



Biblical Teaching on Marriage: A Brief Survey

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It is important to bear in mind that in concentrating on the Bible's teaching on marriage, as indeed in concentrating on any one aspect of biblical teaching, we are abstracting this aspect from its total context. This is a perfectly legitimate procedure, provided that we remain aware of what we are doing and do not try unconsciously to fit that teaching into some other context that may falsify it. We must always remember that we are dealing with the word of God that narrates and effects that action of God by which he has created and restored a world, creating a people whose future is with him for eternity. In short, as I hope we will see, we are looking at marriage as part of God's eternal plan for God's people on pilgrimage and indeed for the whole human race.

In this brief account of biblical teaching we will look first at the Old Testament, whose importance is greater here than for many other aspects of life, and then we will look at New Testament teaching. Our study of the Old Testament will begin with a few notices about the actual practice of marriage and family as this can be gleaned from the legal texts of the Old Testament. We will then look at the wisdom tradition, including the teaching of the first three chapters of Genesis, and conclude this section with a consideration of the prophetic tradition. In the New Testament we will look first at Jesus' teaching and then the Pauline tradition. Space

In the Bible, marriage, from the beginning, partakes of elements common to the surrounding world. With time, biblical writers use language appropriate to marital relationships to describe the relation between God and Israel and Christ and the church, thereby raising the theological significance of marriage.

will allow for only a cursory glance at the way spousal imagery is used in the rest of the New Testament.

The Old Testament

MARRIAGE AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION

A glance at the delightful tale of the wooing of Rebekah in Gen 24 shows us the steps in the process of matrimony in Israel, which was basically that of the Near East of that time. The Old Testament ancestral narratives are a combination of remembered tradition and actualizing narrative. Thus, they relate actions of the fathers and mothers that flagrantly go against the legal enactments of later Israel (for instance, Jacob married two sisters, contrary to Lev 18:18), while reflecting both the world of the ancestors and that of the subsequent tradition. There are four steps in the matrimonial process. The first is that of “asking.” This may begin by a simple inquiry, but it involves a series of negotiations between the prospective bridegroom (or his father, guardian, or agent) and the family of the prospective bride (usually the father but, as in the case of Rebekah, some other male with authority in her family). What was being envisaged was not merely the union of two young people, but a new and important relation begun between two families or clans, one in which God must and did take a part.

The second step is the act of “giving.” This term describes the action of the bride’s family once the negotiations have been completed. This is not a financial transaction: the bride is not “bought” or “sold.” Rather, it follows upon financial arrangements that are designed to protect the woman.

Third, there is the act of “taking” a bride. The act of acceptance corresponds to the act of giving and establishes the woman as “betrothed,” indicating a specific social and juridical status, corresponding somewhat to what we would call a ratified but unconsummated marriage.

The last step is that of “becoming” a wife or husband. From this point on, and most especially after the second step in the matrimonial process, the man and woman (particularly the woman) are spoken of as “the husband of...” or, “her husband”; and “the wife of...” or, “his wife.” It should be emphasized that this process creates a legal status for both the man and the woman. It is not, as some authors have surmised, an act of “buying” or “owning” a wife.

In the legal thinking of the ancient Near East, the primary reason for the institution of marriage (as opposed to other forms of male and female sexual relations) was to ensure for the man a legitimate heir who would continue the family line and possess the family property. The whole logic of the legal system governing marriage derived from this premise. The legal duties of a husband toward his wife prescribe undertaking with her a common life and included care for her physical needs for food, clothing, and shelter; performing the marital debt; treating her with respect and honoring the rights of her children, even if he took another woman as wife

(something rare in Israel); and respecting her rights to the money of her dowry and the money provided by her family for her protection in case of divorce or death. The primary duty of the wife was to give to her husband the unilaterally exclusive right to have intercourse with her and to care for the children. In addition to the preoccupation with male heirs, the fact that the woman was obliged to reserve herself exclusively for her husband also contributed to her well-being. Not only was she protected, by penalty of death, from the predatory appetites of unruly males; she, as the vessel of transmission and source of education, was honored as the one through whom the family existence was preserved.

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It is, of course, impossible to garner an adequate impression of some aspect of a society by looking only at its legal enactments. This is especially true of a culture like that of ancient Israel where “laws” expressed the collective wisdom of covenant morality and human experience, and were more precedents for deciding cases than abstract norms for judging, in our sense of the term. It may be said, in brief, that the system, while presuming a certain male privilege, was humane, and contrary to some hasty reading of the material, was designed in large part to protect the woman.

THE WISDOM TRADITION

Family Life

We can get a glimpse of family life from narratives such as that in 1 Sam 1:1-28, which recounts the birth of Samuel and the tenderness of the relation of Elkanah (the only commoner in the Bible to be described as having two wives) to Hannah. We see this as well in some of the sayings of the sages regarding marriage: “House and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD” (Prov 19:14). “I take pleasure in three things, and they are beautiful in the sight of God and of mortals: agreement among brothers and sisters, friendship among neighbors, and a wife and a husband who live in harmony” (Sir 25:1). The many warnings to the young man about adultery, and the penalty for it, make it clear that men were not free to indulge themselves as they pleased. A long and vigorous warning against adultery is given in Prov 5:1-23 (also Prov 7:4-27), mostly from the perspective of the shame and corrupted relationships that result. The same type of warning is found in Sir 23:16-27, with the significant remark that the man’s infidelity not only offends against the rights of his partner’s husband, but also “dishonors *his* marriage bed” (Sir 23:18). One of the prominent features of the wisdom teaching about family life has to do with the raising of children and the

honor due to parents, teaching that made the Jewish way of life so remarkable and attractive later in the Diaspora.

The Teaching of Genesis

Of all the extant accounts of the origins of the world from the ancient Near East, those found in Israel (which, of course, borrow from their predecessors) are unique in that they are the only ones to place the couple, man and woman, at the center of their attention and to account for the diminished human existence by attributing it to personal infidelity to a personal God.

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The first chapter of Genesis, placed at the head of the Bible by an inspired theological decision, tells us of the creation of *adam*, which means three things: “man” in the generic sense of human being, a specific person, and also humankind. Literally translated the key text runs:

And Elohim said: “Let us make *adam* in our image, as our likeness, that they may rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the heavens, and the tame beasts, and all the earth, and all the creeping things creeping on the earth.” And Elohim created the *adam* in his image: in the image of Elohim he created him/it, male and female he created them. And Elohim blessed them, and Elohim said to them: “Be fruitful, be many, and fill the earth and subjugate it, and rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the heavens, and all the living things creeping on the earth.”

Later on we read:

This is the list of the generations of *adam*. On the day when Elohim created *adam* he made him in the image of Elohim; male and female he created them, and he blessed them and called their name *adam* on the day they were created. And *adam* lived one hundred and thirty years and he begot in his likeness, as his image, and he called his name Seth. (Gen 5:1-3)

From these texts (two of the five in the Old Testament that apply the term “image” to man) we can see that it requires both male and female to make up the image of God. Each, male and female, has this capacity to be image, but it is only in their relating that the perfection of this imaging is realized. We can say, therefore, that man and woman bring an equal but asymmetrical contribution to the relationship, one that preserves both their identity as human beings and their irreducible difference as male and female.

From the abundant teaching of Gen 2 and 3, most likely from another tradition, we can glean the following principal points. First, woman is a “helper” (a term that most often refers to God—nineteen of the twenty-one occurrences) to *adam*, thus making her a divine gift of aid. Second, this aid consists in enabling a genuine

communion of persons. And third, “They were both naked, the man and his wife, but they felt no shame with one another” (Gen 2:25): they had unveiled communication. This relation was not destroyed by sin, but it was diminished in the shame and fear that followed upon their covenant infidelity. “Your urge will be towards your husband, and he will dominate you” (Gen 3:16). The two sides of this now warped and adversarial relationship are described in terms of domination and connivance in domination. In the man/woman relationship (the paradigm of all human relating) we are shown the depth of the wound inflicted by sin. The lie of power and the lie of helplessness feed off each other and have produced such a situation that even two millennia of Christianity have made little more than a beginning in unmasking and overcoming the bondage brought by sin into the history of human relating.

THE PROPHETIC TRADITION

In the period before the exile, the prophets, in fidelity to the covenant, condemned the sin of adultery in Israel and ranked it along with murder (Job 24:14), misuse of God’s name (Jer 29:23), and other crimes. In addition, following the lead of Hosea, they exploited the spousal imagery latent in certain covenant terms for infidelity to accuse Israel of an adulterous unfaithfulness to YHWH, their God, and to threaten the punishment that such conduct merits. They also used the imagery to promise a freely given restoration of the relation to YHWH. The exilic and post-exilic tradition, during the experience of the punishment of infidelity, used the same imagery nearly exclusively to promise restoration. An example of both uses can be seen in this passage from Hosea:

Plead with your mother, plead—for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband—that she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts, or I will strip her naked and expose her as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness, and turn her into a parched land, and kill her with thirst....Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her....There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, “My husband.” (Hos 2:2-4, 14, 15b, 16a)

The New Testament

THE TEACHING OF JESUS

Many places in the gospels provide us some inferential appreciation of Jesus’ regard for marriage. He counters the Pharisaic use of *korban* (the removal of an object from secular use), in regard to the financial support of one’s parents, with the solemn injunction from the Decalogue, “Honor your father and your mother” (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16), and adds the words from Exod 21:17 and Lev 20:9 threatening with death anyone who speaks evil of father or mother (Matt 15:14-16; Mark 7:9-13). In his reply to the young man asking about attaining eternal life, Jesus re-

peats again this same command from the Decalogue and prefaces it by the command: “You shall not commit adultery” (see Matt 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-23). In addition, several occasions are recorded when Jesus performs a miracle to heal a child and relieve the suffering of a grieving parent.

The gospel tradition is solid in regard to the fact that Jesus forbade divorce, and thus placed himself squarely in the line of thought represented by the text of Mal 2:10-16 and the positions held at Qumran. His teaching brings this position into greater clarity, grounds it clearly in the teaching of Gen 1-2, and endows it with his own authority. It is found in the gospels, especially Matthew and Mark. The “exception clause,” found in Matt 5:31-32 and 19:9 refers to a marriage contracted within forbidden bonds of consanguinity, as does the reference to the same situation in Acts 15:20, 29. The same teaching is found in a mysteriously unattached saying in Luke 16:18, is appealed to as the Lord’s “charge” in 1 Cor 7:10, and seems to influence the thinking in the Deutero-Pauline literature regarding the requirement that church leaders and widows have had only one spouse (1 Tim 3:2, 12; 5:9; Tit 1:6).

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More important for our purposes is the creation of the “messianic family” in Jesus’ reply to those who speak of his “mother and brothers”:

While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him....But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (Matt 12:46, 48-50 and parallels)

From now on union with Jesus is the force that creates those bonds of closeness where one finds identity and security. This is the “messianic family,” and it has the power to uproot marriage, not to destroy it, but to place it in the context of eternal life and free it from the restrictions of a reality limited to this world. This teaching lies at the heart of all those sayings in which Jesus insists that he be placed ahead of all other relationships, thus outlining the conditions and consequences of discipleship. Here are some examples:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (Matt 10:37-38 and parallels)

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, broth-

ers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.” (Mark 10:29-30 and parallels)

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. (Luke 12:51-53) (This text is alluding to the eschatological situation described in Mic 7:6.)

All of these relativize marriage in the light of the kingdom, but they also place marriage in the kingdom that only reaches perfection at the eschaton. There are those who are called to leave family in a literal sense. It suffices to note that we are dealing here with an instance of what may be called “paradigmatic thinking.” This expression refers to the fact that what all disciples are required to do in one form or another is actually and literally carried out by some of them, who, in so doing, become a paradigm for the others. These others are thus entitled to consider themselves as sharing in this activity, even if their own realization of it is not as literal or as radical as that of their “paradigms.” We will pass on now to consider the heavenly dimension of marriage itself in the letter to the Ephesians.

THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

We may consider this letter Pauline in the broad sense of the term and move on to consider some of its more salient teachings as expressed in some key verses of Eph 5:21-33. First, there are the opening lines: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior.” It is clear that the call to each member of the community to subordinate themselves (a free act, not a state of “submission”) is extended to wives in marriage. It should be noted, however, that the author uses a term completely uncommon in extrabiblical discussions of marriage, a term coined by Christians in this sense in order to mediate a new reality, that of two equal members of the body of Christ relating to each other. This teaching here is equivalent to that found in Phil 2:1-4, addressed once again to the whole community:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

While this verb (“be subject”), applied to the husband in Eph 5:21, is not explicitly linked to his way of relating, this is implied in the husband’s call to imitate Christ who is head of the church precisely by being its savior through the cross:

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her....In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies” (Eph 5:25, 28a). This then is “headship”; it is the imitation of and sharing in the initiative of love and sacrifice of Christ. It is this initiative which, when accepted in the “initiating receptivity” of the woman, begins to heal the adversarial relation begun by Adam and Eve.

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The other dimension of the text is the “great mystery.” “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:31-32). Now the full meaning of God’s intention for marriage is clear: it is the realization, on the plane of human love, of the physical and eternal union between Christ and the church. Marriage is the matrix of that love by which new life enters the world and is perfected through life in this world until it is complete in the world to come. In this sense, marriage is a paradigm of the eternal and bodily union between Christ and the church, which, to use St. Augustine’s phrase, will result forever in “one Christ loving himself.” ⊕

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