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Marriage, a Type of God's Relationship to His People

By ARTHUR J. CROSMER

A VERY rewarding searching of Scripture consists in pursuing a certain theme through all its pages, such as the topic of this paper. Tracing the references to marriage in the Bible as a type of God's relationship to His people leads to a new understanding of the beauties of God's Word. It reveals anew God's overwhelming love for the sinner. It strengthens faith in the testimony of all of Scripture of Jesus as Very God of Very God. It leads the believer to confess more earnestly: "I believe in the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints," the bride of Christ. It increases his love for God's Book.

According to the Bible, marriage is strictly a divine institution. "And the Lord God said, it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him" (Gen. 2:18). It is the closest of all human ties. "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Besides close mutual companionship, marriage was established for the propagation of the human race: "God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth" (Gen. 1:28; 2:18, 24). Although in the Old Testament age polygamy prevailed in spite of the ideal established by God, much of the degradation that attaches to the practice was absent. As now, so in earliest times a marriage was accompanied by great rejoicing. Four times Jeremiah mentions as one of the chief marks of the woe that would befall the land the cessation of the voice of the bridegroom and the bride (Jer. 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11).

It is not strange that this closest of human ties should be used as a type of the relationship between God and His people. As in the case of all types, however, the comparison must not be carried

too far. Marriage, after all, is for this world only. The relationship between God and His people is designed to continue for eternity. The purposes of human marriage, the status itself, remains on a lower level always than this close relationship which it is used to typify.

When we turn to the Old Testament, we find marriage used as a type of God's relationship to His people in two different senses. First, it is used as a type of God's relationship to all of Israel as His chosen nation. Then it is used, especially in prophetic literature, of the relationship between God and spiritual Israel, the Remnant. Jeremiah makes this distinction. "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt; which My covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord" (Jer. 31: 31, 32). This new covenant is to be made with reunited Judah and Israel, joined by the Gentiles, who will then form the one holy Christian Church. The old covenant was made with the fathers and included all the events narrated from Exodus 3 to Num. 10:11, from the call of Moses to the dedication of the tabernacle. It was established with all Israelites that had been delivered out of Egypt. This covenant they broke almost as soon as it was established. They broke it, the Lord says, "although I was an husband to them." The Lord had accepted the whole nation into a relationship as close and as holy as the marital bonds under the condition of obedience. In spite of this undeserved love, they became unfaithful to their heavenly Bridegroom.¹

In its earliest form the image of a marriage between God and His people is reflected especially in the expressions "to go a whoring" and "whoredom" as descriptive of the rupture of that relationship by acts of idolatry. These expressions have been taken by some writers in their primary and literal sense as pointing to the licentious practices of idolaters. This interpretation, however, destroys the whole point of comparison. Let us look at some of

¹ Theo. Laetsch, *Jeremiah* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), pp. 255 ff.

these references to idolatry as whoredom. We shall see that they plainly refer to spiritual harlotry, that is, idolatry.

Several times before the entry of Israel into the Promised Land, God warned them against whoredom with false gods. Already in Exodus 34, after the Law was given to Moses the second time, God warns the Israelites to beware not only of forming any covenant with the inhabitants of Canaan but also of retaining any signs whatever of their idolatrous worship, lest the Israelites be led astray by such an alliance to go awhoring after their false gods or to marry their sons to the daughters of the Canaanites, by whom they would be persuaded to join in the worship of idols. "Lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go a whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and one call thee and thou eat of his sacrifice, and thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a whoring after their gods, and make thy sons to go a whoring after their gods" (Ex. 34:15, 16). Here we hear a warning against any sort of alliance with the heathen in the land promised to the Israelites. Such an entanglement leads finally to idolatry practiced by the inhabitants of the land, if not in the first generation, then at least in the second. We meet here for the first time the idea of whoredom in a spiritual sense to denote idolatry. It implies that the relation of God to His people resembles the marriage bond because breaking His covenant in any form by idolatry is termed *whoredom*.

Two warnings are found in Leviticus in a section containing commandments that relate to holiness of life in the covenant fellowship of Israel with God. The first warning reads: "And they shall no more offer their sacrifices unto devils, after whom they have gone a whoring" (Lev. 17:7). This section contains the strange prohibition against slaying an animal either inside or outside the camp without first bringing the animal to the tabernacle. Punishment was extermination from Israel. This seems severe for such a seemingly small breach of the Ceremonial Law. However, there is evidence that Israel had brought from Egypt the custom of offering a sacrifice to "field devils," as Luther translates, who were supposed to inhabit the desert. This severe penalty was

imposed to avert superstitious idolatry in connection with the slaying of animals. Such idolatry is again termed "whoredom."²

Another warning in this section reads: "Then I will set My face against that man and against his family, and will cut him off, and all that go a whoring after him to commit whoredom with Molech, from among their people" (Lev. 20:5). It is followed by a warning against turning to familiar spirits and necromancers, practices always closely connected with idolatry. "And the soul that turneth after such as have familiar spirits and after wizards, to go a whoring after them, I will even set My face against that soul and will cut him off from among his people" (Lev. 20:6).

God commanded the Israelites to wear tassels on the edge of the upper garment "that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring" (Num. 15:39). The Israelites were to be reminded by these tassels not to direct their heart and eyes to the things of this world which turn away from the Word of God and lead astray to idolatry. Their former whoredom, against which they are now warned, was no doubt idolatry and not adultery.

After the terrible breach of the covenant relationship upon the return of the twelve spies from Canaan, God threatens punishment thus: "And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years and bear your whoredoms" (Num. 14:33). The children of these apostate prostitutes who had lost faith in their God and refused to enter the Promised Land, thereby breaking the covenant with God, would have to endure the consequences of their faithless apostasy, again termed "whoredoms." This breach is spiritual adultery in the form of apostasy, since it severs the marital relationship which Israel enjoyed with God.

Just before the death of Moses, God announces to him that after his death the nation would go awhoring after other gods and thus break the covenant He had made with it, with the consequence that it would be visited with severe afflictions. God directs Moses to write an ode and teach it to Israel that when this apostasy should take place and the punishment of God be felt in conse-

² Cf. Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentaries on the Old Testament, Pentateuch*, II, 408. (Engl. reprint by Eerdmans.)

quence, it might still be in their memory and speak as a witness against the people. God says to Moses: "Behold, thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, and this people will rise up and go a whoring after the gods of the strangers of the land whither they go to be among them, and will forsake Me, and break My covenant, which I have made with them; then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day" (Deut. 31:16). This verse plainly refers to spiritual adultery on the part of Israel.

That this apostasy soon took place just as God had prophesied we learn from the Book of Judges: "And yet they would not hearken unto their judges, but they went a whoring after other gods and bowed themselves unto them. They turned quickly out of the way which their fathers walked in, obeying the commandments of the Lord; but they did not so." (Judg. 2:17.) It happened soon after the death of Joshua, who had tried to prevent such apostasy as long as he was leader in Israel.

But Israel also in her later history continues to play the unfaithful wife. It is against this faithless apostasy that the prophets speak out.

Before we examine the message of the prophets, we must turn our attention briefly to the difficult Book of Canticles. There seem to be as many different interpretations as there are commentaries on this book. Since Origen, many commentators have regarded the book as an allegory. If this is indeed the case, then it is an extended use of marital love to depict the relationship existing between God and His people and reaching its fullest expression in the love of Christ for His church. So interpreted, the book becomes beautiful indeed. While the book itself does not make this application explicitly, the spiritual interpretation has been the traditional point of view from earliest times in the Christian Church.

In the Book of Hosea, God's covenant with His people is most pointedly and poignantly portrayed as resembling the bonds of wedlock. In her unfaithfulness to her husband, Gomer is a living demonstration of Israel's spiritual adultery. It has been suggested that Hosea's experience with his erring wife is an allegory or a vision. The simple, direct language seems to preclude this view. The people of Israel were to realize in Gomer's sin and the tragedy of Hosea's broken heart how heinous was their crime of spurning

the love of God when they broke His covenant with them. "God, who must divorce and destroy His people, nevertheless has a future for them. Hosea, having divorced Gomer, at the command of God buys her back. Would God, then, be less merciful than Hosea? Israel will be stripped of all that she has, ejected from the land, literally sent back to her desert days when she had nothing. But there she will learn again of her ancient purity and loyalty now so long forgotten. From there she will have a new start, a new betrothal to her God."³

"And I will betroth thee unto Me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto Me in righteousness and in judgment and in loving-kindness and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto Me in faithfulness; and thou shalt know the Lord." (Hos. 2:19, 20.) God speaks hope to Israel, hope of restoration and a new betrothal to Himself, despite her continued unfaithfulness and apostasy.

Isaiah speaks beautifully of this restoration especially in the second part of his book. He peers far into the future—some 200 years and beyond—to see the restoration of a remnant. This promise is pictured most beautifully as a marriage relationship contracted with one who was forsaken. "For thy Maker is thine Husband; the Lord of Hosts is His name; and thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; the God of the whole earth shall He be called. For the Lord hath called thee as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, and a wife of youth, when thou wast refused, saith the Lord." (Is. 54:5, 6.) "Thou shalt no more be termed 'forsaken,' neither shall thy land any more be termed 'desolate'; but thou shalt be called 'Hephzibah' (My delight is in her) and thy land 'Beulah' (married one); for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married. For as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee; and as a bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee." (Is. 62:4, 5.)

These promises reach down to include the New Testament era. Isaiah has much to say about how this new covenant will be established and about its blessings. He speaks in a wonderful manner of the Messiah and His bride, the church. Unless we understand this marriage covenant which Isaiah pictures as the

³ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), pp. 75 ff.

establishment of the Messianic kingdom through the person and work of Jesus Christ, we have lost the whole point and purpose of this marvelous book, oftentimes termed the "evangel of the Old Testament." These promises contain the heart of the new covenant, which still lay in the future, as described by Jeremiah in the verses quoted at the beginning of this study.

God also reminds Israel through His prophet Jeremiah of their first love. "I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown" (2:2).⁴ God Himself commends the love and loyalty of His people at this time. Israel, however, had become unfaithful. In the spirit and language of Hosea, Jeremiah declares that the nation is a harlot who has betrayed her divine husband and faces divorce. Yet, as was the case with Hosea, angry denunciation is coupled with a moving and impassioned plea for repentance.⁵ "Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you. And I will take you one of a city and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion" (Jer. 3:14).

Such repentance on a national scale never took place. Therefore Judean independence and the identification of the Jewish nation with the people of God soon came to an end. This utter rejection of Israel as a nation is pictured most graphically. "They say, If a man put away his wife and she go from him and become another man's, shall he return unto her again? Shall not that land be greatly polluted? But thou hast played the harlot with many lovers; yet return again to Me, saith the Lord. . . . Hast thou seen that which backsliding Israel hath done? She is gone up upon every high mountain and under every green tree, and there hath played the harlot. And I said after she had done all these things, Turn thou unto Me. But she returned not. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away and given her a bill of divorce, yet her treacherous

⁴ Dr. Laetsch translates this verse thus: "I recall your youthful affection, your bridal love, how you followed Me in the desert, in an unsown land" (p. 34).

⁵ Bright, p. 106.

sister Judah feared not, but went and played the harlot also. And it came to pass, through the lightness of her whoredom, that she defiled the land, and committed adultery with stones and with stocks. And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah hath not turned with her whole heart, but feignedly, saith the Lord. And the Lord said unto me, The backsliding Israel hath justified herself more than treacherous Judah." (Jer. 3:1, 6-11.) Because of this spiritual harlotry the nation was rejected as the bride of God.

Ezekiel, speaking during the captivity, summarizes the rise and fall of Israel with a picture of a bridegroom and his unfaithful bride. He shows how God had raised up Israel and greatly enhanced her status only to be rejected. He portrays the final recompense of this bride turned prostitute. We find this picture in Chapter 16 of his book. The chapter is long, and we shall not pause to discuss it at length. It is, however, a good overview in the matchless picture language of the Old Testament of God's dealings with His people throughout that whole period as seen from the point of view of a marriage relationship ending in failure, divorce, and finally the destruction of the unfaithful wife. The nation as a whole did not keep its part of the covenant. Nevertheless God remained faithful to His promises of a "new covenant," which is fulfilled in the relationship of Jesus to His church in the New Testament. To that relationship we now turn.

Jesus is pictured as the Bridegroom in the New Testament. We hear Him claiming this title for Himself quite early in His ministry. "And Jesus said unto them: Can the children of the bride chamber fast while the Bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the Bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the Bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days."⁶ This was Jesus' answer to the question: "Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Thy disciples fast not?" In thus making reference to the bridegroom, a picture familiar to those who brought this question, Jesus can mean no one else than Himself. That picture had already been used by John the Baptist. "He that hath the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom,

⁶ Mark 2:19, 20. Cf. also the parallels in Matt. 9:15 and Luke 5:34.

which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. This my joy therefore is fulfilled." (John 3:29.) In the Old Testament, as we have seen, the Bridegroom is the God of Israel. The marriage is His covenant relationship with His people. In the New Testament Jesus appropriates this title, along with other Old Testament titles for God, to Himself. Thus our Lord's claim to be the Bridegroom is nothing less than His claim to be the only Son of God, the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, through whom the New Covenant relationship should be established and the kingdom of God come.

But if Jesus is the Bridegroom, who is the bride? In the mind of the early disciples of Jesus the bride was still Israel. Jesus had come, they thought, to espouse the ancient people of God and raise them to the throne from which they had been deposed by their enemies. Jesus, however, indicated from the very first that a new Israel was to take the place of the old, an Israel composed of men of all nations who should believe on Him. He calls this new people of God "His congregation" as contrasted with the congregation of ancient Israel. He says: "I will build My *ἐκκλησία*" (Matt. 16:18). Our English word *church*, good and suggestive as it is, obscures His meaning here, for it loses sight of the references to the Old Testament which lie in the Greek word *ἐκκλησία*. This word in the LXX from Deuteronomy onwards is the usual rendering for the Hebrew *קָהָל*, that is, the gathering or congregation of the people of Israel. When Christ speaks of My *ἐκκλησία*, My congregation, He clearly distinguishes between the old Israel and a new Israel which is His, while setting forth the continuity of the new with the old by the very choice of a word which links it with the old. From Christ's teaching we learn more about this new Israel. Before His Passion He speaks of "this Gospel of the Kingdom being preached for a testimony unto all nations" (Matt. 24:14). After His resurrection He sends His disciples all over the world to make other disciples. The same thing is taught in the parable of the Great Supper (Luke 14:16-24) and the parable of the Marriage of the King's Son (Matt. 22:2-14). In both the servants are bidden to go into the highways and hedges of the open country and ask as many as they could find to the feast. Thus the feast is furnished with guests. Here we

have without doubt the call of the Gentiles and the formation of the catholic, or universal, church, no longer limited to Israel. The bride herself does not appear, however, until the vision of the Apocalypse, with the exception of the doubtful reading in the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins.⁷ She is the church which is being made ready for the *parousia* of her Lord, not the church in her present outward organization, but the sum of those who are awaiting the Lord's coming and are being gathered generation after generation into His presence. When He comes, all these will be the acknowledged spouse of Christ.⁸

Christ's relationship to the church also forms the basis for St. Paul's injunction to husbands and wives in his Letter to the Ephesians. The grand theme of the main part of this letter is the holy Christian Church. Even when he begins his table of duties, St. Paul cannot let go of this wonderful theme. It must play in even after he has seemingly finished with it. Let us look at this section.

St. Paul says to the wives: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the Head of the church, and He is the Savior of the body." (Eph. 5:22.) This admonition is based upon the fact that the man is the head of the wife, and this relationship is like Christ's to the church. Our head regulates all living movements of the body. Christ, the Head and Lord of the Church, leads His church according to His will. Just so in wedlock the man is lord and head. The Apostle here confirms the right relation between husband and wife, which was ordained at creation. The comparison of the marriage relationship is carried a step further in the admonition: "So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies" (Eph. 5:28). The marriage union is as close as that of the body with its head. The human marriage relationship is only an imperfect type of the perfect union between Christ and His bride, the church. This is brought out even more clearly in the admonition to the husbands: "Husbands, love your wives, even

⁷ Matt. 25:1. Some MSS add καὶ τῆς νόμφης.

⁸ The two previous paragraphs are largely borrowed from an excellent little book by H. B. Swete, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Macmillan, 1920), pp. 176—179.

as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27). Christ is clearly presented as the Bridegroom, the church as the bride of Christ. When Christ appears in His glory, then the church, after she has discarded the earthly, mortal frame, will be seen as perfect, in complete adornment, in glorious, transcendent beauty, entirely without the least spot or wrinkle or any such thing, as the spotless bride, as a chaste virgin. He gave Himself for her. He sanctifies her. Finally, before the assembled universe, He places by His side the bride purchased with His blood. The church is to be an object of admiration because of its freedom from all defect and because of its absolute perfection. In writing: "Even so ought husbands also to love their own wives," St. Paul returns to his comparison. The admonition addressed to the husbands has given him an opportunity to illustrate from a new angle his chief theme, the *una sancta*, to picture the church as the bride of Christ. A Christian husband should not only consider in general the love of Christ toward His church, but he is to see in this love the model for the love he owes his spouse and therefore be willing for her sake to sacrifice and forego much and strive to help, support, and protect his wife as the weaker vessel.⁹

St. Paul also speaks of the relation of individual Christians to their Lord as a marriage relationship thus: "For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy, for I have espoused you . . . as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:2). The picture is that of a father who has betrothed his daughter to the noblest of bridegrooms. Soon the nuptials will be celebrated. Soon the father will lead his daughter to the altar (to use our language). This father can lead her there only as a pure virgin. The point of the whole image lies in this term, "a pure virgin." Hence the statement, "I am jealous over you with godly jealousy." I watch over you with jealous eyes and see that you ever remain pure for that great day of your presentation to Christ. The bride did not betroth herself. Her

⁹ G. Stoeckhardt, *Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, trans. M. S. Sommer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952).

parents, or whoever was the head of the house, betrothed her. Paul acts this part. He had founded the Corinthian congregation. He was its father. He had pledged this church in betrothal to a husband, namely, to Christ. She is to be faithful to this one as husband, to have no thought of another, and thus to come as a virgin pure to this One, when the great marriage day comes and Paul as the father presents this his daughter to Christ.¹⁰ In a sense this figure could apply to the relation of every Christian pastor to his congregation.

The idea of spiritual adultery is also taken over from the Old Testament into the New. Jesus speaks of an adulterous generation (Matt. 12:39 and 16:4). James, who in many respects sounds like the thunderous prophets of the Old Testament predicting the doom of Israel, lashes out against spiritual adultery: "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God."¹¹ The love of the world is spiritual adultery, which is in reality idolatry. This spiritual adultery is referred to also in the Apocalypse in the letter to Thyatira: "Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce My servants to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulations, except they repent of their deeds." (Rev. 2:20-22.) Apocalypse 17 refers to the great whore "Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth."

Finally there are specific references to the Lamb and the bride in the Apocalypse. These references take us to the last times and the Day of Judgment. "Let us be glad and rejoice and give honor to Him; for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white, for the fine linen is the righteousness of the saints. And He saith unto me: Write, Blessed

¹⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1935), p. 1274.

¹¹ James 4:4. The masculine form *μαίχοι* is absent from most earlier MSS.

are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb." (Rev. 19:7-9.) The church has from the first been espoused to Christ as a chaste virgin. Now He takes her into full union with Himself and thus gives her rest from all her conflicts and sufferings. The bride represents the multitude of His faithful followers arrayed in white robes of the righteousness of the saints. As the bride represents the faithful people of God taken as a whole, so they which are called to the marriage supper represent the faithful followers of Christ considered individually. "And I, John, saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). This figure, of course, must not be taken literally but rather as symbolic of the unsurpassed joys of heaven. "Come hither, and I will show thee the bride, the Lamb's wife" (Rev. 21:9). John is about to view the glorified church, the bride of the Lamb. This bride of Christ continues through the ages of history to issue the invitation: "Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely." (Rev. 22:17.)

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