

THE SACRED ACT OF WEDDING: HOW THE HISTORY OF MARRIAGE CEREMONIES
AFFECTS THEIR FUTURE

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Summary:

This paper traces the development of the marriage ceremony from biblical contexts to the contemporary. Included are current cultural developments as well as an application to the writer's ministry context.

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At the end of the 1992 season, thirteen TV shows concluded with weddings, as did at least nine shows in 1997-98 (including such popular ones as “Friends”, “Baywatch”, “Dr. Quinn”, and “Everybody Loves Raymond”).¹ Meanwhile, the movie industry also capitalizes on the wedding phenomenon, recently producing such popular movies as “Father of the Bride”, “Four Weddings and a Funeral”, “My Best Friend’s Wedding”, “The Wedding Singer”, and “Runaway Bride”.² The reality is that weddings are big business! So much so, that “the average American couple spends \$19,104 per wedding”, including \$989 on the wedding dress with its accessories.³ The result is a total of \$32 billion in U.S. revenues for the primary wedding market alone⁴, not to mention the “more than \$18 billion a year” spent by those buying wedding gifts⁵, and the billions more spent within the secondary wedding market. Clearly, the act of getting married is a huge part of North American society today!

It might be asked: Are today’s wedding ceremonies as meaningful as they are lucrative?, and if they aren’t, what can we do to improve them? In this paper, I aim to help answer these questions by examining the history of weddings from Bible times until today. After examining their history, I plan to focus on my own church tradition, in hopes of discovering how to enhance its wedding ceremonies.

¹ Chrys Ingraham. *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 5.

² Ibid., 8.

³ *Bride’s 1997*; quoted in Ingraham, 4-5.

⁴ Ingraham, 27.

⁵ *Modern Bride 1994*, quoted in Ingraham, 49.

Defining Wedding

The American Heritage Dictionary defines “wedding” as: “1a. The act of marrying. b. The ceremony or celebration of marriage”⁶. Meanwhile, the Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia defines marriage as: “the legal union of a man and a woman and the ceremony initiating and celebrating them as husband and wife”⁷.

Symbolically, a wedding represents “the marriage and union of two people”⁸. It also symbolizes the bringing together of two families, the accountability of wedding witnesses, a new social status for husband and wife, and the end of old relationship styles. Furthermore, weddings please families, affirm relationships, and are a powerful way of demonstrating the love and commitment of the marrying couple. Therefore, it is no wonder that many people invest so much money and effort in hopes of designing “the perfect wedding”!⁹

In Ephesians 5:22-33, Paul provides a particularly high view of marriage that corresponds to the image of Christ and the Church.¹⁰ The Christian view of weddings should be highly influenced by these thoughts. As Stevenson says, “Marriage rites in Christianity are a rich tapestry” that “speak of the things of the Kingdom of God” within the relationships found in the Body of Christ.¹¹ Let us now proceed to examine these rites as found in the Bible.

The Sacred Act of Wedding in the Bible

Old Testament

The first evidence of a wedding act (except, perhaps for Genesis 1:28) is found between Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 24. Here, we find that Isaac was to marry from his father’s family

⁶ *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th ed.* (2000). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

⁷ P. Trutza, “Marriage,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1975, 1976), 92.

⁸ Cathy Stein Greenblat and Thomas J. Cottle, *Getting Married* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 179.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 179-180, 196, 199,

¹⁰ Kenneth Stevenson. *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of Christian Marriage Rites* (London: Alcuin Club, 1982), 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 213.

(Gen. 24:3-4), and that “the marriage (was) subject to negotiation with Rebecca’s family and a betrothal”¹². Rebekah agreed to go with Abraham’s servant (who gave expensive gifts to her and her family), and was blessed by her family before leaving (vv. 53, 60). Rebekah was married to Isaac in his tent, which is consistent with the understanding that a tent was “often used as a bridal chamber (see Ps. 19:4-5)”¹³.

In Genesis 28, we discover that Jacob was also supposed to marry within his family (vv. 1-2). In addition, we find the practice of a seven-day wedding feast (Gen. 28:22, 27-28); a tradition that is also found in the account of Samson’s first marriage (Jdg. 14:10-12). Furthermore, we learn that Jacob worked for a total of fourteen years in order to marry Laban’s daughters, Leah and Rachel. The practice of making wedding arrangements with the bride’s father is consistent with ancient near eastern history, from which we discover that “male heads of households arranged marriages for their daughters and sons.”¹⁴

Further Old Testament references to marriage include the God / Israel metaphor found in Hosea, and the famous Song of Songs phrase: “Place me like a seal over your heart” (Song of Songs 8:6), of which Stevenson says, “sums up a great deal of what the prophets say in their protests against infidelity”¹⁵. Indeed, a covenant commitment to marriage is seen as being very important in the Old Testament (see Mal. 2:13-16; Pr. 2:17; and Ezek. 16:8)!

It is interesting to note the five traits that God offers Israel when he says he will betroth himself to her (Hosea 2:19-20). These include righteousness, justice, love, compassion, and

¹² Stevenson, 4.

¹³ *The NIV Study Bible*, 1995. footnote 24:67 (Genesis).

¹⁴ Jaclyn Gellar, *Here Comes The Bride: Women, Weddings, and the Marriage Mystique* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2001), 114.

¹⁵ Stevenson, 5.

faithfulness; quite a contrast to the expectation of money or labor that many people have counted on throughout the ages!¹⁶

Finally, there are many incidental references to wedding ceremonies scattered throughout the Old Testament. These include mention of ornamental bridal accessories (Is. 49:18), jewels (Is. 61:10), bridegroom crowns (Is. 61:10; Song of Songs 3:11), and “shouts of joy and jubilation during the bridal procession” (see Jer. 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11). The wedding song of Psalm 45 also makes mention of several traditions, including elaborate dress for the bride and groom, a procession, and wedding music.¹⁷

New Testament

In the New Testament, “the gospel writers and Paul extend the Jewish imagery of God-Israel to Jesus-Christians”. As a result, we find that Jesus is referred to as the bridegroom “(Matt. 9:15 = Mark 2:19 = Luke 5:34)”¹⁸. This imagery is extended in Revelation 19:6-8, where we find God being praised at “the wedding of the Lamb” (“the Lamb” being Christ), and where we find the ready bride (the Church) clothed in “fine linen, bright and clean”.¹⁹ The symbolism of purity identified with the bride’s clothes is particularly relevant to the practice of wearing white wedding dresses today. When a bride wears a white wedding dress it can help us remember our need for holiness as we prepare to be wed to the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords (see e.g. Heb. 12:14).

There are two other major passages that mention wedding ceremonies in the New Testament; the first being the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee where Jesus changed the water to

¹⁶ Stevenson, 5.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 9.

¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

wine (Jn. 2:1-13). In this passage, we can conclude that Jesus affirmed the practice of wedding feasts through his attending one (particularly in light of his wine-making miracle!).

The other major passage that talks about a wedding ceremony is Matthew 25:1-13. Here we see a small part of the Jewish practice in which the bridesmaids accompanied the groom to the bride's house, before going back to the groom's house with the bride for the wedding feast.²⁰ In today's culture, the home does not seem to be as significant a location for wedding gatherings (whether ceremonies or receptions). I wonder if this takes away from some of the personal and familial significance of getting married?

The Sacred Act of Wedding: History of the Last Two Thousand Years

First Three Centuries A.D.

A lot of what we know about this period's wedding ceremonies can only be pieced together from various literary comments. Scripture seems to suggest that early Christians celebrated marriage "in the Jewish manner, with betrothal, followed at some point by a formal agreement, and the marriage." This custom would also have included a central wedding feast, the bride entering in a procession with her attendants, and the bride's wearing of a veil or crown (the groom also wore a crown) along with her wedding robe.²¹

Arisian offers some additional information, suggesting that the church recognized the importance of marriage when it realized that Christ would not be returning immediately. She believes that early "weddings consisted of simple rites – mostly vows – uttered by the groom", before the Church became increasingly involved in the ceremony.²² This is consistent with Stevenson's observation that the overall trend of this period seems to be of "a gradual shift from

²⁰ Stevenson, 9-10.

²¹ Ibid., 13.

²² Arisian, 131.

a domestic rite, which was led either by a member of the family or a local cleric, to a church wedding, presided over by a bishop or presbyter.”²³

We also know that the earlier church Fathers “had a worthier ideal of marriage than their successors.” Clement of Alexandria, Ignatius, and Athenagoras all encouraged Christians to maintain absolute purity in their marriage relationships.²⁴ In contrast to the high ideal of marriage held by their predecessors, later fathers (including Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine) had a “high appreciation for celibacy”²⁵, Tertullian emphasizing the importance of 1 Cor. 7:9 (“it is better to marry than to burn with passion”).²⁶

The Fourth to Sixth Centuries

In the East, we find evidence of weddings being led by a priest, the use of priestly blessings, the use of psalmody, the crowning of bride and groom, and wedding feasts at home after the ceremony.²⁷ Meanwhile, in the West, we find that “betrothal was known and practised”, a wedding blessing was important, and the Eucharist may have been part of the wedding ceremony.²⁸ Archaeological evidence suggests that veils were used in the West, crowns were used in the East, and that both East and West practiced the joining of hands and the presentation of a ring at the time of betrothal.²⁹

Of particular interest is the finding that there was “a growing reluctance to marry in Advent and Lent”.³⁰ I had never thought of this before: does marrying during these times take away from our focus on the gospel? I wonder if Advent and Lent are still less common times to get married for this reason (whether subconsciously or by choice)?

²³ Stevenson., 20.

²⁴ Trutza, 94.

²⁵ Trutza, 94.

²⁶ Stevenson, 16.

²⁷ Ibid., 25.

²⁸ Ibid., 31.

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁰ Ibid.

The Medieval Ages

Murray claims that “the basic outline of a marriage ceremony was summarized in the early Middle Ages, and by the thirteenth century the familiar liturgy was established.” This liturgy included “the handing over of the bride, the exchange of consent, the bestowing of a ring or other precious object on the bride, and the nuptial kiss.” It was also common for the wedding ceremony to be followed by an elaborate feast, regardless of the social level of the couple getting married.³¹

In the West, it became more common for the Gregorian mass to be part of the wedding ceremony. At the same time, the use of “vernacular material and short blessing prayers” also became more common. The East, although having less association with the Eucharist, did emphasize the spirituality of marriage. This could be seen in the readings, prayers, and priestly blessings that were an important part of their wedding liturgy. The East also continued to value “the crowning ceremony” as part of their weddings.³²

Moving back to the West, we find that wedding banns were read three times by the priest (separated by several days between each reading) before the typical thirteenth century Anglo-Norman marriage. We also find that bridal parties gathered at the door of the church to recite their vows. This was followed by the exchange of rings, and the option (at additional expense) of going inside the church “for a formal mass”.³³

I find the practice of marrying at church doors to be quite fascinating. Although the reasons for this practice and the extent of its use are unclear, there certainly is evidence of it having happened (i.e. the discovery of large, elaborate medieval porch constructions). Brooke

³¹ Jacqueline Murray, *Love, Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001), 233.

³² Stevenson, 120-121.

³³ Frances and Joseph Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 106; quoted in Gellar, 257.

believes that after being married, couples were then able to enter the church for continued prayers, liturgical elements, and possibly the celebration of mass. The symbolism is powerful: I suspect that entering the church may have represented bride and groom becoming one with each other within the context of oneness with Christ and the Church.³⁴

It should be mentioned that the Church became more and more influential during this period, gaining dominance over the state. This had a significant affect on marriage ceremonies, and in the eleventh century, marriage became “one of the seven Catholic sacraments.”³⁵

Reformation Days: Catholics, Protestants, and Anglicans

At the time of the Reformation, Roman Catholics were particularly strict in their marriage rites.³⁶ Then, along came such reformers as Luther and Calvin, who “rejected marriage as a sacrament”, and made adultery a fair reason for divorce.³⁷ Luther kept a lot of the “‘liturgical’ features” of weddings (like the ring and joining of hands), but allowed for a lot of freedom in the rest of the proceedings. Calvin threw out a lot of liturgical features and focused in on the theological depth of weddings.³⁸

Meanwhile, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Anglo-Norman wedding ceremony had moved inside the church, and included significant involvement of siblings and peers, who fetched “the bride from her parents’ home” and gave her away at the church. Other wedding traditions included the standard vows, the blessing of the ring, confirmation of the groom’s dowry, the priest’s kissing of the bride (when the ceremony was completed), and the bride’s giving away of her garter.³⁹ These traditions faded away “by the eighteenth century,

³⁴ Christopher N.L. Brooke. *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 248-253)

³⁵ Arisian, 131.

³⁶ Stevenson, 168.

³⁷ Arisian, 132.

³⁸ Stevenson, 133.

³⁹ John Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 34; quoted in Gellar, 257.

when English marriage was conducted with the Book of Common Prayer”.⁴⁰ The Methodists and Presbyterians also used the prayer book, but allowed it to be adapted for their own use.⁴¹ This time also brought about greater parental involvement in the marriage ceremony, and the practice of the bride wearing white for her wedding.⁴²

Twentieth Century

Of enormous significance to the twentieth century wedding was The Second Vatican Council, which had a large impact on both Roman Catholic and non-Roman Catholic churches.⁴³ As a result of this council, Roman Catholics allowed for “local freedom” in wedding practices, placed marriage ceremonies “within a liturgical context” which included mass (unless one of the partners was not a Catholic),⁴⁴ and tried to make wedding symbolism as clear as possible. The general wedding sequence of the Roman Catholic church was understood to be “word, consent, prayer, and solemn blessing.”⁴⁵

The changes in the Roman Catholic wedding ceremony are consistent with “The New Wedding” as described by Arisian in 1973. Arisian describes “The New Wedding” as being “a fresh reshaping of some very old ingredients and attitudes that are biased in favor of the freedom and fulfillment of the individual.”⁴⁶ This type of “personal-flavored” wedding seemed to become more popular in the twentieth century.

The Sacred Act of Wedding: Current General Use

The tension found between wedding celebrations and the business of getting married is a significant issue today. For example, in response to receiving many wedding gifts, couples often

⁴⁰ Gillis, 135-145.; quoted in Gellar, 258.

⁴¹ Stevenson, 167.

⁴² Gillis, 135-145; quoted in Gellar, 258.

⁴³ Stevenson, 181.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 183.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 188.

⁴⁶ Arisian, 23.

wonder what truly motivates the givers. Do people really want to express their love and joy to the couple?, or is their giving more motivated by societal expectations?⁴⁷

Meanwhile, businesses and families demand the bride's attention to such an extent that grooms often feel disconnected, if not upset.⁴⁸ These grooms may have a legitimate concern: Who's to say that the lack of teamwork during wedding planning will not also result in a similar lack of teamwork during marriage? On a more positive note is the rise of the coed wedding shower; an event that "seems to point to increased female independence and heightened male sensitivity", while also encouraging the togetherness of the couple.⁴⁹

No doubt also owing to the big business of weddings, the media is a strong force that is pushing the value of marriage today.⁵⁰ An unfortunate result is the feeling of ostracism experienced by many who aren't married. These people miss out on parties, gifts, and the respect and recognition given to those who tie the knot.⁵¹ Although I certainly don't think we should avoid celebrating marriage, I do think that we could do a much better job affirming those who have decided not to marry (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 7).

Current Wedding Symbolism and Tradition

Today's white wedding dress is highly symbolic, and is thought to represent the Victorian era that valued chasteness.⁵² Arisian claims that the idea of bridal white came from the Victorian "virgin-white outfits little girls put on for their first Communion."⁵³ As previously mentioned, I believe that elaborate white wedding dresses also serve as an excellent reminder of the "fine linen" the church will wear for its wedding to Christ (Rev. 19:8).

⁴⁷ Greenblat and Cottle, 116, 118.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 98, 174.

⁴⁹ Gellar, 178.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁵¹ Ibid., 163, 182.

⁵² Ibid., 227.

⁵³ Arisian, 120.

The origin of wedding rings appears to be somewhat more complex. Different theories range from the groom's tradition of giving a gift of value to the bride,⁵⁴ to the use of rings to seal important agreements,⁵⁵ to perhaps the most incredible theory of all: that the exchange of rings arose from the American Colonial practice of giving the engaged woman a thimble, of which the cup was cut off after the wedding!⁵⁶ Today, it is thought that the ring symbolizes eternity, and the bride and groom's commitment to be united together for the rest of their lives.⁵⁷

Many ancient customs have persisted through the years yet have lost their original meaning. For example, the showering of bride and groom with rice and petals "originally symbolized the hope for fertility in marriage", but is now more associated with "beauty, happiness, and prosperity."⁵⁸

Other wedding-related traditions include the reception and the honeymoon. Today's wedding receptions are usually quite original, as influenced by the bride and groom.⁵⁹ They are quite different than the Jewish seven-day feast tradition, which in many ways has been replaced by the bride and groom's honeymoon. Instead of allowing for community celebration and interaction, the honeymoon "promotes isolationism from the community at large"⁶⁰, and is therefore reflective of the individualism in today's society. An interesting trend of late is the "weddingmoon" in which couples are married in exotic spots with close family and friends, who may or may not stay with the couple for a vacation.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Arisian, 38.

⁵⁵ Carlfred B. Broderick and Harvey T. Pulliam-Krager, "Marriage," in *The World Book Encyclopedia*, 1983 ed.

⁵⁶ *Modern Bride* Jun.Jul. 1999, 118; quoted in Gellar, 281.

⁵⁷ Broderick and Pullian-Krager, 179.

⁵⁸ Arisian, 122.

⁵⁹ Gellar, 316.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁶¹ Ingraham, 59.

Changing Wedding Practices

Changes occurring in society today are having a significant affect on marriage rites. For example, the secularization and individualization of society has resulted in more “casual, intimate, and secular” weddings.⁶² Commonlaw and second marriages are also having a significant affect. Commonlaw brides and grooms may choose to enter the ceremony together, or may even choose to greet their friends as they arrive,⁶³ while second marriage brides are encouraged to wear non-white dresses with no veil or train.⁶⁴

Current Evangelical Use and Use in My Own Ministry Context

Couples often decide to have a religious wedding ceremony because of the way they were raised, because of their parents wishes, or because they “believe that the wedding as ritual or ceremony is by definition a religious event.”⁶⁵ Therefore, it is conceivable for an “evangelical wedding” to take place between a couple that may not consider themselves to be evangelical Christians. Things get even more confusing when different faiths are involved. The result can be a lot of tension among the intermarrying families.⁶⁶

I come from a denomination known as the “Fellowship of Evangelical Baptists”, and can relate to Stevenson’s comments concerning the Baptist wedding tradition. Stevenson speaks of Baptist ceremonies as being direct, and of often having a didactic purpose. He also mentions the Baptist tendency to freely adjust wedding forms and to use “strongly theocentric as well as personal” prayers.⁶⁷

⁶² Gellar, 103.

⁶³ Arisian, 119.

⁶⁴ Greenblat and Cottle, 182.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 142-143.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 147.

⁶⁷ Stevenson, 199-200.

Because I have attended very few evangelical Baptist weddings (and very few weddings of any type), I borrowed my pastor's wedding manual in hopes of gaining a greater appreciation of my tradition. The book, entitled "The Pastor's Wedding Manual"⁶⁸ does not appear to be directed only at Baptists, but does seem to be evangelical in scope. The author, Jim Henry, stresses "a strong biblical emphasis" in the ceremony, and sees the wedding as being a great opportunity to teach the couple, "the attendants, the family, and the friends who attend".⁶⁹

In looking through Henry's selection of wedding ceremonies (of which readers are encouraged to mix and match various elements), a general pattern can be seen. After the processional, each ceremony generally starts with the pastor addressing the wedding witnesses. The ceremonies then usually proceed to a word from Scripture (frequently directed to the bride and groom). Next, the pastor asks who is giving the woman to be married (this sometimes happens before the word from Scripture), and the bride and groom participate in the exchange of vows and rings. Following this, the pastor leads in prayer (this prayer is sometimes also led by a family member or friend), and pronounces the couple to be husband and wife.⁷⁰

Enhancing The Significance of Weddings in My Ministry Context

A major challenge for today's wedding planners is being able to enhance the significance of wedding ceremonies in light of the many changes taking place in society (i.e. the increase in commonlaw marriages, second marriages, age at first wedding, and material possessions owned by marrying couples⁷¹). As Stevenson says, "the secret of new rites will not lie in technique and

⁶⁸ Jim Henry, *The Pastor's Wedding Manual*. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985)

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁰ Henry, 66-189.

⁷¹ Ingraham, 30.

slickness so much as identification and adaptation”.⁷² Arisian adds that rituals are meaningless unless they help “underscore” people’s “mutual obligations”.⁷³

Jim Henry has helped make evangelical weddings more meaningful. His goal has been to lead weddings in unique ways with the hope of enhancing their personal significance. He has accomplished this through incorporating both traditional and contemporary practices, through sharing personal stories about those getting married, through mixing and matching elements from different wedding ceremonies, and through encouraging the bride and groom to become personally involved (i.e. through sharing their own vows, through addressing their parents, through prayer, or through testimony).⁷⁴ I think that these are all excellent ways of making weddings more powerful and meaningful occasions!

I see the family’s involvement in weddings as being another important issue. Including members of the family in wedding prayers, music, and other service elements can only help to increase the significance of two families becoming one. Families could also work together to plan weddings, resulting in less pressure on the bride and her family and an affirmation of the groom and his family. Other interesting ideas include having the father as the best man, and having kids from former marriages standing at the altar with remarrying couples.⁷⁵ Incorporating friends into the wedding festivities is also a great idea! – strong pastoral leadership is good, but why not create deeper meaning by also involving people you love?

Meanwhile, I believe it is critical for us to work hard toward removing the stigma of being single in today’s church environments (and in society at large). We can work toward affirming single people by treating them the same as everyone else, by refraining from using

⁷² Stevenson, 210-211.

⁷³ Arisian, 15-16.

⁷⁴ Henry, 29-30.

⁷⁵ Greenblat and Cottle, 168, 170, 187.

running jokes about their not being married, and by finding ways to celebrate their lives, even as we celebrate the lives of those who choose to get married.

In terms of celebration, the Christian West can learn a lot from Eastern rites about the festive aspect of marriage.⁷⁶ So often we become overly concerned about having just the right proceedings, and miss out on some of the pure enjoyment of weddings. I suggest that our churches and families should work hard to restore a healthy tension between sacred ceremony and joyous celebration. In doing so, we must also beware of succumbing to the consumerist wedding agenda.

Finally, today's church workers should take advantage of the incredible opportunity to witness to unsaved family members and friends who are helping couples with their weddings. Pastors, lay assistants, and church wedding coordinators alike can all make outreach a key focus when assisting people with their weddings.⁷⁷

Conclusion

This paper has been very useful in helping me better understand wedding ceremonies. I have gained a greater appreciation of the value people place on weddings, as well as a greater appreciation for how we can make the wedding ceremony more meaningful for the bride, the groom, and the wedding witnesses.

My hope is that today's Christians will be able to reflect the incredible glory of Christ and the Church, as we celebrate the remarkable union of husband and wife. To that end, and to the praise of His wonderful name...amen!

⁷⁶ Stevenson, 211.

⁷⁷ Murray, 50.

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