

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

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MARRIAGE AS COVENANT

Christians typically discuss marriage as a covenant. The notion of marriage as covenant resembles the covenant relationship between God and the Israelites as recounted in the Old Testament. In fact, the comparison of marriage to the biblical covenant is absolutely central to a Christian theology of marriage.

The Old Testament is a collection of writings developed, collected, and edited by the Israelites between two thousand and three thousand years ago. To the Jews, this collection is simply the Hebrew Bible, also called the Tanak. Christians call it the Old Testament, while the later, Christian writings constitute the New Testament. Both Jews and Christians consider the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible to be sacred literature that reveals God's being and action in history. For Christians, the Old Testament provides the basic framework and context for understanding the distinctive experience of Jesus of Nazareth. The Old Testament then is the best place to begin a contemporary discussion of the theology of family and marriage from a Christian perspective.

TOOLS

Have you ever heard anyone claim that they should do something or believe something “because the Bible says so”? In fact, many widely held assumptions about men, women, children, and family life are shaped by what the Bible has to say about such matters. Christians hold the Bible in such high regard because they believe it reveals God's intentions for human beings. For this reason, the Bible constitutes the first and primary source upon which the Christian faith tradition is built. But the Bible must be used intelligently and responsibly. Without a responsible reading of Scripture, we risk making binding claims about marriage that are either unsupported by Scripture or are biased by our personal interpretations.

At first blush it may seem self-evident what we mean when we use the word *revelation* or claim that the Bible is the Word of God. However, defining *revelation* proves more difficult than we might expect. To some, it may imply that the words of the biblical text are the exact words

DIFFERENT TAKES ON SCRIPTURE

People of Jewish faith refer to their sacred literature as the *Tanak*, an acronym made from the first letters of the Hebrew words *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Kethuvim*, respectively Law, Prophets, and Writings, the major divisions by which the Hebrew Scriptures are organized. Christians call this same body of literature the Old Testament. When the books were canonized (accepted as sacred scripture) in the first century, the rabbis selected those books originally composed in Hebrew, authored by people with recognized religious authority, and mostly completed by the time of Ezra in 425 BCE.

By the time of Christ, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, known as the *Septuagint*, was read more widely. The Septuagint also included seven additional books that were originally authored in Greek. The Christian Old Testament preserved these additional seven books, and they remained part of the Christian Bible until the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. The Reformers eliminated these seven books from their canon, while the books remained part of the Catholic Bible. Despite some differences in the arrangement and number of books, today both Christians and Jews accept the Old Testament/Tanak as divine revelation.

chosen by God and miraculously communicated to the Bible's authors. To others *revelation* may refer to a new insight: "Today I had a revelation about what I am supposed to do with my life." Or *revelation* might mean a general sense of God's self-disclosure, not unlike someone revealing a personal secret to a close friend.

When we try to understand what we mean by the term *revelation* in Scripture, we need to consider several realities. First, the Scriptures span several thousand years. The earliest sources underlying the present-day texts were oral stories that date from as far back as 2000 BCE. If you think about how much can change even in one hundred years, it becomes immediately clear how many different cultures and contexts influenced the outlook and perspective of the Bible's authors. Second, because the texts span such a long history, they were written and edited by many different people who lived and worked in many different eras. As a result, the Scriptures tell and retell events in ways that speak specifically to the social situations of their authors. Ideas and attitudes changed throughout this long history,

making it difficult at times to interpret what the Bible is saying.

Let me give you an example of how thoughts about marriage in the Old Testament can change from one era to the next. In the year 587 BCE, the Israelites living in Judah were conquered and exiled to Babylon. The Israelites' cities were destroyed, their Temple lay in ruins, and many people were brutalized and murdered. The devastation the Israelites must have felt is nearly unimaginable. In order to comfort the exiles in Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah sent them a letter from Jerusalem encouraging them to go on with their lives, to seek work, to pray for the welfare of their new city, and to marry and have children (Jer 29:1–7). They did all of these things, with the hope that one day they would be allowed to return home. That hope was realized a few decades later when Persian forces conquered the Babylonians and allowed the exiled Jews to return to their homeland. Although Jeremiah did not instruct the Israelites to intermarry with the Babylonians, by the time of the restoration of Jerusalem many had in fact married and

started families with foreign spouses. Upon their return, they were told by their leaders Ezra and Nehemiah to divorce their foreign spouses (Ezra 9–10; Neh 13:23–31).

Conflict over whether it was appropriate for the restored Israelites to retain spouses and other cultural influences acquired while in exile can be detected in many biblical passages and stories. One of the most striking examples is the story of Ruth, which may have been written during the restoration period to counter objections to foreign spouses. Ruth was a Moabite woman married to an Israelite man. After his death, instead of joining her kinsfolk, she stayed with her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi. Because she stayed with her mother-in-law, she was ultimately rewarded by marriage to another Israelite man, Boaz, on the basis of the levirate marriage custom (Deut 25:5–10). This marriage custom required the nearest relative of a deceased man to marry the man's widow, in the event that she was childless, for the purpose of producing a male heir. Because Ruth was faithful to her mother-in-law, she was joyfully redeemed and socially secured by marriage and maternity. In this story, Ruth's foreignness is mitigated by her faithfulness.

Since both perspectives on marriage to foreign spouses occur in the Bible, one might ask which is right. The key to understanding conflicting points of view is to recognize that the authors and editors of the Bible neither held nor put forth a singular or undisputed teaching. When Jeremiah was written, the people were simply trying to survive their terrible cultural upheaval. When Ezra and Nehemiah were composed, they were trying to reclaim their identity as a people with as little foreign influence as possible. When Ruth was written (or at least edited into its current form), people were likely dealing with the question of whether and how a foreign person might also embody faithfulness to Israel's laws and covenant with God. The fact that multiple perspectives are preserved in the Bible

shows us that reading the Bible for instruction on any given issue (marriage to people of different cultures, in this case) is seldom straightforward, unproblematic, or without debate.

Beyond questions of authorship and context, readers of Scripture encounter issues of literary genre. The many authors of Scripture wrote various types of literature, just as today we have many genres serving a variety of audiences and purposes (textbooks, newspapers, poetry anthologies, biographies, text messages, science fiction short stories, and so on). We cannot expect these literary types or genres each to “reveal” truth in the same fashion. The “truth” of a poem is different from the “truth” of a scientific lab report. Readers of Scripture need to appreciate different types of truth found in different genres of literature within the Bible as well.

The actual manuscripts that have survived the ages pose difficulties for modern readers as well. While mostly in agreement with one another, these manuscripts do differ, often significantly. This stems from the fact that the ancient texts were copied by hand by scribes who occasionally made mistakes. Texts thus changed as they were transmitted from one generation to the next. When manuscripts disagree, the biblical scholar must attempt to ascertain which variant represents the original reading.

There is also the difficulty involved in arriving at the best possible interpretation of a passage of Scripture. Once again, we might think that the meaning of a sentence or a story is self-evident, but it soon appears that there are nearly as many possible interpretations as there are readers. This is especially true when we recognize how much our historical, social, and religious context influences how we understand the world. For example, imagine it is Valentine's Day, and you open a greeting card from your beloved. The card reads, “Your teeth are like a flock of ewes to be shorn. . . . Your neck is like David's tower girt with battlements.” Should you

be insulted? Not if you understand the imagery as it was originally intended. These images from the Song of Solomon (4:2–4) are part of a wedding poem, whereby the bridegroom woos his beloved. A woman in that time would have heard in these lines praise of her lovely, strong neck and shoulders and beautiful white teeth. Historical context is key to reading Scripture!

Much has changed in the four thousand years since the story of the biblical Israelites began. Today technologies make information and interconnection with people all over the globe literally keystrokes away. We travel with relative ease and speed, and we often live, study, and work far away from the places where we grew up. In the ancient world, not only did the majority of people have no access to written materials, but they rarely traveled great distances from their birthplaces. Twenty-first-century life is markedly different from life even one hundred years ago. It differs much more from life at the times various authors composed the Scriptures. Aware of the issues of context and social location, scholars have developed a number of critical-analytical tools for responsibly interpreting sacred literature. These tools include study of ancient manuscripts, culture, literary forms, editing histories, and ancient source material.

When we combine the findings of Scripture scholarship in all of these fields, we can reasonably conclude that “revelation” in the Old Testament refers to the Israelites’ interpretation of their experience of history as an experience of God working within and directing that history.¹ When they thought about and reflected on why and how certain events occurred, they believed that their experiences were only possible by the hand of God. What is revealed through many

different authors, time periods, and types of literature is the people’s experience of God in their midst. What is the particular nature of that experience? The primary and central theme of the Israelite’s identity is their sense of sharing a covenant with God. To put it simply, the covenant between the people and God is the foremost revelation of the Hebrew Bible. This covenant revealed in the myriad and diverse texts of the Hebrew Bible is the foundation for both Jewish and Christian understandings of marriage, and its significance as a result cannot be overstated.²

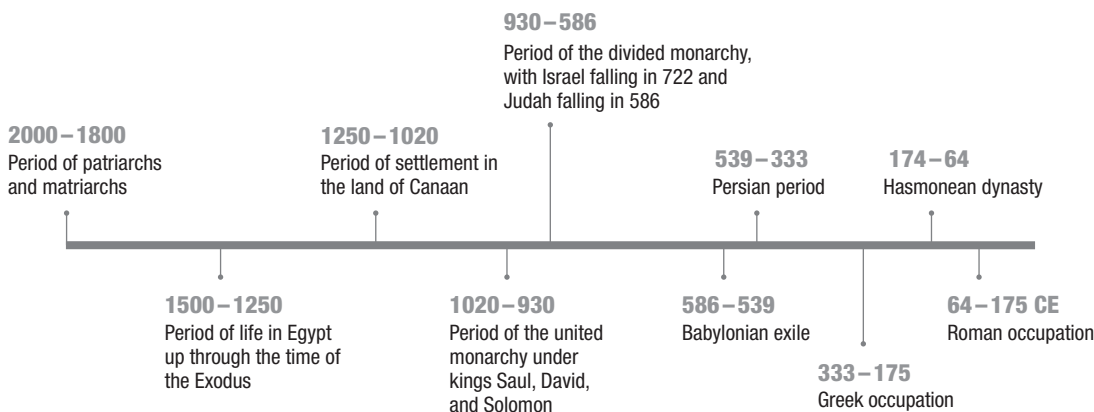
ISRAELITE LIFE AND COVENANT WITH GOD IN THE BIBLE

What is the covenant? The covenant is the relationship between God and the Israelites. The story of the covenant is told throughout many historical eras, by many authors, and in a number of genres in the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes the Israelites wrote about their covenant from a historical perspective while at other times they wrote from a prayerful or contemplative perspective. Sometimes they wrote about their covenant from the perspective of the prophets, or from the perspective of myth and legend. In all cases the covenant is the theme that binds the Scriptures together as a cohesive whole, because the covenant is how the Israelites defined their identity and understood the relationship they shared with their God. Let us consider the covenant as it appears in key books and historical events of the Hebrew Bible.

1. For an excellent and thorough discussion of ways of thinking about revelation, consult Richard McBrien, “Revelation: God’s Self-Disclosure to Us,” in *Catholicism* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 227–272.

2. Good introductions to the study of the Hebrew Scriptures include Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Mahwah, NJ, 1984) and Corrine Carvalho, *Encountering Ancient Voices* (Saint Paul: Anselm Academic, 2006).

MAJOR PERIODS IN ISRAEL'S HISTORY



IN THE BEGINNING

Genesis, the first book of the Bible, begins with the story of God's creation. This book details the birth of humankind; their fall from grace; God's protection of the people in their fallen state; the great flood that devastated the earth; God's renewed relationship with the people; the establishment of the covenant with the hero of the flood, Noah; God's promise of covenant carried on through the great patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and the descendants of Jacob, who become the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. Throughout Genesis, we see God establishing and renewing his special relationship with humankind. First, God creates the world, including Adam and Eve (1–2). Then God protects Noah and humankind from future natural disasters, and sees that the human race spreads over the whole earth (5:5–11:26). God then establishes a relationship with Abraham (11:27–12:9; 15:1–21). Finally God renews his covenant with Abraham through the patriarchs Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (25:19–50:26). The covenant God establishes with these patriarchs is the promise that if they obey and trust in God, God will protect them and see that they and their descendants grow and flourish.

Marriage and family life play a big part in Genesis, beginning with the creation accounts. In Genesis 1:27 the human male and female are created simultaneously, suggesting that the male and female are indissolubly linked in their humanness and common purpose in creation. This idea is ratified in Genesis 2:4–25, where the human male is created first, and the creation of the human female is the culminating act of God's creative work. In this second, more folksy tale, the female is created as the only one who can provide proper companionship for her male counterpart. Upon seeing the woman, the man proclaims, "This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (2:23). They will now cleave to one another, leaving behind even mother and father, because in their union "the two of them become one body" (2:24). These passages become a powerful statement about the mutuality and interdependence of husbands and wives, located at the very beginning of God's work in creation.

Although the couple is subsequently banished from paradise (a common motif in ancient literature of the region), the Hebrew Bible continues to portray God as a loving provider who takes care of the basic needs of human beings.

Indeed, God is portrayed as blessing human beings precisely through their fertility and offspring. Fertility is the heart of God's covenant promise to Abraham, as we read in the following passage (17:1–7):

1. When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said: "I am God the Almighty. Walk in my presence and be blameless.
2. Between you and me I will establish my covenant, and I will multiply you exceedingly."
3. When Abram prostrated himself, God continued to speak to him:
4. "My covenant with you is this: you are to become the father of a host of nations.
5. No longer shall you be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham, for I am making you the father of a host of nations.
6. I will render you exceedingly fertile; I will make nations of you; kings shall stem from you.
7. I will maintain my covenant with you and your descendents after you throughout the ages as an everlasting pact, to be your God and the God of your descendents after you."

The idea that God demonstrates his covenantal blessing on human beings is reinforced through the motif of the barren woman conceiving a child through God's miraculous intervention, as in the cases of Sarah, wife of Abraham (Gen 16:1–2; 21:1–2), Rebecca, wife of Isaac (25:21), and Rachel, wife of Jacob (30:1; 30:22–23). Through these interventions, God continues the covenant he began with human

beings in creation, while demonstrating that through human union God's providential promise can be fulfilled.

IN THE LAW

At the beginning of the Book of Exodus, we find that the tribes of Israel have migrated to the delta region of the Nile because of famine. They have become a successful and numerous people, who enjoy good status with the Egyptians. However, the goodwill that they shared with the Egyptian pharaoh on account of Joseph, Jacob's son by Rachel, has long been forgotten (Exod 1:8). The Israelites are drafted into servitude by the pharaoh for his building projects, and their burdens are tremendous, dangerous, and difficult (1:9–14). They are a persecuted people and the firstborn male children of the Israelites are targeted for murder (1:15–16). Just when the people of Israel are most oppressed, Exodus

COVENANT IN GENESIS

Mention of the covenant occurs throughout Genesis. Compare the discussion of covenant in the following passages: Genesis 9:1–17, in which God makes a covenant with Noah, and Genesis 28:10–22, in which God speaks to Jacob in a dream.

After reading these passages, answer the following questions:

- What do these passages have in common, and how do they differ?
- In what ways, implicitly or explicitly, do they relate to marriage and family?
- How do these passages characterize the relationship between God and human beings?

relates that God remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (2:24).

In order to deliver the Israelites from their hardships, God raises up the prophet Moses, who will guide them out of slavery in Egypt to another home in the promised land of Canaan. Moses is called by a vision of God in a burning bush and charged with the task of delivering the Israelites from slavery (3:1–10). In this dramatic event, the audacious claim is made that God actually tells Moses God's name: YHWH, which we are told means "I am who am" (3:14). This encounter, complete with God's self-revelation of his name, is an incredibly bold statement about how the Israelites perceived the close relationship between God and humankind.

Numerous miracles in Exodus reveal God's providential relationship with the people. Among the most memorable are the plagues that persuade Pharaoh to release the Hebrews from captivity (7:14–10:29), the Passover in which the children of Israel are spared from death (11:1–12:28), the destruction of the Egyptian forces that pursue the Israelites at the parting of the sea (14:23–31), and the provision of food and water in the desert as the Israelites journeyed to Canaan (16:4–15). All of these miracles show that God has a special purpose in mind for this people.

As Scripture scholars have pointed out, it can be argued that most of the miracles that occurred were actually natural phenomena of the region. However, the fact that the events occurred in such a way as to benefit the people toward the end of their ultimate liberation is where the real meaning of the miracles lies. Just as a person today who survives a deadly accident or recovers from a terrible disease might interpret the hand of God in his life, so also the Israelites saw God at work in their history.

God's work in history did not end with the mere event of the liberation from slavery. Indeed, the story of the liberation from slavery is prologue to the central event of Exodus, God's

giving of the covenant law to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 19–24). Here, in this face-to-face meeting with God, a God who even reveals his name to his prophet, the meaning of the covenant becomes most clear. The people are not freed to just any end or purpose. Rather, they are freed to become God's people. This involves the twofold commandments to reverence and worship God and to establish just and wholesome relationships with one another. A review of the numerous laws cited in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy will show that God is as concerned about just relationships between people as with proper worship and sacrifice. The covenant established with God on Mount Sinai is to be lived out in the land of Canaan.

The laws recounted in these books are often difficult for modern readers, because they represent a variety of types of law that are no longer observed. Some of these laws have to do with marriage. This is an area where readers of Scripture need to be critical and discerning both about the meaning of "revelation" and the application of biblical teachings to our present-day lives.

Consider these sets of laws. In Exodus 21:1–11 we find a series of laws pertaining to Hebrew slaves and their families. Although the Israelites were themselves delivered from slavery in Egypt, they continued to keep slaves. Moreover, it was possible for fathers to sell their daughters into servitude. Sometimes slaves were married or were taken as wives by their masters. The laws recounted here describe how slaves, their spouses, and their offspring should be treated in the event that the slave was freed.

In Leviticus 20–21 we find laws that treat, respectively, punishments for sin and rules that govern priests. Many of the issues covered in these chapters relate to marriage and sexual relationships. Some of the topics include sexual contact with animals, homosexuality, incest, intercourse during menstruation, adultery, and proper sexual and marital conduct for priests.

Some of the punishments for sexual or priestly misconduct cited in these chapters are shocking to modern readers. For instance, death is the punishment for adultery (20:10) and male homosexual contact (20:13). Ostracism is the punishment for a couple having sexual contact during the woman's menses (20:18). Immolation is the punishment for the daughter of a priest who becomes a prostitute (21:9).

What are modern readers to make of these laws? I suggest that they should neither be loosely dismissed nor taken as normative. Rather, they should be read in light of the whole covenant law, which helps to explain why such laws would be included in the first place. The covenant law includes a number of different types of law codes, including: the Ten Commandments, the covenant law codes, and the priestly law codes.³ All of these laws, compiled over centuries, intended to direct the Israelites in proper conduct religiously and ethically for the good of the whole community. Adultery, for example, was considered such a serious crime because it disrupted the foundational unit of society, namely the family, the locus for the procreation of children. The Israelites viewed violations of marriage through adultery as damaging to the whole community and not just to the individuals involved. Today such punishments for adultery would be untenable. Also, many have pointed out that women were more penalized than men and held to a stricter standard of sexual exclusivity than were men. However, the point of the law was to

THE LAW AND GOD'S PROMISE

The law in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy covers a multitude of religious and social situations. The law itself represents the human response to God's promise, first established with Abraham. In order to get a sense of the range of concerns covered by the covenant at Mount Sinai, read Exodus 20–24. After reading these laws, answer the following questions:

- What types of laws do you find in these passages?
- Identify and describe those laws that relate to marriage, sexuality, and children. Do these laws seem appropriate or relevant for people today?
- What laws in these passages are problematic for you? Should they still be binding for people today who consider the Bible to be God's revelation? Why or why not?
- What is your overall sense of the covenant based on these laws? How would you describe its mandates both religiously and socially?
- How would you describe the relationship between covenant laws in general and marriage as a covenant specifically?

guarantee sexual fidelity within marriage because the consequences of infidelity were and are so profound for so many people (parents, children, in-laws, and the entire community).⁴

The Israelites believed that God was as concerned with intimate personal issues that affected others as God was with overtly religious matters. Marriage and sexual integrity, then, were seen as extensions of the covenant between God and people as well as a place where that covenant should be lived out. When trying to understand any difficult law within the Bible, it

3. See Carvalho, "Reading the Law through a Contemporary Lens," in *Encountering Ancient Voices*, 89–97.

4. Ephraim Neufeld reviews Israelite marriage in *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws* (Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1944).

is helpful to ask what the purpose of the law might have been at the time it originated and whether there is any insight or wisdom in that ancient purpose that still resonates today.

IN THE LAND

The history of the people in the land is not as idyllic as one might expect, given their special relationship with God. If the Exodus occurred sometime in the mid-thirteenth century, it took about two hundred years for the tribes of Israel to coalesce into a unified whole and to establish a kingdom. The Scriptures began to be written at the height of the golden age of the kingdom under King David in the eleventh century. However, corruption, politics, and old tribal rivalries survived, leading to the eventual division and destruction of the kingdom. Two kingdoms were formed (Israel in the north and Judah in the south), both of which were pressed upon and ultimately destroyed by competing world powers in subsequent centuries.

During the time of the divided kingdom, many prophets emerged in Israel who sought to challenge the kings and prominent citizens of the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem. The prophets returned to the notion of covenant in order to assess the problems and challenges their kingdoms faced. The prophets attributed these problems to the people's failure to live up to their end of the covenant. One such prophet was Hosea.

Hosea took as a wife a woman named Gomer, who was a prostitute. Hosea saw in his marriage to Gomer a parallel relationship to that of the Israelites and their God. By the mid-eighth

HOSEA AND GOMER

Hosea 1–3 describes the tumultuous marriage between Hosea and Gomer. By marrying Gomer, Hosea is fulfilling his prophetic calling by symbolically living out in his own life the struggles that stress the relationship between the Israelites and God. In order to reflect on the meaning of this prophetic work more fully, read Hosea 1–3 and answer the following questions:

- Describe the nature of the infidelity that Hosea experiences. What type of infidelity has God experienced?
- The prophet redeems his wife and restores her to good standing. How is this act related to God's action on behalf of Israel?
- How would you characterize Hosea's forgiveness of Gomer? Consider both his emotional state and his actions.
- Should Hosea's extraordinary compassion for Gomer be a model for marriages today? Why or why not?

century BCE, when Hosea prophesied, the kingdom of Israel had compromised its integrity by admitting foreign religious practices (which were deemed immoral). The ruling class had become corrupt and exploitative of those less affluent. Thus Israel had strayed and become unfaithful to the covenant. Similarly, Gomer strayed and was unfaithful to her husband. Under such circumstances, Hosea was permitted and indeed required by religious law to cast out his wife and even to stone her. But he refused to do so, instead recovering her from her debasement and welcoming her back into his home. Rather than repudiating her for her infidelity, Hosea redeemed Gomer and treated her as his queen. By treating her with such compassion and steadfast love, Hosea helped Gomer to transform into the person she was meant to be all along.

This is also how Hosea depicts God's action in Israel's history. Although Israel strayed miserably, God nevertheless remained faithful and compassionate. Even when the affectionate love between the people and God was stressed by Israel's faithlessness, God's actions revealed a deeper love that could withstand the greatest challenges. This metaphor of active and steadfast spousal love became the archetypal Old Testament image for God's covenant with the people of Israel. Moreover, since marriage could be seen as a metaphor for God's relationship with his people, the very perception of marriage was exalted. Marriage came to be seen as a place where service, forgiveness, and steadfastness not only could but *should* be present, because in marriage people have the opportunity to live out God's love personally.

IN THE WRITINGS

Although prophets such as Hosea worked to encourage the Israelites to return to their covenant obligations, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were too compromised by political instability and corruption to withstand the forces of Assyria and Babylon for long. By the year 722 the northern kingdom had been destroyed by Assyria (2 Kings 17:1–41). By 586 the southern kingdom had been destroyed by Babylon (2 Kings 24:8–25:21). In the event known as the Babylonian exile, the citizens of Jerusalem were carried away in chains, having been overrun by the great general Nebuchadnezzar. This experience was devastating to Israelite identity, indeed the most ruinous event in Israel's history. Among the worst tragedies of the exile was the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which was the centerpiece of Israelite religion. Torn from their homes, the Israelites faced the challenge of trying to understand why they had enjoyed freedom and prosperity in the promised land of Canaan, only to lose it.

In reflecting on this loss, the Israelites composed some of the finest literature in the Hebrew Bible. They compiled and edited their history and stories into a version of the Old Testament that we would recognize today so as to lovingly record all that had been. They also wrote beautiful poems and stories reflecting on the meaning of human life, suffering, hope, and the consolation of God's everlasting love. Much of the Writings comes from this period. Although this literature is not explicitly concerned with Israel's history vis-à-vis the covenant with God, it is fundamentally concerned with the meaning of covenanted life.

One of the most beautiful texts of the Writings, the Song of Solomon, is a poetic exploration of the theme of covenanted love. In its current form the Song of Solomon is probably derived from a poem that would have been read or acted out during ancient wedding ceremonies. On one level, it may certainly be read as a poem about the ecstatic pleasure of physical and sensual love. Many modern interpreters are inclined to read it precisely in this vein. However, for most of its history, Hebrew and Christian interpreters alike have seen in the poem, respectively, an allegory of God's love for the people of Israel or Christ's love for the church. It is fascinating to note that even after a period of cultural destruction, exile, and devastating loss, the Israelites were best able to express their sense of covenant relationship to God in terms of the fullness of human intimacy between spouses.

Reading this poem I am always struck by the tenderness and joy that the lovers express and find in one another. Consider these verses:

I delight to rest in his shadow, and his fruit is sweet to my mouth. (2:3)

His left hand is under my head and his right arm embraces me. (2:6)

How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride,
how much more delightful is your love than wine,
and the fragrance of your ointments than all
spices! (4:10)

Set me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your
arm; for stern as death is love, relentless as the
nether world is devotion; its flames are a blazing
fire. Deep waters cannot quench love, nor floods
sweep it away. (8:6–7)

It is not surprising that readers see in this poem a sensuous description of physical love. The imagery of the poem invites such a reading. What is surprising, however, is that readers have often seen in these same images poetic descriptions of divine-human love. I find it stunning to think that people could be to God more delightful than wine and fragrance, more beautiful than any other, and loved with a relentless passion. What great comfort to imagine God holding people as a lover would, with one hand supporting the neck and the other embracing the body. It is a remarkable witness to divine love that the Israelites saw in this poem a statement about their relationship with God, even after all the suffering they experienced within their history. It is equally remarkable that only in the metaphor of physical love within marriage could they adequately express their experience of divine love.

SUMMARY

The exploration and exposition of the meaning of God's covenant relationship with the Israelites is the unifying theme of all Hebrew literature. Whether the Israelites were writing during the high point of the kingdom united under David or exiled by the waters of Babylon, they wrote about their covenant. Whether they were writing history, poetry, or legend, they wrote about their covenant. For the covenant defined them.

Moreover, the idea of the covenant shaped the Christian community, which came to understand the work of Jesus in the New Testament as establishing a new covenant with God.

In order to grasp fully the meaning of covenant between God and the people of Israel, one needs to read the Scriptures. The selections discussed here are meant to sensitize us to the depth of experience and contemplation that the Israelites invested in the notion of what it means to share a covenant with God. For in their experience, God was not an impersonal power beyond conception, nor was God a fickle deity to be lured and manipulated through deeds and rites. The all-powerful God of creation and history was, in the experience of Israel, as close as a lover and as involved in their lives as a spouse. The lived experience of marriage became a place and opportunity for the people to experience and practice covenanted life, which they believed to be instituted and ordered by God himself. Indeed, the Israelites believed that God's covenant promise was most concretely fulfilled in the context of marriage through the blessing of children. On the one hand, the Israelites used the incomparably close human relationship of marriage in order to express how God and the people interrelate. On the other hand, the steadfast and tireless fidelity of God to the people became the paradigm or ideal model for actual marriages.

APPLICATION TO FAMILY AND MARRIAGE TODAY

The Israelites self-consciously made the connection between human marriage and divine-human love. Although the family structures that characterized the biblical Israelites did not always live up to the covenant ideal, the concept of covenant remained as a rule and judge of conduct and character within marriage. If we reflect for a moment

upon what this model reveals to us about human marriage, three points emerge. First, a theology of the family and marriage grounded in the biblical notion of covenant affirms that marriage is a sacred reality. In other words, although marriage and family life have obvious social, legal, and even political dimensions, the human experience of marriage and family life transcends mere sociological analysis. It is a reality that, when it points toward the ideal, becomes a condition for human beings to experience the divine.

In what way does this occur? Take again the example of Hosea's love for Gomer. His love is not a passive affection or sentimentality. It is, rather, a love expressed in terms of saving action. Hosea recovers and restores Gomer, not because she merits it by her past behaviors, but because she has an inalienable worth in his eyes. He transcends his baser inclinations to anger, jealousy, and retribution in order to achieve both her restitution and the salvation of their marriage. No mere legal or social explanation of marriage can account for love's desire to overcome weakness, loss, and the hurts people are all too capable of inflicting upon one another. In Hosea we see the human acting as the divine in order to reach beyond human feeling. True interpersonal love that seeks excellence and wholeness in one's beloved causes goodness to flourish in both lover and beloved. It is in this sense that marriage may be understood as a sacred reality.

This brings us to the second point, which is that covenant love is not passive feeling or sentimentality. It is rather compassionate action and fidelity. It is expressed in terms of what is done as opposed to what is felt. Although the emotional dimensions of love should not be diminished or disparaged, a mere affective sense of love is antithetical to the biblical notion of covenant love. Covenant love is love expressed in behaviors that are constant, redeeming, restorative, patient, and

steadfast, even when the emotions would instruct us to behave otherwise.

A final point is that covenant love is indissoluble. Invoking the comparison between a contract and a covenant is useful here. A contract is a legal agreement that binds two parties to one another under a specific set of conditions and for a specific purpose for a specified time. Covenants, on the other hand, are unconditional, and while they may be legal, they cannot be broken or forfeited in the same fashion as a contract. For example, one does not establish a set of conditions upon which a friendship will depend and then write it on parchment to be signed by the friends. And when a friendship is challenged by a betrayal or failing, one does not merely cancel it and begin anew with someone else. Covenants involve the whole person and the measure of the person's character in a covenanted relationship is the sincerity and commitment one brings to upholding the relationship. As covenant relationships largely define human beings, they cannot be rejected without causing permanent damage to the persons rejecting them. In this sense covenants are indissoluble, for they involve the entire character and identity of the persons involved.

When we say that a biblical sense of covenant founds a Christian theology of marriage, we are saying that marriage is:

- A sacred reality
- Based on active love
- Indissoluble

These three points will frame the entire Christian outlook on family and marriage, and they find their origin in the long and meandering history of the biblical Israelites who came to know themselves by coming to know God. Their covenant is the beginning revelation of God's love, and indeed, of love itself.

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. What is “revelation”? What are some of the issues modern readers face when turning to the Bible for guidance and instruction?
2. How would you define God’s covenant with the people of Israel?
3. Identify and summarize the biblical selections cited within this chapter that relate to marriage as a covenant. When viewed together, how would you summarize the Hebrew Bible’s view of marriage?
4. Legal material in the Bible can be difficult to reconcile with modern attitudes and concepts of rights. How do you think we should regard biblical laws? How do these laws relate to the claim that the Bible is divine revelation?
5. Evaluate the marriage between Hosea and Gomer. Does Hosea do the right thing? How can or should marriage be a context for redemption?
6. God is typically depicted as the husband and the Israelites as the wife in the God-Israel marriage metaphor. Some have suggested that this endorses the idea that men ought to play a god-like role over their wives in human marriages, even having the authority to punish their wives as God punishes Israel. How do you evaluate this suggestion? Is it problematic for you?
7. What is the difference between a covenant and a contract? Should marriage legally be one or the other? How might you conceive of the differences between the two legally?
8. Do some brief research on the legal differences between marriage contracts and marriage covenants. What arguments would you make in favor of or against legal marriage covenants versus legal marriage contracts?
9. Does a covenant need to be a legal or civil reality in order to be binding?

Resources for Further Reading

Old Testament Resources

Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984).

Corrine Carvalho, *Encountering Ancient Voices* (Saint Paul: Anselm Academic, 2006).

Covenant Marriage Resources

John Kippley, *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005).

Craig Hill, *Marriage: Covenant or Contract* (Northglenn, CO: Harvest Books, 1992).

Bernard Cardinal Law, *Christian Marriage: A Covenant of Love and Life; A Pastoral Letter* (Boston: Roman Catholic Archbishop of Boston, 1998).

John Cardinal O’Connor, *Covenant of Love: Pastoral Reflections on Marriage* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Press, 1991).

John Tarwater, *Marriage as Covenant: Considering God’s Design at Creation and the Contemporary Moral Consequences* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006).

John Witte, Jr., and Eliza Ellison, eds., *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).