

insula

The Insula

In Jesus time, families usually lived in clusters of buildings called *insulas*. These clusters were built around a central courtyard. Grandparents, cousins, uncles, and aunts all lived and interacted together in the insula.

As sons married, they added to the insula. After asking a girl to marry him, the son would return to his village and build new rooms onto his father's home. The son, anxious to be married, waited for the day when his father declared that the building was complete. Then he could finally marry his bride and bring her to their new home.

Jesus presented a beautiful picture of heaven when he said, " In my Father's house are many rooms. I am going there to prepare a place for you." (John 14:2-3). This word-picture presented Jesus as a bridegroom, preparing new rooms for his followers in the *insula of heaven*.

When Jesus described his second coming, he again used the picture of a young bridegroom, waiting for his father's approval to return for his bride: No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, not the Son, but only the Father. (Matt 24:36)

By using the familiar images of an *insula*, Jesus helped his followers to understand the kingdom of God—a household of faith where God's family lives in close community.

Wedding Plans

First-century Galileans had several wedding traditions that influenced Jesus' teaching as well. When it was time for a man and woman to marry, both fathers would negotiate the bride price, recognizing that the bride would be a precious loss to her family.

Taking a cup of wine, the groom drank from it and offered it to the woman, symbolically saying that he wanted to make a covenant and would be willing to give his life for her. The woman sealed the engagement by drinking from the same glass. From that moment, she was referred to as "one who was bought with a price," distinguishing her as an engaged woman.

The groom then returned to his father's house and built new rooms, adding on to *the family insula*. Meanwhile, the bride prepared herself and her bridesmaids for the day of her groom's return. Not knowing when the groom would come, wise brides made preparations immediately so they would not be caught unprepared.

When the groom finally finished building and gained his father's approval, he would travel to his bride's village and blow the shofar. The bride would hear and know that her wedding day had arrived.

The "best man" stood at the door while the bride and groom consummated the marriage. When he heard the groom come to the door, he announced that the couple was married and the seven-day reception began. The bride was now officially part of her husband's close-knit *insula family*.

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