lexically; see, e.g., BDAG, s.v. *λαμπάς*; LSJ, s.v. *λαμπάς* (highlighting torches and metaphoric extensions).

2. Joachim Jeremias, ‘ΛΑΜΠΑΔΕΣ: Mt 25:1.3f.7f’, *ZNW* 56 (1965), pp. 196-201; *idem*, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribner’s, 2nd edn, 1972), pp. 174-75; followed by, e.g., Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 498; more recently, e.g., David A. Fiensy, *The Archaeology of Daily Life: Ordinary Persons in Late Second Temple Israel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), pp. 122-23.

3. Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 173.

4. Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 596, citing Euripides, *Tro.* 343-344; Vergil, *Aen.* 4.338-339;

Here I update this list with some further references. Torchlit processions more generally were of course common,<sup>5</sup> but here I continue the focus on wedding processions.<sup>6</sup> Wedding ceremonies normally began at night, thus requiring lighting.<sup>7</sup> Wedding torches thus appear pervasively in Greek and Roman sources.

As the Greek bride approached the groom's house, the mother-in-law would meet her 'outside the door holding a lighted torch in honour of Hymen'.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, though elements of Roman weddings might vary, celebrations typically included 'torch-lit processions' and feasts.<sup>9</sup>

In their association with weddings, connubial torches signify joy.<sup>10</sup> They contrast with funerary torches,<sup>11</sup> so that at a mournful wedding, *poetically* speaking, the torches were like those used at tombs;<sup>12</sup> in such a case, a Fury might carry the torch instead of Juno or Hymen.<sup>13</sup> One who died before narrating the wedding would thus reach 'the funeral torch before the wedding

7.388; *Culex* 246; *Ecl.* 8.29; Ovid, *Metam.* 1.483, 763; 4.758-759; 6.430; 10.6; Lucan, *Phars.* 2.356; Plutarch, *Quaest. rom.* 2; *Mor.* 263F; Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. Clit.* 2.11.1; cf. S. Safrai, 'Home and Family', in S. Safrai and M. Stern (eds.), *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions* (2 vols.; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974-1976), pp. 728-92 (758). See also the observation in Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 55.

5. E.g., Cornutus, *Nat. d.* 6, §5.14-15; Plutarch, *Cic.* 22.3-4; Lucian, *Alex.* 39-40; Xenophon of Ephesus, *Eph.* 1.2, 10. On torches, see, e.g., R.J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology* (9 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1955-1964), VI, pp. 125-31.

6. I am not distinguishing the various Latin and Greek terms for torches used at weddings.

7. E.g. Menander Rhetor 2.7, 410.19-25; Xenophon of Ephesus, *Eph.* 3.6.

8. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite's Tortoise: The Veiled Woman of Ancient Greece* (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2003), p. 235.

9. Alexandra T. Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Charleston, SC: Tempus, 2000), pp. 111-12.

10. Catullus 64.25, 302; cf. Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 9.6, concerning Homer, *Il.* 18.491.

11. Ovid, *Fast.* 2.558, 561-562; cf. Silius Italicus 2.184; Apuleius *Flor.* 19.6.

12. Ovid, *Her.* 2.120.

13. Ovid, *Her.* 6.45-46.

torch'.<sup>14</sup> Torches might burn throughout the house during a wedding celebration.<sup>15</sup>

Such practices predate the first century. Aeschylus declares the bridegroom's appearance by the light of Aphrodite's torches (*λαμπραῖς*).<sup>16</sup> In Menander, wedding settings include torches and garlands.<sup>17</sup> Roman literary sources provide even more examples.<sup>18</sup> The practice continues to appear in sources from and concerning the first century. Thus Seneca takes for granted that a bridesmaid would carry a torch<sup>19</sup> and Nero's wedding to a male prostitute reportedly included nuptial torches.<sup>20</sup> Statius speaks of a worthy maiden entering patrician doors, i.e. marrying into an aristocratic family, 'with the first marriage-torches' (*lampade*).<sup>21</sup>

Later novelists, orators and erotic composers wax eloquent regarding the custom.<sup>22</sup> In Xenophon of Ephesus's *Ephesiaka*, after all-night celebrations and a feast, 'they brought the girl' to the ornately decorated 'bridal chamber with torches'.<sup>23</sup> Eros himself led the way, Xenophon elaborates, 'with a lighted torch'.<sup>24</sup> At a wedding, an orator might declare, 'Hymen shall kindle

14. Apuleius, *Flor.* 16.18. Apuleius, *Rhetorical Works* (ed. Stephen Harrison; trans. Stephen Harrison *et al.*; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 160.

15. Aristaenetus, *Erot. Ep.* 1.10.85-86. Aristaenetus, *Erotic Letters* (trans. Peter Bing and Regina Höschele; WGRW, 32; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2014), pp. 24-25: in this case, 'made of incense, so as to burn and give off scent at the same time'.

16. Aeschylus, *Fr.* 275.831-832.

17. Menander, *Sik.* 418-419; *Sam.* 731-732.

18. Besides those elaborated below, see, e.g., Catullus 61.15 (a pine torch); 61.77-78, 94-95, 114; 66.79; Ovid, *Her.* 4.123; 6.42; 11.101; 12.137-138; 14.10; *Ex Ponto* 3.2.55; *Fast.* 2.558, 561; *Tristia* 4.5.33; Valerius Maximus 7.1.1.

19. Seneca, *Med.* 37-38.

20. Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.37.

21. Statius, *Silvae* 4.8.59-60. Statius, *Statius* (trans. J.H. Mozley; 2 vols.; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, rev. edn, 1955), I, p. 261. Cf. also Statius, *Silvae* 3.4.53-54; *Thebaid* 2.259.

22. E.g., Menander Rhetor 2.7.409.10; Libanius, *Thesis* 1.31.

23. Xenophon of Ephesus, *Eph.* 1.8. Xenophon of Ephesus, 'An Ephesian Tale', in B.P. Reardon (ed.), *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 125-69.

24. Xenophon of Ephesus, *Eph.* 1.8. Xenophon of Ephesus, 'An Ephesian Tale', p. 133.

the lamps and torches for us with the wedding fire'.<sup>25</sup> When the speaker personifies Marriage (Γάμος), Marriage is depicted as carrying a torch (λαμπάδα).<sup>26</sup> One eager to marry is 'eager to light the torch to the Cyprian' (i.e. Aphrodite).<sup>27</sup>

The image was sufficiently common to generate figurative usages. Thus the marriage torch could symbolize marriage in general.<sup>28</sup> Legitimate as opposed to immoral romance can be depicted as 'The fire that is kindled with lawful torches'.<sup>29</sup> Eros initiating people into love can be described in terms of a torch,<sup>30</sup> although the image of Eros's or Cupid's fire also applies more widely to any sexual passion,<sup>31</sup> and 'burning' with passion appears more widely still,<sup>32</sup> most conspicuously in romances,<sup>33</sup> erotic literature<sup>34</sup> and erotic magic.<sup>35</sup>

25. Menander Rhetor 2.6, 404.23f. *Menander Rhetor* (ed. and trans. D.A. Russell and N.G. Wilson; Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), p. 145.

26. Menander Rhetor 2.6, 404.32.

27. Libanius, *Speech in Character* 17.3. See Libanius, *Libanius's 'Progymnasmata': Model Exercises in Greek Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (ed. Malcolm Heath; trans. Craig A. Gibson; WGRW, 27; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), pp. 401, 403, regarding Medea.

28. Ovid, *Tristia* 4.5.33. Silius Italicus 2.184 describes marriage with a term related to torch-bearing.

29. Ps.-Quintilian, *Decl.* 291.5, evoking nuptial torches as well as fire of passion.

30. Alciphron, *Pisc.* 22 (Thalasserôs to Euploüs), 1.19, ¶1.

31. E.g. Musaeus, *Hero and Leander* 40-41; Apollonius Rhodius, *Argon.* 3.287, 774; Vergil, *Aen.* 1.660, 673; Ovid, *Am.* 1.8; 1.1.21-26; 1.2.7-9, 46; 2.9.5; *Ex Ponto* 3.3.67, 80; Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. Clit.* 2.3.3; 4.7.4; Chariton, *Chaer.* 4.7.6; Apuleius, *Metam.* 5.23; cf. perhaps Euripides, *Hipp.* 429-430.

32. Pervasive in literary sources, e.g., Xenophon, *Cyr.* 5.1.16; Sallust, *Bell. Cat.* 14.5-6; Cicero, *Tusc.* 1.19.44; Vergil, *Aen.* 4.2, 23, 54, 66, 68; *Ecl.* 8.83; Ovid, *Her.* 4.17-20; 7.23; 15.9; *Fast.* 3.545-546; *Metam.* 1.461-462; Lucan, *Phars.* 10.71; Quintus Curtius 8.3.2; Plutarch, *Bride* 4 (*Mor.* 138F); *Table-Talk* 1.2.6 (*Mor.* 619A); *Dial. on Love* 16 (*Mor.* 759B); Ps.-Quintilian, *Decl.* 287.10; Sextus Empiricus, *Pyr.* 3.199; Philostratus, *Ep.* 13 (59); Libanius, *Description* 30.3; Athenaeus, *Diep.* 1.10d, 23d.

33. Longus, *Daphn.* 3.10; Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. Clit.* 1.5.5-6; 1.11.3; 1.17.1; 4.6.1; 5.15.5; 5.25.6; 5.26.2; 6.18.2; 6.19.1; Chariton, *Chaer.* 1.1.8, 15; 2.3.8; 2.4.7; 5.9.9; 6.3.3, 9; 6.4.5; 6.7.1; Lucian, *Asin.* 5; Xenophon of Ephesus, *Eph.* 1.3, 5, 9,

Jewish reports of weddings generally focus on other features, but widespread attestation of the ancient use of torches, alongside the generally nocturnal commencement of wedding celebrations,<sup>36</sup> suggests that such celebrations would have included festive lighting in Judean and Galilean as well as in Diaspora settings. That the custom persisted in Middle Eastern villages, as commentators note, supports this inference. Works that focus on this later practice, however, can increase the probability of their thesis by triangulating with more of the abundant data from the ancient Greek and Roman world.

14; 2.3; 3.6; Apuleius, *Metam.* 2.5, 7. In Jewish sources, see Sir. 9.8; 23.16; 1 Cor. 7.9; *T. Jos.* 2.2.

34. *Alexandrian Erotic Fragment*, column 1; Catullus 45.16; 61.169-171; 64.19; Tibullus 2.4.4-6; *Pervigilium Veneris* 31-33; Aristaenetus, *Erot. Ep.* 1.6.8; 2.1.4, 10-12; 2.18.6; 2.21.16.

35. E.g., *PGM* 36.69, 81-85, 110-114, 130-133, 199-200, 301, 355-359; Lynn LiDonnici, 'Burning for It: Erotic Spells for Fever and Compulsion in the Ancient Mediterranean World', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 39 (1998), pp. 63-98.

36. Cf. Gen. 29.23; *m. Ber.* 2.5, 8; *b. Meg.* 13b.