

METAPHORS OF MARRIAGE AS EXPRESSIONS OF DIVINE-HUMAN RELATIONS

RICHARD D. PATTERSON*

Figurative language makes up a great deal of human communication. As a general category, all figures of speech are at times classified under the term “metaphor.” Thus Williams can point out that “metaphor lies at the very root of language.”¹ Some of life’s most precious relationships, activities, and institutions can appear in a figurative setting. By employing metaphoric language, an author imbues his work with a freshness and vividness that not only make his words more memorable, but invites the reader to be a participant in the interpretive process. Thus Ryken observes, “Metaphor and simile are obviously meditative forms that ask us to ponder how one thing is like another.”²

Such is the case with the institution of marriage, including the wedding ceremony. Thus two fields of research can be said to be “wedded together,” such as science and the Bible. A uniting of business firms or approaches may be termed a marriage, and an ideal marriage is sometimes called a “marriage made in heaven.”

Metaphorical language abounds in the Bible. Thus Zuck records the declaration of W. MacNeile Dixon who writes, “Remove the metaphors [i.e. figurative expressions] from the Bible and its living spirit vanishes. The prophets, the poets, the leaders of men are all of them are masters of imagery, and by imagery they capture the human soul.”³ Some of these metaphors revolve around cherished family situations. Thus a previous study in this *Journal* noted the scriptural importance of the metaphor of love of parents for their children.⁴ Another of the most striking metaphors is that of marriage. This human institution is often drawn upon by the biblical writers to express God’s relation to His people. The following study will examine marriage under the metaphors of the husband and wife, and the bridegroom and bride.

* Richard D. Patterson is emeritus professor of Old Testament at Liberty University, 1971 University Blvd., Lynchburg, VA 24502.

¹ D. J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999) 2.

² Leland Ryken, *Words of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 100.

³ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton: Victor, 1991) 143. Dixon’s words are drawn from the citation by George S. Hendry, “Biblical Metaphors and Theological Constructions,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, n.s. 2 (1979) 258.

⁴ Richard D. Patterson, “Parental Love As a Metaphor for Divine-Human Love,” *JETS* 46 (2003) 205–16.

I. METAPHORS OF MARRIAGE AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

When we turn to the literature of the ancient Near East, we soon learn that the Scriptures are unique in employing these metaphors for divine human relations. Perhaps it is the basic tenets of the committed polytheism of the nations of the ancient Near East which negated the use of metaphors relative to marriage to express a human relationship with the gods.

Mesopotamia is representative of the normal situation, especially with regard to the general citizenry. Thus Walton observes, "The nature of polytheism significantly affects the distinction between state and family religion. Since the gods were viewed as operating within a hierarchical system, there was a bureaucracy and a division of labor . . . most families would feel that they had little access to those great gods. Likewise, those gods would not likely be concerned about them or hear their requests. Consequently, the common people tended to turn to their family and ancestral gods."⁵ Oppenheim puts it even more strongly, entitling his chapter on Mesopotamian religion with Hölderlin's observation concerning the Mesopotamian's difficulties in approaching his god: "*Nah ist- und schwer zu fassen der Gott.*"⁶ Oppenheim affirms that "it is extremely difficult to penetrate to the individuality of the divine figures. There is no trace in Mesopotamia of the *communio* between the deity and its worshippers . . . for the Mesopotamia deity remained aloof."⁷ Indeed, "man was created for the service of the gods"⁸ or "perhaps rather to wait upon them."⁹

This is not to say that no divine-human relations were ever expressed in the ancient Near East. For example, the god Ilu's lusting after two human women, who in turn gave birth to the deities Dawn and Dusk, is recorded in the literature of ancient Ugarit.¹⁰ Likewise, in ancient Egypt the eighteenth dynasty Queen Hatchepsut recounted the affair between the god Amon-Re and her mother by which she was conceived.¹¹ Also, many Mesopotamian kings claimed to be the son of a particular deity as did the Ugaritic King

⁵ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 142–43. For the importance and prevalence of family religion in the ancient Near East, see Maria Häust, "Gott als Vater und Mutter und the Sohnschaft des Volkes in der Prophetie. Rezeption mythischer Vorstellungen," Hubert Irsigler, ed., *Mythisches in biblischer Bildsprache. Gestalt und Verwandlung in Prophetie und Psalmen* (Freiburg/Basel/Vienna: Herder, 2004) 258–89.

⁶ A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) 171.

⁷ *Ibid.* 194, 191.

⁸ H. W. F. Saggs, *The Greatness That Was Babylon* (New York: Hawthorn, 1962) 354.

⁹ H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East* (trans. J. Sturdy; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 111. See further L. Delaporte, *Mesopotamia* (trans. V. G. Childe; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970) 135–71.

¹⁰ See Dennis Pardee, "Dawn and Dusk," in *The Context of Scripture* (3 vols.; ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr.; Leiden: Brill, 1997, 2000, 2002) 1:280–82. For the Ugaritic text in transliteration, see Cyrus Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Analecta Orientalia 38; Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1965) 174–75, text #52, lines 30–67.

¹¹ See J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (London: Histories and Mysteries of Man; repr. 1988) 2:80.

Kirta (or Keret).¹² Nevertheless, although many individuals, especially kings, could claim protection by a particular deity or a special relation to him or her such as that of a son to his father or mother, the concept of a nation being the wife of a deity is foreign to the extrabiblical world in general.¹³

II. MARRIAGE METAPHORS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Bible, however, provides a rich mine for exploring metaphors of marriage as an expression of a divine-human relationship. Thus God's covenantal relation with Israel is often depicted as that of a husband for his wife. By way of contrast with Israel's polytheistic neighbors, "The Israelites' monotheistic stance distinguished Judaism from the polytheism of other ancient religions; the idea of monogamy thus undergirds figurative prostitution accusations. God's covenant with Israel is comparable to a monogamous marriage; he provides for her, raises her to a special place of honor and asks her to support his plan."¹⁴

1. *Marriage, then separation.* Indeed, Isaiah reminds the Israelites that, "Your husband is your Maker—His name is Yahweh of Hosts." (Isa 54:5).¹⁵ In that regard, Jeremiah pictures God's fond remembrance of those early days:

I remember the loyalty of your youth,
 your love as a bride—
 in a land not sown.
 Israel was holy to the LORD,
 the firstfruits of His harvest. (Jer 2:2–3)

Here, in addition to the metaphor of Israel as the bride of her husband Yahweh and a holy people, her portrayal as the "firstfruits of the harvest" "indicates that Israel was a choice possession of the Lord, just as the first yield from the harvest belonged to God (cf. Lev 22: 10–16)."¹⁶ Concerning this Thompson remarks, "As with the harvest so in the world of man, Israel comprised God's portion of the harvest of nations that one day would be realized. Because Israel was God's own portion just as the firstfruits were,

¹² See Dennis Pardee, "The Kirta Epic," in *Context* 1:339.

¹³ The supposed sacred marriage ceremony in the Mesopotamian Akitu festival is likewise not to be confused with the husband/wife metaphor for divine human relations. Full details concerning this ceremony are clothed in obscurity and, in any case, bear no resemblance to the metaphor of the husband and wife utilized in the Scriptures. For a proposed reconstruction of the Akitu, see Saggs, *Babylon* 382–89. See further E. Ray Clendenen, "Religious Background of the Old Testament," in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation* (ed. David S. Dockery, Kenneth A. Mathews, and Robert B. Sloan; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 280–81.

¹⁴ "Prostitute, Prostitution," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman, III; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 677.

¹⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible. Concerning Isa 54:5, see n. 39.

¹⁶ F. B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah Lamentations* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman, 1993) 62.

she was under his special protection.”¹⁷ That Israel was so involved faithful-ness on its part. Thus the Lord declares, “If you will listen to Me and carefully keep My covenants, you will be My own possession out of all the peoples, although all the earth is Mine, and you will be My kingdom of priests and My holy nation” (Exod 19:5–6). As Cassuto explains, “The proposal envisages a bilateral covenant, giving Israel an exalted position among the peoples in lieu of the acceptance of a special discipline.”¹⁸ Here, too, the concept of Israel as God’s valuable property and treasured possession is particularly emphasized.¹⁹

This becomes a familiar theme in the OT (e.g. Ps 135:4). Indeed, a gracious God had purchased Israel, redeeming her out of bondage in Egypt, not because of her goodness, but simply because he loved her and because he would be faithful to the promise made to the patriarchs (Deut 7:6–11). He entered into covenant with his people, asking only that they should love him and be faithful, just as he had been toward them. This meant that they should reflect his holy standards in their lives and so be assured of seeing good success (Deut 14:1–2; 26:16–19).

Alas, God’s “treasured possession” all too quickly proved to be unfaithful. Israel strayed from God and “followed useless idols” (Jer 2:8). Even though God provided for them through the wilderness wanderings and brought them into the Promised Land with all its benefits, the people, priests, and prophets forgot the Lord and followed after such false deities as Baal. Such was not only blatant sin but revealed a thankless heart. Furthermore, that Israel should desert Yahweh for Baal was a betrayal of her status as his wife. It is of interest to note that the noun *ba’al* can designate not only the name of the Canaanite god but was used of a husband (e.g. Deut 24:4; Jer 3:14). Thus to chase after Baal was not only sinful but foolish. Her real “ba’al” was Yahweh, her husband.

Because of her infidelity, wife Israel became separated from her husband. Thus the Lord challenges his people through the prophet Isaiah saying, “Where is your mother’s divorce certificate that I used to send her away? Or who were My creditors that I sold you to?” (Isa 50:1). The double question is rhetorical in nature. The first question has its background in Deuteronomic legislation concerning divorce, which stipulates that when a man divorces his wife, “he may write her a divorce certificate, hand it to her, and send her away from his house” (Deut 24:1). As Merrill observes, “She has thus been cut off and driven away from home and family, a punishment laden with

¹⁷ J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 164.

¹⁸ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 227. William C. Propp (*Exodus 19–40* [AB; New York: Doubleday, 2006] 159), however, sees in Yahweh’s relation to Israel here a combination of three metaphors: treasure, son, and servant (cf. Mal 3:17).

¹⁹ See further, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (rev. ed.; ed. Temper Longman, III and David E. Garland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 1:472. For discussions of the Hebrew noun translated “possession,” see Eugene Carpenter, “Ségulla,” *NIDOTTE* 3:224; Richard D. Patterson, “סגל,” in *TWOT* 617.

indescribable shame and incalculable economic and social loss in that ancient Israelite world.”²⁰

The second question, likewise, has its background in legal regulations. As Blenkinsopp observes, “Selling someone into indentured service in order to repay debt that could not otherwise be amortized, is regulated in the laws (Exod 21:1–11; Deut 15:12–18) and must have been of common occurrence in a subsistence agrarian economy both before and after the fall of Jerusalem (e.g. 2 Kgs 4:1; Neh 5:5).”²¹ That both questions are rhetorical in nature is evident, for “not only has God not divorced Zion but He has also not sold her children to creditors. . . . God, of course, has no creditors, nor does He owe anything to anyone. The figure of the marriage relationship is thus maintained. Zion is separated from the Lord, her true Husband. This has not come about however, through any writing of divorcement that He has given her, nor has He sold any of her children to creditors.”²² Israel’s judgment and separation from the Lord is because of willful sin both corporately and individually: “Look, you were sold for your iniquities, and your mother was put away for your transgressions” (Isa 50:1b).

On the one hand, it is evident also that in Isa 50:1a the divorce metaphor deals with the covenant nation per se as represented especially by David’s direct line located in Judah. On the other hand, the metaphor of divorce and indebtedness (v. 1b) refers to the Northern Kingdom in particular, while at the same time serving as a warning to Judah should its people fail to meet their covenantal standards.²³ Such a position is in harmony with Jeremiah’s later oracle (Jer 3:6, 8, 10):

In the days of King Josiah the LORD asked me, “Have you seen what unfaithful Israel has done? She has ascended every high hill and gone under every green tree to prostitute herself there. . . . I observed that it was because unfaithful Israel committed adultery that I sent her away and had given her a certificate of divorce. Nevertheless, her treacherous sister Judah was not afraid but also

²⁰ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 317. Due legal process is in view here as in the Code of Hammurapi (para. 137–49) and The Middle Assyrian Laws (para. 37–38). For the latter, see “Theophile J. Meek, “The Middle Assyrian Laws,” in *ANET* 183. For the Code of Hammurapi, see G. R. Driver and John C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws* (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) 1:290–309; 2:55–57. The Babylonian Laws are particularly relevant and dictate that legal proceedings must be duly adjudicated by a court.

²¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 316.

²² Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 3:296.

²³ The understanding of Isa 50:1 depends greatly on one’s view of its date. If as Gleason Archer (*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* [Chicago: Moody, 1974] 339–43) maintains, Isaiah 40–66 are pre-exilic, the idolatry condemned there would then best refer to conditions in the reign of Manasseh. Therefore, the Northern Kingdom has fallen and sinful Judah is being warned of the danger of its self-destruction. Similarly, Larry Walker (“Isaiah,” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* [ed. Philip W. Comfort; Wheaton: Tyndale, 2005] 9) writes, “The Assyrian menace was very real. Isaiah captured this moment of truth.” Less satisfactory, perhaps, is the suggestion of John N. Oswalt (*The Book of Isaiah*, (NICOT; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, 1998) 1:27–29; 2:7–11) that although the context of Isaiah is in the time of Hezekiah in the late 8th century, the message of chapters 1–39 could only be completed by the prophecies relative to the coming exile and restoration of God’s people.

went and prostituted herself. . . . Judah didn't return to Me with all her heart—only in pretense.”

Thus Laetsch comments, “Even when God had finally divorced His unfaithful spouse, when Samaria was destroyed in 722, Judah continued in her hypocrisy. . . . Forsaking her Bridegroom (Jer. 2:2), the Fount of Living Water (ch. 2:13), she chose as her gods wood and stone (cp. ch. 2:27). . . . Judah the treacherous spouse, is like an adulterous wife that seeks to deceive her husband by promising faithfulness while she continues in her relations with other men.”²⁴

Employing the imagery of marriage and divorce through Jeremiah, the Lord reminds Judah that if a woman has been divorced and married to another man, her former husband cannot remarry her (Jer 3:1): “If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him to marry another, can he ever return to her?”²⁵ Wouldn't such a land become totally defiled? But you! You have played the prostitute with many partners—can you return to me?” Commenting on the flow of the context in the verses that follow, Chisholm remarks,

The Lord was forced to “divorce” Israel and send her into exile as punishment for her unfaithfulness (v. 8a). This “divorce” occurred in 722 B.C., when the Assyrians took the Israelites into exile and Israel's territory an Assyrian province. Judah, Israel's “sister” to the south, was watching all this transpire (v. 7b) She should have taken the episode to heart and remained faithful to the Lord, but instead she too committed spiritual adultery by worshiping idols (vv. 8b–9).²⁶

Writing from the standpoint of the exile, Ezekiel uses similar language in his prophecies. Although he draws upon historical data, in an allegory Ezekiel portrays Jerusalem first as an abandoned child whom the Lord rescued, and then as a beautiful young lady whom the Lord took in marriage and adorned with lavish splendor (Ezek 16:1–14). Subsequently, however, his wife prostituted herself with other nations and their gods (vv. 15–32). Jerusalem, the city that David took from the Jebusites and made his capital, housed David's direct line, so that by metonymy Jerusalem stands for God's distinct covenant people in general and in particular the Southern Kingdom.²⁷ Despite her favored status, Judah had become guilty of gross spiritual prostitution. So detestable had the spiritual condition of Judah's leadership and people become that Ezekiel can paint an extreme portrait of its spiritual lust. Unlike normal prostitutes who receive payment for her favors, prostitute Judah had to solicit strangers and bribe them with gifts: “Men give gifts to all prostitutes, but you gave gifts to all your lovers. You bribed them to come

²⁴ Theo. Laetsch, *Bible Commentary Jeremiah* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1965) 50, 51. See also Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1999) 307–9.

²⁵ Interestingly, the LXX reads: “Can she still return to him?” The Greek construction expects a negative reply.

²⁶ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 158–59.

²⁷ Thus Charles L. Feinberg (*The Prophecy of Ezekiel* [Chicago: Moody, 1969] 85) points out that, “Ezekiel was charged by God to declare his message to Jerusalem as representative of all Judah, and even the entire nation.”

to you from all around for your sexual favors. So you were the opposite of other women in your acts of prostitution; no one solicited you. When you paid a fee instead of one being paid to you, you were the opposite" (vv. 33–34).

Therefore, because of Judah's entanglement with other nations and their deities (e.g. Ahaz, 2 Kgs 16:7–18; 2 Chr 28:1–25; Manasseh, 2 Kgs 21:1–16; 2 Chr 33:1–9), God must surely judge Jerusalem (vv. 35–43), for she had become like her "sisters" Sodom and Samaria (vv. 44–52).²⁸

In a subsequent allegory (Ezekiel 23), Ezekiel compares Israel and Judah to two sisters who, because they have become prostitutes, forgotten God, and therefore "must bear the consequences of your indecency and promiscuity" (v. 35). These two "wives" therefore had to suffer the punishment of their adultery (vv. 45, 49). Alexander remarks, "Those whom Jerusalem and Samaria lured into 'relations' would now judge these two cities (vv. 43–45). . . . Assyria and Babylonia would judge Samaria and Jerusalem with the judgment prescribed for an adulteress and murderer in the Mosaic covenant."²⁹ Thus spiritual and physical prostitution will be brought to an end in God's land (vv. 48–49).

Zechariah (13:2) would later declare God's intention to cut off the very names of the idols that Israel had embraced so frequently in the course of their history.³⁰ Klein remarks, "'To cut off' one's name is tantamount to utter destruction or even consigning someone to non-existence. . . . Since the name of beings, places, and things convey meaning, for an idol, the name carries claims about existence, personality, and deeds. Zechariah described the coming day when all of these vacuous projections on to mere objects will be stripped away, exposing the utter foolishness of giving obeisance to an idol."³¹ So it was that when the Jews refused Antiochus Epiphanes's demand that they make sacrifices to the Olympian Zeus, and rebelled and gained their freedom to worship in accordance with their traditional religion, "Never again were Jews to take idolatry seriously. Rather, idol worship became a matter of semi-humorous satire and ridicule."³² Nevertheless, God's "wife" was to suffer the penalty for her infidelity (Ezek 16:43, 58; 23:35, 48). She would be separated from Yahweh her husband for a season (Isa 50:1b) until she acknowledged her guilt and repented (Jer 3:22b–25).

²⁸ For the historical background of the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh, see Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 405–9, 435; Richard D. Patterson and H. J. Austel, "1 & 2 Kings," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (12 vols.; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 4:242–47, 277–80.

²⁹ Ralph H. Alexander, "Ezekiel," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (12 vols.; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 6:857, 858.

³⁰ See Eugene H. Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 329. See further, Thomas Edward McComiskey, "Zechariah," *The Minor Prophets* (ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 1220.

³¹ George L. Klein, *Zechariah* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2008) 376. Klein also points out (375) that "the future kingdom of God over which the Messiah will rule righteously holds no room for false teachings about God. The first step, then, in the establishment of the righteous Messianic reign will be the removal of false teachings about the Lord."

³² P. L. Garber, "Idolatry," in *ISBE* 2:799.

The prophet Hosea rehearses all of this most graphically. Taking the canonical text as it stands, Hosea is first told to marry a woman of questionable moral scruples (Hos 1:2). Having married Gomer, Hosea's family soon consists of a wife and three children (1:3–9). F. C. Fensham properly concludes that Hosea's use of the metaphor revolves around the concept of God's covenant relation with Israel.

It is clear that the covenant, metaphorically expressed by the marriage contract, plays a major role in this pericope. It forms the climax of the description. In the marriage is also incorporated Israel's guilt, their apostacy [sic] from the orthodox religious conceptions by accepting in their service of the Lord certain characteristics of the Canaanite religion like e.g. cultic prostitution. . . . It is such a good metaphor, because in Canaanite religions and in its Israelite surrogate sexual rites played an important role.³³

Gomer's infidelity quickly surfaces, for she goes after other lovers (2:2–13[14–15]). Therefore she is separated from her husband and eventually falls into slavery or cultic prostitution. "Hosea's separation from Gomer served as a visible symbol of God's estrangement from Israel. Just as Gomer was sent from her house and husband, so Israel would be judged by God and sent into captivity. Just as Gomer would be bereft of economic and material resources, so God would afflict the land and crops with devastating losses."³⁴ God's condemnation through his prophet is graphic:

I will devastate her vines and fig trees.
 She thinks that these are her wages
 that her lovers have given her.
 I will turn them into a thicket,
 and the wild animals will eat them.
 And I will punish her
 for the days of the Baals
 when she burned incense to them,
 put on her rings and jewelry,
 and went after her lovers
 but forgot Me. (Hos 2:12–13)

"The 'Baal idols' (NET; lit., 'Baals') doubtless refer to the many places of cultic worship of the god Baal, especially at festival times."³⁵

2. *Reconciliation, restoration, and renewal.* The account of Hosea and Gomer takes a fresh turn when, in his undying love for Gomer and in accordance with the Lord's instruction, Hosea redeems his wife (Hos 3:1–2).³⁶

³³ F. C. Fensham, "The Marriage Metaphor in Hosea for the Covenant Relationship Between the Lord and His People (Hos 1:2–9)," *JNSL* 12 (1984) 77–78. See also P. C. Craigie, *The Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986) 176–77.

³⁴ Richard D. Patterson, "Hosea," in *Minor Prophets* (Cornerstone Biblical Commentary; ed. Philip W. Comfort; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2008) 19–20.

³⁵ Richard D. Patterson, *Hosea* (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 2008) 33.

³⁶ See J. A. Brewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament* (3d ed.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1962) 97–98; H. W. Wolff, *Hosea* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 6.

Restored to her husband, Gomer nonetheless must undergo a period of isolation in order to reestablish normal relations of love and trust: "I said to her, 'you must live with me many days. Don't be promiscuous or belong to any man, and I will act the same way toward you'" (Hos 3:3). When Gomer fully responds in loving commitment to Hosea, she will be restored to all the blessings of full family privileges. So it was that Israel was to understand that there was a time when the nation would be exiled for a period of time. But when it fully recommits itself in love and submission to Yahweh, it will, like Gomer, experience the divine blessings of full covenant status (vv. 4–5). In addition, Hosea's life with Gomer portrayed visibly the great spiritual truths of God's compassion and great love for his people Israel, despite their infidelity.³⁷

Hosea's metaphor of the husband and wife is taken up and expanded by other prophets. Isaiah (54:5–8), compares disobedient Israel to a rejected wife on whom he will have compassion and restore to fellowship.

"For your husband is your Maker— . . .
For the LORD has called you come
Like a wife deserted and wounded in spirit,
a wife of one's youth
when she is rejected," says your God.
"I deserted you for a brief moment,
but I will take you back
with great compassion." (Isa 54:5, 6–7)

In that restored state Israel will no longer be "Deserted" but the one in whom God finds his delight ("Hephzibah"), and the land itself will no longer be termed "Desolate" but "Beulah" (married; Isa 62:4). Indeed, the pristine relationship between Yahweh and Israel will be renewed: "As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so your God will rejoice over you" (Isa 62:5b).

The theme of reconciliation and restoration is also found in Jeremiah. Through his prophet the Lord challenges his faithless wife to return to her husband (Jer 3:14).³⁸ If she does, Israel will be restored in purity and faithfulness to the Promised Land of their inheritance with great blessings (vv. 15–18). God will make a new covenant with wife Israel, which exceeds all previous provisions and blessings.³⁹ For "the Mosaic Law demanded allegiance to the

³⁷ Although a different metaphor is involved, note the expression of God's deep commitment to his people in Hos 11:8–11 (cf. 14:4).

³⁸ Robin Wakely ("שָׁרָה" *NIDOTTE* 1: 528–29) suggests a slightly different approach in holding that "instead of reconstituting the old marriage, there will be a new marriage (i.e. there will be a new unconditional covenant, the integrity and permanence of which will be guaranteed by Yahweh, who will overcome and heal Israel's faithlessness . . . and this new relationship will have qualities lacking in the previous one."

³⁹ Hosea 2:19 represents God's reconciliation and new covenantal relation to Israel under the metaphor of betrothal. Although the practice and standards of betrothal are abundantly attested in the OT, its application to God's restored relation to Israel is clearly a figurative equivalent to the normal marriage metaphor and probably chosen to emphasize the tenderness of Israel's new relationship to the Lord. Accordingly, the HCSB renders Hos 2:19–20 as follows: "I will take you to be My wife forever. I will take you to be My wife in righteousness, justice, love, and compassion.

Lord, demonstrated through obedience to its regulations. But it had no power, in and of itself to make the people obey. . . . The new covenant . . . rather than being recorded on stone tablets, would be inscribed on the hearts and minds of God's people . . . there would be no need for exhortations to "know the Lord," for the people would automatically 'know' him as they experienced the forgiveness of sin."⁴⁰ Thus Garrett remarks, "This is no mere reestablishment of the covenant rights of Israel; it is the beginning of a relationship of love between God and his people as they had not known before. It is a *new covenant*."⁴¹

By way of summary, it may be said that the metaphors of marriage provide an interesting perspective on God's relation to his people Israel. The Lord is portrayed in his great abiding love for Israel. Although Yahweh and Israel at first enjoyed a mutual love for each other, even as bridegroom and bride, Israel soon became an unfaithful wife by chasing after many false deities, even while feigning devotion to her husband. For this the Lord must chasten his faithless wife who has left him for others. Nevertheless, despite her infidelity, husband Yahweh remains faithful to his wife Israel and concerned for her. After a time, when she has realized the consequences of her actions, and genuinely repents and longs again for her husband, the Lord will restore Israel in purity. He will enter into a new relationship with her and lavish his love upon her with abundant blessings. Thus throughout not only God's undying love for and faithfulness to his own are underscored, but as well his standards of holiness and justice. What was needed was a corresponding love and devotion on the part of God's people.

III. MARRIAGE METAPHORS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The marriage metaphors portraying the husband and wife, and the bridegroom and bride, also appear in the NT where they depict the relationship between Christ and the church. In the days of Christ's early ministry, John the Baptist compares his role in assisting Jesus in the bridegroom's ministry to that of a best man (John 3:27–30). Köstenberger rightly points out, "The Baptist . . . makes clear that the purpose of his ministry was to elevate Jesus, so that there was no rivalry between the two men. . . . This is not merely a

I will take you to be My wife in faithfulness, and you will know the LORD." The suggestion by David W. Jones ("The Betrothal View of Divorce and Remarriage," *BibSac* 165 [January–March 2008] 74) therefore that Hos 2:19, along with Isa 54:5 and Jer 3:14, are instances of actual betrothal is questionable, however applicable the practice may be to the biblical concepts of divorce and remarriage. For yet another approach to Hos 2:19–20, see Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000) 36.

⁴⁰ Chisholm, *Handbook* 195. Chisholm goes on to explain the implications of the new covenant for Israel and the church (pp. 195–97). Among other prophetic texts and terms relative to the new covenant (e.g. "a covenant of peace"), see Isa 54:10–13; Ezek 34:25–31; 37:21–27. For the relation of the marriage metaphor to the covenant theme, see Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, III, "Marriage," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* 538–39.

⁴¹ Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea–Joel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997) 93; see also Sweeney, *Twelve Prophets* 1:35–36.

personal issue; the transition from the Baptist to Jesus represents a crucial salvation historical watershed from the OT prophetic era to that of the Messiah.⁴² Thus, “In light of the OT background where Israel is depicted as ‘the bride of Yahweh’ (cf., e.g., Isa. 62:4–5; Jer. 2:2; Hos. 2:16–20 . . .), the Baptist is suggesting that Jesus is Israel’s awaited king and Messiah.”⁴³ The main focus, therefore, is upon Christ as the bridegroom with John simply being his friend whose task it is to assist him. Similarly, Osborne observes that John the Baptist’s point was that he was simply the best man at the wedding. Thus at Jewish weddings the best man’s duty was:

to oversee most of the wedding details and lead the procession that brought the bride to the groom’s home for the ceremony. While the groom was the focus, the best man was “simply glad to stand with him.” Behind this is also the imagery of Israel as the bride of Yahweh (Isa 62:4–5; Hos 2:16–20) and the church as the bride of Christ (Eph 5:25–27; Rev 21:2, 9). John the Baptist had handed God’s people over to the Messiah and was thrilled to do so.⁴⁴

During his earthly ministry, Christ likened his mission to that of a bridegroom, while depicting his disciples as guests at a wedding (Matt 9:15–16; Mark 2:19–20). Jesus’ teaching concerning the guests of the bridegroom “picks up a metaphor from the Baptist, who saw himself as the ‘best man’ and Jesus as the groom (John 3:29). This similar metaphor would therefore be more effective to his audience—Jesus is the groom and the disciples his ‘guests’ who are so overjoyed at being with him that for them to fast is inappropriate.”⁴⁵

The apostle Paul portrays the marriage metaphor in terms of the bride and bridegroom as well. Thus he reminds the believers that human husbands are to have the same love and intentions for their wives as Christ who “loved the church and gave himself for her, to make her holy, cleansing her in the washing of water by the word. He did this to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and blameless” (Eph 5:25–27). Williams sees in reference to the washing of water an allusion to a Jewish bride who would “bathe in a symbolic act of purification. The practice may have originated as a rite of passage—her being transferred as a piece of property of one man to another. . . . Paul’s readers could hardly have failed to see in the bath an allusion to baptism—baptism being, as it were, the symbolic precursor to their union with Christ.”⁴⁶

In the Corinthian church, Paul senses the same dangerous tendencies as exhibited by Israel in OT times (2 Cor 11:3–6). He emphasizes his role to

⁴² Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 138.

⁴³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, “John,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 437.

⁴⁴ Grant R. Osborne, “The Gospel of John,” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* (ed. Philip W. Comfort; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2007) 61.

⁴⁵ D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (12 vols.; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 8:226–27.

⁴⁶ Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors* 54, 55. Williams suggests further (p. 55) that the reference to the “word” is to be understood “as the gospel, represented in the metaphor by some such declaration of the bridegroom to the bride as “I love you.”

the Corinthian believers as likening himself either as (1) the father of the bride to be or (2) the friend of the bride in declaring his task to present the Corinthian believers “in marriage to one husband—to present a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor 11:2). In favor of the former view, Hughes suggests that Paul is serving as the father to the Corinthians: “And as it is the father’s right to give his daughter in marriage to an approved bridegroom, so he, their spiritual father, had given them in betrothal to one husband, a Divine Husband. The betrothal of a maiden implies purity and faithfulness; she is committed to the one man to whom she is engaged to be married.”⁴⁷

The second alternative is perhaps more in keeping with Jewish practice in NT times. Thus Edersheim declares,

In Judea there were at every marriage *two* groomsmen or “friends of the bridegroom”—one for the bridegroom, the other for his bride. Before marriage, they acted as a kind of intermediaries between the couple; at the wedding they offered gifts, waited upon the bride and bridegroom, and attended them to the bridal chamber, being also, as it were, the guarantors of the bride’s virgin chastity. . . . he speaks, as it were, in the character of groomsmen or “bridegroom’s friend,” who had acted as such at the spiritual union of Christ with the Corinthian Church. And we know that it was specially the duty of the ‘friend of the bridegroom’ so to present to him his bride.⁴⁸

Along similar lines, Williams affirms that in Jewish marriage customs there was both a “friend of the bridegroom” and a “friend of the bride.” Likening himself to the latter, “Paul saw himself, vis-à-vis the Corinthians, in the role of the friend. He had wooed and won them for Christ. He had ‘betrothed’ them to Christ, and now he was bound (so he felt) to present them as ‘a pure virgin’ to their prospective ‘husband.’”⁴⁹

The apostle John foresees the second coming of Christ to the future Jerusalem under the metaphor of a wedding: “Let us be glad, rejoice and give Him glory, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has prepared herself” (Rev 19:7). Beale suggests that “the metaphorical significance is . . . that God’s people are finally entering into the intimate relationship with him that he has initiated.”⁵⁰ Another approach is to view the bride as the new Jerusalem (cf. Rev 21:2, 9–10) as metonymy for the church, much as Jerusalem by metonymy represented God’s covenant people and the Southern Kingdom in particular (Ezek 16:15–34). Thus Johnson remarks with regard to Revelation 19:7 that “the bride is the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem (21:2, 9), which is the symbol of the church, the bride of Christ, the community of those redeemed by Christ’s blood.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 374. See further Murray J. Harris, “2 Corinthians,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (rev. ed.; ed. Tremper Longman, III and David E. Garland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 520.

⁴⁸ Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ* (London: Religious Tract Society, [n.d.]) 153.

⁴⁹ Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors* 54.

⁵⁰ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 940.

⁵¹ Alan F. Johnson, “Revelation,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (rev. ed.; ed. Tremper Longman, III and David E. Garland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2006) 755. Along these same lines,

It is apparent that John's language, while figurative, points to a manifold enduring reality. Thus Ladd observes that John's metaphorical language points to the climax of man's redemption in God's dwelling with believers as his people (Rev 21:3):

This is why John can apply the same metaphor of the bride prepared for her husband to the new Jerusalem which comes down from heaven to dwell among men (Rev. 21:2), and why the angel can refer to the new Jerusalem as "the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:9). As Jerusalem is frequently used in Scripture to represent the people of God (Matt. 23:37), so in the vision of the world, the people of God and their capital city—the church and the new Jerusalem—are so closely connected that the same figure—the bride—is used for both.⁵²

With the prospect of God's dwelling amongst his people in a new paradise,⁵³ it is small wonder that the believers' exhilaration rings out in yearning for the soon coming of Christ to fulfill the scenario that John has envisioned (Rev 22:17).

IV. CONCLUDING APPLICATION

Thus the imagery and teaching connected with the scriptural metaphors of marriage come to their ultimate grand consummation. But before that day, the church has its own role as the bride of Christ. The further implication in Paul's words in Eph 5:25–27 is that the church is to submit to the progressively sanctifying power available to them as united to Christ. As Saucy observes,

Although the sanctification of the church is complete and perfect in its positional standing in Christ, it is also a process in the life of the church as the meaning and significance of the complete salvation are continually applied through the operation of the Holy Spirit by means of the Word. . . . The responsibility of the church is to allow the divine purification to work in its midst. This demands not only submission to the discipline of the Father (Heb 12:5–7), but self-discipline in obedience to the numerous commands for purity in the Word.⁵⁴

Believers need to be warned of the necessity of being ready for the Bridegroom's coming (Matt 25:1–13). Here the church can fulfill a double role.

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (*The Book of the Revelation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2990] 222) writes: "A city has no vital identity apart from its citizens, and it is because the great company of the redeemed comprises the authentic citizens of this holy city from heaven (Phil. 3:20) that its appearance is that of a *bride adorned for her husband*."

⁵² George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 248–49.

⁵³ David Barr (*New Testament Story* [Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1987] 288) presents a bit different twist in suggesting, "The city is a combined idealization of Jerusalem the dwelling place of God, and the Garden of Eden. It represents the redemption of Creation, now including the city, a human creation. In this magnificent vision of the end, the work of humanity is taken up into and perfected in the work of God."

⁵⁴ Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972) 96–97.

She must live not only as his spotless bride (cf. 2 Pet 3:13–15), but individual believers can be used, as were Paul (2 Cor 11:1–4) and John the Baptist (John 3:28–29), in the role of being friends of the Bridegroom who invite others to be saved and so be ready for the coming wedding by becoming part of the church his bride.

As the church, the faithful bride, goes forward with Christ in submission and service to him, it looks forward with longing to that day when at last in God's perfect timing the bridegroom comes again, and so it cries out, "Come!" (Rev 22:17). And when the Beloved One comes, perhaps it shall be as the poetess envisions it:

The bride eyes not her garment
But her dear Bridegroom's face;
I will not gaze at glory
But on my King of grace,
Not at the crown he giveth
But on His pierced hand;
The Lamb is all the glory
Of Immanuel's land.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Anne Ross Cousin, "The Sands of Time Are Singing"; for the full words and background details as to the setting of this old hymn, see Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982) 257–59.